Summary

Steve Rogers is a good man. His friends have told him so on numerous occasions, but this might actually be more bordering on "stupid" rather than "kind". Because what else would you describe the act of inviting a complete stranger - and thief - into your home over the Holidays?

Steve isn't quite sure what to call it himself, but fact is that when it comes to the case of Bucky Barnes, Steve's actually pretty okay with being referred to as an idiot, as long as it keep the other man safe.

And to Steve's defence, it had all started out with *such* good intentions...

Notes

Beta by the wonderful and ever so glorious 

Nursedarry <3
Saturday, November 26th

Steve exits Game Stop with yet another plastic bag dangling from his arm as he ticks Sam’s name off his mental shopping list. That new Call of Duty game had been one difficult thing to hunt down, but Steve figures that he owes Sam the struggle, considering the rather expensive drawing tablet Sam got him last year.

He tucks the bag with the game down into the bag already containing Clint’s espresso kit, along with Nat’s mp3-player and headphones. Given, Steve loves Christmas, but not even he would normally be spending this much money on buying gifts. (Not to the point that he'd willingly risk life and limb during Black Friday, which was yesterday, anyway.) This year, however, he received a rather hefty bonus from work, so he figures that a few well-deserved surprises won’t hurt anyone.

He rummages through the bags, going through the list again. Thor, done, even though he won’t be getting his gift until he returns from his family vacation in Norway. Clint, Nat, Bruce, check. Sam, check. That leaves…

“Tony,” Steve sighs, looking back up and out over the crowd in front of him. It’s only late November, but people are already bustling around, keeping the shops busy. Steve doesn’t blame them; Christmas shopping in New York tends to get a bit…hostile the longer one waits to get it done. Which is exactly why Steve is here, trying to finish his errands sooner rather than later.

Shopping at Staten Island Mall is, in Steve’s opinion, a generally more pleasant experience than shopping at Kings Plaza back in Brooklyn. Staten Island spends more time on their overall decorations, and puts them up way earlier, and Steve’ll be damned if he’s going to do his Christmas shopping without a single snowman or automated santa in sight.

It’s silly, he knows that. Normally, the holiday frenzy is something you tend to grow out of once
you hit adulthood, but for Steve, not so much.

He loves Christmas. He loves the lights, the songs, the food, the snow (even the artificial kind), and he intends to spend the whole of December huddled up in big, oversized Christmas sweaters and soaking up the holiday cheer, every chance he gets.

Tony calls him obsessive, but Nat thinks he’s adorable, so Steve figures he’s got the balance down. And speaking of Tony…

Steve wanders through the crowd, looking at the many display windows for something that might be suitable for a gift. What the hell do you even get a man who has everything? Even with Steve’s bonus, he’s still not sure if he’ll ever be able to find something he’ll be able to afford, and will stand up to Tony’s standards.

Not that Tony would be ungrateful for anything Steve might get him, oh, no, that’s not the problem. Steve could get Tony a tea cosy from Goodwill and Tony would most likely love it. It’s just that Steve takes great pride in finding the perfect gifts for his friends, and he’s not gonna let the fact that Tony’s a successful CEO of a successful company stop him from being a successful Christmas shopper.

For a moment, he considers going up to Armani Exchange to look for a pair of sunglasses – Tony loves his sunglasses – but makes a quick decision that his wallet probably wouldn’t be able to survive as much as crossing the threshold of the store. Instead, he takes a left as he reaches the mall plaza, heading towards Giorgio’s Fine Jewelry. Maybe he can get Tony a gift card for a new watch or something? Or, at least, part of a new watch…

The mass of people is a bit thicker here, but it doesn’t bother him much. With his six foot plus height advantage and broad shoulders, the crowd tends to clear a path in front of him as he approaches out of pure reflex. And should they not, that’s rarely a problem that a hearty smile and a friendly look from blue eyes can’t fix.

That’s why, as Steve walks past the escalators, his initial reaction to receiving a bump to the shoulder by someone passing by, is genuine surprise. The bump is not hard, and it barely makes him stumble, but something about it still triggers a tiny warning sign in the back of his head, and he stops.

Quickly, he pats down the front of his jacket, and yup, right where the weight of his wallet had been mere moments ago, there is now nothing but an empty pocket.

“Shit…!”

Spinning around, he scans the crowd, and just barely manages to recognise the glimpse of long, dark hair and a black jacket as they disappear behind the big Christmas tree situated right next to the escalator.

Steve doesn’t even stop to think. He sets off running, pushing past the people in his way as efficiently as he can. However, he quickly realizes that the gift bags still clutched in his left hand is going to slow him down way too much, and so, as he passes the kiddy train track running around the Christmas tree, he tosses the bags to the guy manning the ticket booth with an urgent, “Watch these!”

It’s a brash and not very thought-through decision, but Steve figures that if he doesn’t get his wallet back, he’s going to have a lot bigger problems to worry about than a few missing Christmas presents.
Making his way through the crowd is a hundred times easier without the bags, and as he rounds the train track, he spots the culprit as he heads down the same corridor from which Steve had just come from. Towards, Steve suspects, the exit that lies just around the corner ahead.

It’s a man he’s chasing, without a doubt, and Steve sends a quick thank you to the heavens when he notices that the man in question isn’t running. He is walking fast, yes, but he doesn’t look as if he’s realized that Steve’s caught on to him. So, instead of continuing to run, Steve simply decreases the speed of his steps to match those of the stranger’s as he follows him down the line of stores.

The guy seems to be in his late twenties, much like Steve himself, and perhaps only an inch shorter. He’s dressed in a pair of black cargo pants and black military boots, paired up with a black leather jacket with the words ‘ghost story’ printed in white across the back. The left sleeve of the jacket looks as if it had been torn off and replaced by one made out of a completely different material. It reminds Steve a little of gray denim, but it’s hard to tell due to the fact that the entire sleeve is literally covered in silver safety pins that makes the whole thing shimmer and gleam when the man moves. A red patchwork star sits across the shoulder, right over the deltoid, like a flare of color amidst all the black.

He has long, chocolate-brown hair that reaches to somewhere around his shoulders, with what looks like a sidecut on the left. There’s a thick, red stripe of color that runs along the line between the sidecut and the rest of the hairstyle, like a vibrant mirror image of the star on his left arm. When the man turns his head to the left, just as he rounds around the corner, Steve has gotten close enough to catch the bright gleam of the silver piercings adorning his left ear.

Steve’s heart picks up speed when the thief disappears out of sight for the second time, and he breaks into a light jog, trying to keep a low profile as he makes his way to the corner. He can’t afford to let the thief out of his sight for long. If the guy makes it out onto the street, it’ll all be over.

The exit is just up ahead. Steve is already preparing to make one final sprint to tackle the man to the ground, when suddenly, the other takes a sharp right and walks straight through the doors of the fast food restaurant that’s just a few paces away from the mall’s entrance.

Steve stops, blinks, hesitates, and then warily follows the man inside. Watching from the doorway, he sees the other take a seat by one of the tables at the far end of the room, with his back turned towards the door.

Once again, Steve hesitates, but he knows that this has already gone too far. Before he can give himself time to chicken out, he quietly makes his way over and sits down at the table right behind the thief’s own, so that they end up back to back.

The waiter approaches, and Steve can tell that he’s aiming for Steve’s table first. After all, why wouldn’t he? Compared to Steve’s pickpocket stranger, Steve must look like the poster boy for decent costumers where he sits in his ordinary blue jeans and brown leather jacket. Steve doesn’t give him the chance, however, and gestures towards the menu on the table to show that he’s still looking.

The waiter’s face falls a little, but he alters his course nonetheless, and comes to a halt right next to the other man’s table.

“Yes?” he says, almost rudely, and Steve frowns. Wow, what a way to greet a paying customer, he thinks to himself, but then all thoughts of customer service is chased right out of his mind when the thief opens his mouth and speaks.
“I’d like a bacon cheeseburger and fries, please.”

His voice is soft, and yet it has an odd gravel to it that makes the hairs at the back of Steve’s neck stand on end. And not in an unpleasant way.

“And drink?” the waiter asks, again with that same condescending tone. There’s a moment of silence, and Steve can hear the sound of papers being turned.

“The water here is free, right?”

“No, unfortunately not.”

Curious, Steve glances down at his own menu. Last time he checked, water was free in all restaurants. He waits, expecting the other guy to put up a fight about it, or at least argue, but that doesn’t happen.

“Oh… Then I’ll just have a Coke. A small one. Thanks.”

The sound of the other man’s voice makes Steve’s head nearly spin off its axle with questions. When told that he has to spend money on drinks, he doesn’t sound as much disappointed or frustrated as genuinely sad, and that right there just doesn’t make any sense.

Someone who just stole an entire wallet full of someone else’s money shouldn’t be all that mindful about how they spend it. Steve has credit cards and enough cash inside that thing to cover his expenses for the entire month, and this guy is sitting there trying to save it up by ordering water?

He turns in his seat to throw a quick look over his shoulder, watching as the man pulls out a couple of bills from inside Steve’s wallet to pay for his minimalistic order of food.

“Is it okay if I pay in advance?” the guy asks. “I’m in a bit of a hurry.”

That’s when Steve decides that enough is enough, and before the waiter has any time to answer, Steve has already leaned across the space between the two tables to point at the wallet over the thief’s shoulder.

“Actually, would you mind using the credit card for that?” he asks politely. “I was sort of saving the cash for something special.”

The man flinches and whips his head around to stare at Steve so fast, Steve nearly expects him to fall right out of his seat. His eyes widen, shoulders drawing tight, while his mouth falls open in a silent gape when he realizes who exactly he’s looking at.

Steve waits.

He is fully prepared to reach out and grab hold of the other’s arm, should he try to make a run for it, but that turns out to be a completely unnecessary precaution. The man just stares, seemingly frozen in place, and after a few seconds of complete silence, Steve slowly gets out of his chair, walks around it, and plucks the wallet right out of the man’s feeble fingers. He leaves the bills where they are, clenched tight in the palm of the man’s other hand, and turns towards the waiter.

“Make that two orders, will you?” he says politely as he sits down, opposite to the thief. “With large drinks, if it’s not too much trouble.”

“Of course,” the waiter agrees, already jotting down the changes to the original order.
“What are you doing?” the thief demands hoarsely, not sounding the least grateful for Steve’s offer, and the waiter gives him a puzzled look over the edge of the notepad in his hand.

“You’re hungry, aren’t you?” Steve retorts while sending him a forward look from across the table top. The man’s mouth shuts with a faint click of teeth, and Steve turns back to the waiter, smiling.

“We’ll pay before we leave,” he informs politely. “Thank you.”

The waiter sends the black-clad stranger another dubious look, but when Steve just continues to smile, he gives them both a curt nod and walks away.

Steve slowly turns back around, ready to finally take a closer look at his polite, albeit grim-looking, dining partner.

Turns out, what Steve believed to have been a sidecut, is actually just the result of the hair and bangs having been pulled back into a braid running along the left side of the man's head. The braid itself has been dyed into a bright red color, hence creating an illusion of a red band running from the man's temple to the back of his neck, where the crimson highlights continue to flow out into the rest of the hair that still hangs free.

A few strands of the bangs have come loose from the braid to fall down across the man’s forehead to frame his face. Steve takes note of the high cheekbones and sharp jawline, – though hidden underneath a thin layer of stubble – and the full set of lips that are currently being pinched together into a thin, ominous line.

The most prominent thing about the stranger’s face, however, isn't actually his face. It's his eyes.

They are gray, and their gaze is both sharp and attentive as they regard Steve from across the table. Framed by long lashes, the silvery-blue color of the irises is nothing short of breathtaking, even if the angry stare itself is currently looking cold enough to freeze a man for at least half a century…

Another thing that catches Steve's gaze, although not immediately, is the fact that the man is pierced. And not just once.

He's got a silver barbell in his right eyebrow, which, in Steve's humble opinion, beautifully accentuates his previously-mentioned eyes. His ears are pierced as well, with one industrial barbell going straight through the top of the left ear, while a big black stud adorns the ear lobe. The right ear is pierced as well, but from what Steve can tell, it only has an identical black stud at the lobe and a thick silver hoop sitting at the near middle part of the helix.

The guy also has lip piercings. Two, to be exact, in the shape of black metal rings on either side of his lower lip. If possible, Steve thinks that they're providing an even bigger distraction than the bar at the eyebrow does…

A dog tag necklace gleams against the man’s chest, where the words ‘long live rock’n’roll’ are printed in a dull red against washed-out black. The neckline of the shirt is stretched out, revealing the strong curve of a clavicle, and part of what's obviously a tattoo winding itself up the left side of the man's neck beneath the upturned collar of his jacket. The front of said jacket has several, horizontal straps covering both sides of the chest, adorned with safety pins just like the left sleeve, only fewer of them.
Steve also makes a mental note of the fact that even though the guy isn't wearing a scarf against the cold weather, he still has dark, fingerless gloves covering his hands. Knitted, not leather, and he keeps on fidgeting with the edge of the tablet that's lying in front of him on the table, as if he's nervous.

The food takes a few minutes, and during the time they wait, the other man doesn’t let Steve go with his eyes for longer than a few seconds at a time. He stares at him as if he’s not sure whether or not he should be fighting him or running away, but he doesn’t say a single word.

When the food finally arrives, the waiter sets it down in front of their respective seats, wishes them a good meal, and after Steve says thank you in return, he walks away. He barely makes it out of earshot before the man on the other side of the table opens his mouth.

“I was going to return the wallet,” he says.

Steve doesn’t say anything. He just raises an eyebrow and picks up a French fry from his plate.

“I only needed enough to pay for the food,” the thief continues, more insistently. “I was going to leave it at the lost and found right after, I swear.”

“I don’t care,” Steve says calmly, and the other’s mouth snaps shut as the stranger swallows hard. Steve watches as those gray, sharp eyes flicker around the room before coming back to settle on Steve's face with a light glare.

“You’ve already called the cops, haven't you?” he accuses tightly.

“I have not,” Steve responds while popping the French fry into his mouth and chewing it.

“Security?”

“Nope.” He swallows the fry down. “I haven't called anyone.”

Something flashes in the other man's gaze. Annoyance, fear, or anger – Steve can't tell. “Then what the fuck is this?” he growls, and oh, yes, that's fear right there; high-strung and feral, like a cornered animal.

“Are you always this suspicious?” Steve asks curiously.

“Don't know,” the guy retorts testily. “Are you always such a dick?”

“No, believe it or not,” Steve says with a chuckle, “but I have a few friends who'd probably want me to answer yes to that question.”

The stranger frowns. He looks as if the concept of humor is completely foreign to him, and Steve abandons the joke in favor of picking up another fry from his plate.

“So,” he asks in a more serious tone, “why’d you steal my money? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“Already told you,” the other grumbles, “I needed food.”

“You stole an entire wallet for a meager cheeseburger, a handful of fries, and a small soft drink?”

“Yes.”

Steve looks up at him, and he takes in the grim expression on the man’s face, the tight clench of his jaw, and the defensive gleam in his eyes. “You could have bought more,” he points out matter-
of-factly.

“Didn't want to,” comes the flat reply, and Steve gives the stranger another evaluating look before nodding slowly.

“No,” he agrees simply, “I guess you didn't.”

Again, the other man frowns, and he sends a quick look at the empty seats around them before leaning forwards over the table, lowering his voice.

“So if you're not calling the cops on me, then what the fuck do you want?” he hisses. “Is this some sort of fucked-up blackmail attempt? Because I sure as hell ain't sucking your dick, pal.”

“Woah, woah,” Steve raises both his hands up, palms out. “Take it easy, nobody's sucking anyone's anything. I'm just trying to figure out what happened.”

“I picked your pocket, that's what happened, Einstein,” the guys says with a condescending snort as he stands up from his seat. “Now, are we done here?”

“You haven't touched your food.”

The other stills. He blinks, and then stares down at his plate. For a moment he looks torn, and his jaw tightens as his gaze moves from the French fries to the burger sitting right beside them.

“If you're willing to steal in order to eat, my bet is that you're pretty damn hungry,” Steve thinks out loud. “It would be a shame to let such a tasty-looking meal go to waste.”

It's close to painful, watching the hesitation creep across the other man's face when the stranger looks around, yet again, as if he's expecting someone to tell him he's not allowed to have the food Steve's offering him. Then he looks back at the plate, over towards the exit, and then back at Steve.

“It's not poisoned,” Steve informs him softly. The man licks his lips, and Steve's eye catches another quick gleam of metal as the soft light from the spotlights above reflects in the silver ball sitting at the centre of the other's tongue.

“So you…just wanna buy me dinner?” the man asks, dropping the hostile tone for the first time since Steve sat down at the table.

“Yeah,” Steve replies simply.

“Why?”

Steve shrugs. “Because I have money, and you obviously don't.”

“But I tried to steal from you,” the guy objects, now clearly confused. “Stole, actually.”

“You said you were gonna give it back.”

“Well, what if I lied?”

“What if you didn't?”

At that, the other man goes quiet. He gives Steve a long, suspicious stare, and Steve meets it head on. After a few excruciatingly long seconds, the other then slowly sinks back into his seat and picks up a fry from the plate with a yet another wary look at Steve’s face. He wavers, but when Steve just raises his brow at him, he puts the fry into his mouth, chewing slowly.
“What’s your name, anyway?” Steve asks, and the man’s posture immediately tenses, making Steve roll his eyes to the ceiling. “I’m not gonna use it to get you busted,” he promises. “I just wanna know what to call you.”

The man’s jaw moves as he chews the last of his food and swallows tightly. “Bucky,” he grates out. “Bucky Barnes.”

Steve nods and reaches his hand out across the table. “Nice to meet you, Buck. I’m Steve Rogers.”

Bucky takes his hand, although warily, as if he still expects there to be foul play involved somehow. His fingers are cold against the back of Steve’s hand, and once again, Steve finds himself asking why the hell the other isn’t wearing more clothes, before the realisation finally hits home.

“So, Bucky,” he says, picking up his burger. “Am I right in assuming that you’re homeless?”

Bucky frowns, and Steve can see him tensing up again. “How did you know?” he asks slowly.

“People who can afford a place to live usually don’t have to steal in order to buy themselves food,” Steve points out soberly, and at that, Bucky actually blushes as he averts his gaze. The ridge of his cheeks slowly tints a faint shade of pink the longer Steve looks at him, and yeah, he's actually pretty damn cute, Steve will give him that.

“I’ve gotta say though,” he adds, “you’re without a doubt the cleanest homeless person I’ve ever seen.”

“That you think you’ve seen,” Bucky corrects him sternly, looking back up. “We don’t all look like we’ve spent half our lives in a dumpster, you know.”

“Sorry,” Steve apologizes quickly. “I didn’t mean to be rude.”

“Well, you’d be the first…” Bucky mutters, making Steve’s chest twinge with sympathy.

“You staying at a shelter nearby?” he asks. He has no idea if asking such a question is considered rude or polite in this context, but he figures he might as well just wing it at this point.

“Some nights,” Bucky says with a shrug. “When it’s not full. There hasn’t been any snow yet, so there are still some spots open.”

Snow.

Suddenly, Steve feels guilty about having been looking forward to that just the other day. For white streets and big, silvery flakes falling from the sky. Thinking about it now, while looking over at Bucky’s clothes, his previous anticipation makes him feel downright ashamed of himself.

“Aren’t you cold?” he asks with a nodd to Bucky’s leather jacket. “That thing doesn’t look very warm.”

“You get used to it,” Bucky says with a shrug as he swallows down another load of fries with a mouthful of soda. Now, when he’s more relaxed, the food is quickly disappearing from the plate in front of him, and Steve can’t help but feel sorry for the poor guy.

He has seen plenty of homeless people out there on the streets – living in New York, that’s something one can’t avoid – and thinking about Bucky, huddled up at some street corner on a rainy winter’s night is something that makes Steve feel both sad and helpless beyond words.
“How long have you been homeless for?” he asks.

“Little over four years,” Bucky responds simply.

“What about work?” Steve continues, but when Bucky just shakes his head, too busy eating to answer, Steve frowns. “Why not? There’s gotta be some place willing to hire you?”

At that, Bucky snorts out a laugh through his nose. “Yeah,” he says sarcastically, “because my appearance inspires so much trust. Besides,” he continues, lower, “I had a job. Got let go in March when the factory closed.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Steve says. He means it.

“Yeah…” Bucky nods. “Left me with enough to get myself a new set of clothes and food for a while. I’ve been going through the shelter’s charity boxes for a better jacket, but so far, no luck.”

“What are you gonna do if you can’t find one?” Steve asks.

“Guess,” Bucky responds simply, and Steve nods, realizing pretty quickly what the other means. “If it’s of any comfort,” Bucky continues, “your’s is the first wallet I’ve had to swipe in over a month.”

Steve is quiet for a moment, but then he frowns, leaning over the table. “Yeah, about that,” he says slowly, “there’s one thing I don’t quite get.”

“What?”

“You said you were just gonna use the cash in my wallet to buy food, and then turn it in at the lost and found,” Steve sums up, and Bucky nods. “Yeah.” He looks away. “That’s…sort of what I usually do.”

“But how did you even know I had any cash in the first place?” Steve continues. “I could have been a card-only kind of guy, and you would have ended up with nothing. What made you go after me?”

Bucky, who’s still staring down at the tabletop, sighs, and then leans back into his seat with a look of resignation towards the ceiling. “Game Stop,” he admits, blatantly avoiding to look at Steve as he says it. “I stood behind you when you paid for your stuff and saw the money.”

“Then what were you doing at Game Stop?” Steve asks, frowning. “Video games are a bit of a luxury for a homeless person, aren’t they?”

“I wasn’t looking for video games,” Bucky defends himself, before adding, in a lower voice, “I was looking for people who could afford them…”

The answer has Steve stunned for a moment, and then he laughs, ignoring the way Bucky glares at him as he does. “I’ve gotta hand it to you, that’s pretty damn clever,” he says, without a doubt both impressed and intrigued by the other’s strategy. “How come someone as smart as you ended up on the street in the first place?”

“Yeah, I—” Bucky cuts himself off, and Steve can practically see the defensive walls go back up around the other man’s mind. “I don’t wanna talk about it.”

Steve sits back, regarding him silently. Bucky looks sad where he is, staring down at his own
hands, and Steve decides to take a shot in spite of the other’s reluctance on the topic.

“Drugs?” he guesses out loud.

“No!” Bucky snaps, so sharply that Steve actually flinches, but then his voice softens as he shakes his head. “No,” he repeats. “Nothing like that. I just— Listen, my life hasn't exactly been all sunshine and rainbows, and if it's all the same to you, I'd rather not share it with some random stranger at a burger joint.” He looks down at the two plates on the table. “Even if they happen to have just bought me dinner.”

“Point taken,” Steve says, before adding with a frown, “But it's nothing illegal, I hope?”

“No, I don't do shit like that,” Bucky says firmly, and then deflates a little. “I mean, unless you count the pickpocketing.”

“I don't.” Steve assures him. He looks on as Bucky reaches out to take another fry from the plate and how he then puts it in his mouth, hanging his head down as he chews it.

Poor guy.

That’s literally the gist of it, really. Steve isn’t sure what exactly he had been expecting when he realized some punk had stolen his wallet, but it sure as all hell hadn’t been this. Sure, Bucky’s attitude could use some work, and he looks like a first class thug, but Steve won’t go as far as to say that he’s a bad guy. He’s just been unfortunate enough to end up in a situation beyond his control, and he’s more-or-less doing whatever he can to get by without causing too much trouble. Even though, stealing people’s wallets right before Christmas might not be the way Steve would have gone about it…

Steve doesn’t know how he knows it, but he is convinced that if only Bucky got the chance, he’d prove to be every little bit of hard-working civilian as anyone else. He is also fully aware of what an absolute ridiculous suggestion he is about to voice, before he even says it. Then again, that’s a knowledge that’s never stopped him in the past.

“Hey,” he says, making Bucky look back up at him. “What would you say if I offered you to come stay at my place for a while? You know, like over the holidays?”

“I'd say you have a screw loose,” Bucky says flatly.

“Well.” Steve pauses and clears his throat. “Thing is, I don't know what it's like to be homeless, but I can imagine that it must get pretty rough sometimes. And, like you said, once the snow comes, the shelters are gonna get pretty much swamped, so, you know, if you want, I was thinking… maybe I could lend you my couch for a few days instead?”

Bucky stares at him, and then pushes his chair back with a loud screech as he abruptly stands up.

“I knew it,” he growls, moving to walk away. “You're fucking crazy.”

“No, I'm perfectly serious,” Steve insists and Bucky turns back around with a snarl as he braces himself against the tabletop with both hands, leaning down towards Steve’s face.

“You think you can buy me off with a fucking burger and a soft drink?” he hisses. “I told you, I ain't some manwhore you get to take home by the hour, much less over the holidays.”

“That's not what this is,” Steve argues adamantly. “Jesus, are you even trying to listen here? I wanna help you.”
“And why should I trust you?” Bucky demands. “How the hell do I know you're not some kind of twisted maniac who's gonna lock me up in some goddamn dungeon somewhere?”

“You don't,” Steve says sincerely. “There's no possible way for you to know anything about me. I just wanted to put the offer out there, because I think you deserve better than having to rely on stolen money in order to survive.”

“So what, I’m just supposed to come live with you?” Bucky says with a snort. “For free?”

“Yes.”

“Bullshit,” Bucky states, straightening up. “Nothing comes for free.”

“You want a price?” Steve asks challengingly. “Alright, I'll give you a price. How about you get to do the dishes every day? And you have to take the trash out.”

“You want me to pay rent by doing chores?” Bucky asks in shocked disbelief.

“Since we’ve already established that you’re not gonna be sucking my dick, yes,” Steve grumbles back. Man, this guy’s stubborn as a mule.

Bucky chews on the inside of his cheek, looking at Steve as if he’s trying to decide exactly what kind of a mental problem he must be suffering from. Then, for the second time that day, the anger seems to melt right off of him when Steve’s point finally gets across. “Why?” he asks, and Steve sighs, throwing his hands out to the side.

“Because—” He sighs again, searching for the words. “Because you had enough money in my wallet to buy yourself an entire buffet,” he starts, “but instead, you went for the cheapest burger on the menu. And you were gonna settle with drinking plain tap water, had it only been free.”

Bucky swallows, and god, Steve hopes he’s finally managed to make his voice heard, because he genuinely feels sorry for this guy now. How many assholes must Bucky have encountered in his life to make believing that Steve just wants to be nice to him so hard?

“Where do you live?” Bucky asks after what feels like forever, still without having moved from his spot at the short end of the table.

“Brooklyn,” Steve responds calmly.

“Bought or rental?”

“Bought.”

“Which floor?”

“Third.”

Bucky’s lips narrow into a thin line, and Steve suspects that the other is unsuccessfully trying to come up with something more to ask. “And what about you?” the other demands eventually, in what sounds like a final attempt of reason. “How do you know I won't be smashing your head in with the nearest blunt object I can find, once you've let me through your door?”

“You won't,” Steve says confidently, and Bucky frowns.

“What makes you so damn sure?”
Steve smiles as he slowly picks up his soda.

“Because it's Christmas.”

Bucky stares at him as Steve proceeds to take a sip out of his cup, and then his face slowly cracks open into a wide, toothy grin as he shakes his head.

“You're fucking insane,” he says with a disbelieving chuckle before sinking back down into his seat with a deep sigh. Then he reaches out and picks up his untouched burger from the plate, grabbing around it with both hands before muttering, just loud enough for Steve to hear him, “I can't believe I'm actually gonna spend an entire month living with your psychopathic ass…”

Steve, at his end, only chuckles and shakes his head too as he watches Bucky dig into his food. Man, if this is what getting your wallet lifted feels like, he really needs to get his pockets picked more often…

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, guys! I hope you enjoyed it. I'd be thrilled to hear your thoughts on it, so feel free to leave me a comment or something below :)
Feel free to follow me on tumblr as well for more Stucky goodness ;)

(Also, if you find any spelling errors or words/expressions used in a wrong way, I'd really appreciate it if you'd let me know. The fic is being beta'd in the upcoming few days, but should you find something particularly horrible, just send me a little note on it, and I'll make sure to fix the error ASAP haha.)

Next chapter will be up tomorrow, so I'll see you then! <3 Have a great December 1st!
Chapter Notes

Beta by the wonderful and ever so glorious
Nursedarry <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Saturday, November 26th

Steve has never been to a homeless shelter before.

He has walked past a few of them, sure, but he’s never before had a reason to actually go inside.

Now, as he follows Bucky up the front step towards the two double doors beneath the sign “Shield - Homeless Support Centre”, he finds himself suddenly, and uncomfortably aware of his own appearance.

There are people lining the steps, all dressed in various collections of mismatched clothing, smoking cigarettes while talking to each other in hushed voices. They go quiet when Steve walks by. He can feel their gazes on him, looking him up and down. Taking in everything from his – in comparison to their clothes – expensive leather jacket, new, sturdy boots, and the collection of shopping bags in his hand.

He is an outsider here, and he can feel the combination of curiosity and suspicion rise in the air behind them as they enter the shelter. It’s already dark outside, and the place is more-or-less packed. There are people everywhere; seated in the row of benches lining the walls, or hovering idly around the lobby. Most of the residents’ attention seems to be drawn towards the far end of the room, where a big crowd is continuously morphing into three separate lines that lead up to a receptionist desk, encased behind a big glass screen.
Still, in spite of all the people, it’s quiet. There isn’t much talking other than the occasional mumble rising from the smaller groups of people huddled together throughout the place, and the people standing at the very front of the lines. It’s a somewhat eerie atmosphere, but Bucky doesn’t seem to take any notice of it as he leads them straight across the room towards the far right wall of the lobby. Here, the room opens up into a wide, shallow hallway, closed off by a metal gate. There is another glass-encased wall here, with two members of the staff sitting behind it, and another, albeit much shorter, line of people waiting to be assisted.

“Stay here,” Bucky orders, and Steve obediently stops while Bucky goes to take his place in the line. Watching, Steve realizes pretty quickly what the line is for. The hallway on the other side of the gate is filled with lockers, and the people in line are either waiting to have their possessions locked away for safe keeping, or there to get them out.

Steve wonders briefly about the generous amount of protective glass surrounding the staff, but he comes to the conclusion that if the glass is there, then it's most likely needed. Bucky had claimed that he's not into drugs, but that doesn't mean that everyone else who comes here is as innocent. Drugs, especially in combination with emotional stress, can make people both irrational and violent, and suddenly Steve feels even more relieved about having already managed to convince Bucky to stay with him, rather than at this place.

When it’s Bucky’s turn to approach the window, Steve watches him dig up a key from the inside of his jacket, and then lean in to slide it through the slot at the bottom of the glass with a few mumbled words.

One of the staff members inside takes the key and checks a few papers, before handing the same key over to her colleague with a nod. That second person then, in turn, disappears down the row of lockers with a polite smile in Bucky's direction.

Steve looks on as Bucky leans against the counter while he waits for the staff member to return with whatever it is that he’s there to check out. He doesn’t look at Steve, and Steve is grateful for it since it gives him the opportunity to study the man more closely, and he has to say, that the change in Bucky’s demeanor from back at the restaurant is remarkable. In here, his posture is relaxed, more at ease, and Steve’s mouth twitches as he watches the other man casually hide a yawn behind the back of his partially gloved hand.

Bucky is handsome, Steve can’t really argue about that. Even the unconventional hair and piercings – both elements that Steve’s never really bothered to form a solid opinion about in the past – serves to give him both a rugged, unpolished air, as well as fiercely good looks. All in all, he’s not really Steve’s type, but Steve decides that as far as appearance goes, he sure couldn’t have picked a better flatmate.

As he stands there waiting, a woman suddenly emerges from the crowd. When she spots Bucky waiting in the line, she makes a bee-line towards him. She’s fairly young, with brown, wavy hair pulled up in a loose knot at the back of her head, and the aristocratic features of her face are underlined by the crimson red lipstick she’s wearing. She’s extremely beautiful. Even though dressed simple, in a knitted brown sweater and blue jeans, it’s still obvious from the start that she’s part of the shelter’s staff rather than the clientele.

She taps Bucky on the shoulder, and when Bucky turns around to look, his face lights up with a genuine smile so bright it actually leaves Steve blinking in silent shock for a few seconds. The woman smiles back and goes in for a hug, which Bucky returns with bone-crushing enthusiasm. As they pull apart, the woman gestures towards the lockers on the other side of the gate, and Bucky nods, shrugging. Her face falls a little, and then she reaches out to place a hand on Bucky’s
shoulder, looking worried.

Again, Bucky shrugs, as if whatever she’s worrying about isn’t that big of a deal, and immediately, the woman’s lips narrow into a scolding line. Bucky snorts out a laugh as he begins to say something, but he cuts himself off as he has to turn around in order to take his belongings – a single black backpack – from the containment box being passed through from the other side of the glass.

When he turns back around, his face softens, and the woman reaches out to take his hand. Steve watches her squeeze it, hard, and then Bucky smiles again before leaning in to press a soft, reassuring kiss against her cheek.

It’s a loving gesture that makes Steve smile in spite of himself. He quickly hides his amusement behind the back of his hand, however, when Bucky then turns to walk towards him with a final, lingering smile towards the woman, who lets Bucky’s hand go with a reluctant look on her face.

Her gaze then travels the distance between Bucky’s disappearing back, and Steve, who’s obviously waiting for him. Her shoulders square, and it’s clear that she’s not very happy about his presence. Steve gives her a little smile and a wave, but she doesn’t return either, which immediately has him feeling more like a villain than a hero. He is beyond grateful when Bucky finally reaches him and gives him an excuse to look away from the judgemental gaze completely.

“All set?” he asks cheerfully.

“Yeah,” Bucky agrees, slinging his backpack over his shoulder. Steve looks at the torn and rugged fabric of the bag, and for a brief moment, he considers asking if that’s really all of it. He doesn’t, however.

“You done?” he asks instead. “Like, you don’t have to fill out any paperwork or something?”

“No, Peggy’s taking care of that for me,” Bucky says, pointing with his thumb over his shoulder towards the woman he just left. Steve dares another brief look, but Peggy, as she’s called, is already talking to another person. An old woman on crutches, and Peggy’s face is bright and warm as she smiles fondly at the lady.

“All right then,” Steve says, motioning towards the front doors. “Let’s go.”

The journey back to Steve’s apartment is quiet, for lack of a better word. Steve tries to come up with topics of conversation, but whenever he looks at Bucky, the other is always facing another way, or simply sits with his eyes closed on the opposite side of the subway car they’re in, as if he’s sleeping.

He looks like the very embodiment of nonchalance, and Steve is still trying to figure out if Bucky really is that relaxed, or if he’s just a very good actor.

Once they reach their stop, it’s only a five minute walk to Steve’s apartment building. Another few minutes later, Steve pulls the key out of the lock to his front door and turns the knob.

“Well, here we are,” he declares humbly as he lets the door swing open. “Home sweet home.”
Bucky gives him a glance out of the corner of his eye, clearly judging him for using such a clichéd phrase, but when Steve gestures for him to go ahead inside, he does so without arguing.

Steve waits until Bucky’s gone far enough inside to follow him without crowding him in the hallway, which isn’t that big. He doesn’t have to wait long, because Bucky takes two steps inside, peeks around the corner to the living room, and then disappears out of sight with a reverent, ‘Holy shit…”

Steve smiles, shrugging his jacket off to hang it up along with his scarf on the wall-mounted coat rack next to the door.

“This place is fucking huge,” comes Bucky’s voice, floating from somewhere that Steve guesses is near the door leading out onto the living room balcony.

“It looks bigger than it is,” Steve calls back, still smiling as he takes his boots off and puts them on the rack next to the door. For a moment, he wonders if he should mention the shoes to Bucky as well, but decides not to. They can do that part later, it's not that important.

Instead, he rounds the corner and steps into the living room, to find Bucky just as suspected, looking out through the window to the balcony. When Steve enters, the other turns around, gesturing towards the interior of the room.

“I take it you're quite the Christmas fan, huh?” he asks, and Steve ducks his head with an embarrassed chuckle.

“Yeah,” he admits. “Probably my biggest quirk.”

Bucky nods slowly, turning to take another good look at his surroundings, and Steve awaits the judgement patiently.

He knows that he’s fond of Christmas, perhaps more so than the average American is, but where’s the harm in that? He likes having fluffy red blankets on his couch, as well as the Christmas lights framing his window sill. He has a stocking hung on the wall over the TV, because the apartment doesn’t have a fireplace, and even though he probably came close to overdoing it with the tinsel and evergreen this year, he still wouldn’t like to say that it looks bad.

With the way Bucky keeps looking at the decorations, however, he’s suddenly very happy that he didn’t have time put up the dancing snowman he got from Clint last year yet…

“I’m gonna go out on a limb here and guess that you’re not that fond of it,” Steve says carefully, and Bucky shakes his head with a wrinkle of his nose.

“No really,” he says with a nonchalant shrug, before adding, a bit more seriously, “I suppose that makes me evil, on some plane of existence.”

“I very much doubt that,” Steve counters.

“How can you even afford to live here by yourself?” Bucky asks, switching the topic so smoothly, Steve barely registers it.

“I don’t have any hobbies,” Steve responds honestly as he lets the change slide. “I work double shifts at a warehouse, as well as evenings and nights, sometimes. It pays well.”

Bucky nods, pulling at his left lip piercing with his teeth, and Steve turns away, clearing his throat.
“C’mon,” he says, “I’m gonna show you your room.”

“My room?”

The sound of Bucky’s voice has Steve turning back around again, frowning in confusion. “Of course,” he says, “We’re else are you gonna sleep?”

Bucky’s eyes flicker towards the couch, and the plethora of blankets on top of it, and Steve chuckles. “This way,” he says, tossing his head towards the opening at other end of the room. The entrance leads into short corridor with three other doors and a closet, and as Steve enters it, Bucky follows without a sound.

There are three framed human model pencil drawings hanging on the left wall – two men and one woman – and Bucky gives them an interested glance as they pass.

“Neat,” he comments, and Steve turns to look over his shoulder to see what he’s talking about.

“Thanks,” he says with a smile. “I worked hard on them.”

“You drew these?” Bucky asks, stopping in front of the last drawing to take a closer look. It depicts a man, nude apart from the sheet draped over his waistline. He appears to be lying on some sort of bed, but the background has been deliberately blurred out.

“Yeah,” Steve confesses. “They were for a school project.”

“You took art?” Bucky asks curiously.

“Art school, to be exact,” Steve corrects. “We did more than just anatomy, of course, but I’ve always liked sketching the human body best.”

“Why?” Bucky asks, still without looking away from the illustration.

“They're different,” Steve concludes simply. “Like, you can only draw a flower so many times before it gets boring, but people...they're all unique, you know?”

“Huh,” Bucky says, but if that’s an agreement or an objection, Steve can't tell.

“You’ll be sleeping in here,” Steve says instead, turning away to push the door open to the room on the left. “Unless you prefer the couch, of course,” he adds with a smirk.

Bucky doesn’t say anything. He just walks past Steve and into the room, eyes wide and mouth slightly open.

It’s more of an office than a bedroom, really, but Steve’s had more than one drunken friend spend the night at his place to realize the value of owning an actual spare bed. It’s fully made, with proper beddings and everything, and it’s sitting neat and tidy against the inner wall of the room, opposite to the wall with Steve’s desk, laptop, and wall mounted bookshelf.

“There’s space left in the closet if you want to store your stuff in there,” Steve continues, pointing to the closet that stretches along the entire right wall, and Bucky nods, as if in a daze.

“My bedroom’s right across the hall, and the bathroom is at the far end,” Steve adds, and finally, Bucky turns to look at him.

“I can’t stay here,” he grates. Steve frowns, but before he can say anything, Bucky continues, “not for free. I've gotta pay you for this somehow.”
“I already told you,” Steve says, “I don’t want anything. You need this, and I want to give it to you. For free,” he adds sternly, before Bucky can voice another protest. “So just, you know…relax. Make yourself at home.”

Bucky blinks, and then swallows as he turns back around to stare at the room again. “This place is fucking enormous…” he mumbles under his breath, and Steve snorts out a laugh before looking at him with a hinged eyebrow.

“You really curse a lot, don’t you?” he asks, amused.

“Yeah, so?” Bucky retorts defensively, probably more out of reflex than anything else. Then his face drops as he sends Steve a second glance. “Oh, fuck me,” he says, “you’re not one of those crazy religious types, are you?”

“No, no,” Steve laughs, shaking his head. “Definitely not. I’ve, uhm…sifted through enough gay porn in my youth to get turned into a piece of charcoal, should I even try to enter most churches.”

At that, Bucky frowns. “You’re gay?” he asks curiously.

“Bi,” Steve corrects, shrugging as he adds, “With a preference. Does that bother you?” he asks, suddenly worried that the news might be something the other won’t approve of.

Bucky gives him a long look up and down his body, and then he shakes his head. “Nah,” he decides, before turning back around to face the bed again. He doesn’t elaborate further however, and Steve takes that as a sign that everything’s good. He watches as Bucky slowly reaches out and slides the tip of his fingers against the white bed spread, only to pull back just as quickly.

“Can I use the shower?” he asks, without turning around.

“Sure,” Steve says. “There are clean towels under the sink. And a razor, if you wanna use it.”

“Thanks.”

“If you want, I could lend you some clothes, too?” Steve suggests. “That way, we could go to the laundromat down the street in the morning to get yours washed?”

Bucky hesitates. Steve can tell, and he understands why. Being homeless, his clothes are most likely one of the few possessions Bucky owns that are truly his, and giving them up, even for a single night, must be very difficult.

“We don’t have to do it today,” Steve offers, “if you don’t want to—”

“No, it’s okay,” Bucky says, cutting him off. He looks down, picking at the hem of his shirt. “They need to be washed, anyway, I guess…”

“If that’s what you want,” Steve agrees. “Then I’ll go ahead and put some new ones out for you.”

“Thanks,” Bucky mumbles. “Again.”

“You’re welcome.” Steve clears his throat, and takes a step backwards, out the door. “I’m gonna go check my closet,” he announces. “You go ahead and shower, and I’ll just…get some stuff sorted.”

He doesn’t wait for Bucky to grate out another strained thank you. He walks straight out and into his own bedroom to fetch the promised clothes, before the other even gets a chance.

Just like the office, the master bedroom also has a closet that spans across the entire short wall of
the room, and Steve pulls the sliding doors aside and begins to rummage through the shelves in hunt for something suitable.

Shortly after, he hears the bathroom door open and close, followed by the sound of the lock sliding into place with a faint click. Steve stills, and after another few seconds, he hears the rustle of the shower curtain and the soft rush of water as the shower is turned on.

Returning to the task, he eventually manages to find a pair of gray sweatpants, and a navy blue t-shirt. As a second thought, he also tugs out a beige cable knitted sweater as well, just in case Bucky’s cold when he gets out of the shower.

He lays the clothes out on the guest bed, noting with satisfaction that Bucky has trusted the situation enough to leave his backpack in the room while he showers. Steve takes it as a good sign, and heads back into the hallway in order to put away the gift bags still sitting by the front door.

He puts them into a box in the hallway closet, storing them away to be wrapped for later, and then goes into the kitchen in search of food. Unfortunately, he finds to his despair that the pantry is almost empty. He had planned to go grocery shopping on the way back from the mall, but then things happened and…now he doesn’t have anything but a half-drunk bottle of Coke and some crackers to entertain his houseguest.

He grabs a cracker and puts it in his mouth, giving it a taste. At least it hasn't gone stale, that’s always something. He is still trying to decide if they’d be all right to actually offer someone else when he hears the door to the bathroom open.

“I left the clothes on your bed,” he calls out, stepping out into the hallway, still eyeing his half-eaten cracker. “I hope they fit, I wasn’t sure about your…size…”

He trails off, losing track of what he had been about to say mid-sentence as he stares at the man standing in the middle of his living room.

Bucky has his back turned towards him, and the first rational thought that goes through Steve's head is that he definitely expected something much scrawnier from a homeless person. Bucky, as it turns out, isn't exactly weak-looking. He is also, as Steve notices with a slight twinge of panic, nearly butt naked.

Well, the butt in particular is actually covered by the towel that’s slung low around Bucky’s hips, but it’s a damn close call. And believe it or not, his butt is not actually where Steve’s attention is directed at the moment.

It’s aimed towards Bucky’s back, which is quite literally covered by a big tattoo. It’s black and white, and depicts a phoenix bird in mid-flight. The tail feathers curl along the entire stretch of Bucky’s back, all the way from the left side of his neck and shoulder, up along the side of his ribs, and then down across his lower back. One of the feathers make an enticing dip beneath the edge of the white towel, and Steve finds himself involuntarily trying to imagine exactly how far it stretches.

It’s a beautiful tattoo. Even Steve, who’s never been interested in tattoos before, can see that. The shading is exquisite, the peacock-like feathers soft and swooping, and the phoenix’s eyes are sharp, with a lifelike presence where they regard Steve from the few feet separating them.

He only gets a few seconds to study it, though, before Bucky turns around to face him upon hearing Steve exit the kitchen, and oh, dear Lord, that’s almost worse.
The phoenix’s wing does indeed wrap all the way around the entire right side of Bucky’s ribs, its tip just barely gracing the edge of a pierced nipple. The tail feathers on the left side of Bucky’s neck merge with the intricate design of a full sleeve covering his left arm. Steve can see roses, peacock feathers, the partial face of a clock and a row of beads that circle down Bucky’s wrist towards a white skull. A single butterfly sits upon a rose, just beside it. Apart from one of the roses near the top, which is crimson red, it’s the only colored thing on the entire sleeve, which is shaded in black and white, just like the bird on his back.

The sleeve then, in turn, morphs into an asymmetric chest piece, where an anatomically-correct heart, that has been fused together with what looks like half a...grenade, sits right atop of Bucky’s actual heart against a background of yet another rose. There are black and red ink splatters reaching out across his chest, fading as they reach the right pectoral muscle. A quote of some sort sits amongst the aggressively drawn lines, the words printed in delicate calligraphy, which stands in sharp contrast to the cruel image of the grenade-heart.

And finally, on the the man’s right arm, there’s another tattoo, sitting on the inside of his lower arm in majestic solitude. It’s another quote, where the letters are depicted, not in calligraphy, but as the sharp up and down curves of a heartbeat. Steve can’t make out the words across the distance, nor does he get the time to, before Bucky raises the arm to run its hand through his still-wet hair.

“What?” he gruffs, and that’s when reality slams back into gear and Steve realizes that he’s been openly staring at the other man for almost half a minute.

“Oh,” Steve says, though he’s not sure if it should even count as a word. It’s more of a noise, really, and he quickly clears his throat, shaking his head. Bucky is looking at him – once again with that suspicious half-glare, as if he’s trying to deduce if Steve’s making fun of him – and Steve notices with another jolt that the thick scruff that had been covering the other’s face mere minutes ago is now gone. The result is very distracting.

“It’s nothing,” Steve starts, hearing himself begin to ramble without being able to stop it, “I— I wasn't expecting you to be so— I mean, that’s a lot of tattoos. Not that there's anything wrong with tattoos, I'm not saying that!” he adds quickly when Bucky frowns. “They look good. I'm no expert, but those… Those are definitely good. You look great. I mean, they look great! I mean—”

He's cut off by the low buzz coming from his cell phone inside the pocket of his jeans, and he quickly pulls it out, thanking his lucky stars that he wouldn't have to finish his sentence. Literally saved by the bell.

Bucky raises an eyebrow at him as Steve excuses himself to the bedroom, and shuts the door behind him with a relieved sigh as he picks up the call, grateful to have escaped the distracting view of Bucky's near-nude body.

“Yeah?” he says, bringing the phone to his ear as he leans against the bedroom door, closing his eyes.

“Wow, don’t sound so happy, you might hurt yourself.”

“Hi, Sam,” Steve grates.

“You sound like Santa just ran you over with his sled,” Sam points out dryly. “Something happen?”

“No, no, I’m fine,” Steve assures him, tensing when he hears Bucky walk past his door and into the opposite room.
“You sure?” Sam prompts, and just as Steve opens his mouth to repeat that, yes, he’s just fine, Bucky knocks on his door.

“Steve?”

“Is someone there?” Sam asks.

“I, uh—”

“Steve?”

“Hold on,” Steve says into the phone before pushing it against his chest to muffle his voice as he calls through the door, “Yeah?”

“Can you open up?”

Steve leans off the door and opens it, trying not to look as flustered as he feels when he meets Bucky’s gaze. “Yeah?” he says again while furiously willing his gaze not to drop below Bucky’s jaw line.

“I’m gonna need to borrow some underwear,” Bucky says, in Steve’s opinion, way too loud.

“Underwear?” he repeats dumbly.

“Yeah, underwear,” Bucky echoes. He sends Steve’s body an evaluating glance. “Unless you usually go commando?” he asks cheekily, and Steve is so definitely not blushing as he turns back towards the room to make his way over to the closet.

Glancing over his shoulder as he begins to rummage through the underwear shelf inside, he sees Bucky lean against the doorway, still with that damn towel wrapped obscenely low around his waist. Steve honestly can’t decide what’s worse; the fact that he’s got a half-naked tattooed demi-god practically standing inside his bedroom, or that he’s about to lend said deity a pair of his own underwear.

“Here you go,” he says, holding out one of his newest pairs towards Bucky, who takes them without a word. Steve pretends that he doesn’t notice the way Bucky’s eyes drift towards the size tag, nor the way the corner of his lips twitch up into a knowing little smirk once he’s read it. Steve knows that he’s not considered small, and so, he tries not to think about what exactly that smile might mean.

“Thanks,” Bucky says, for about the millionth time since they got back, and Steve honestly can’t tell if the other is being sincere or sarcastic anymore.

He waits until Bucky has turned around and gone back into his own room and closed the door behind him, before he closes his own door once more. He knows what’s coming even as he brings the phone back up to his ear.

“Underwear?” he hears Sam asks, and Steve sighs.

“Yeah,” he admits, reluctantly.

“Care to explain?”

“It’s a long story.”

“Oh, trust me, friend,” Sam chuckles, “I’ve got time for this one. Lay it on me.”
There’s no use trying to argue. Once Sam’s got wind of something, he’s like a dog with a bone, and reluctantly, Steve begins to explain.

He tells Sam everything; about the pick-pocketing, the restaurant, the shelter… Once he’s done, he then listens to the long silence that follows from the other end of the line as Sam takes in everything Steve just told him.

The response is, not surprisingly, correctly anticipated.

“Are you out of your goddamn mind?”

Steve groans, and walks the two steps needed in order for him to sink down onto the bed with a heavy sigh.

“Probably,” he agrees, burying his face in his hand. He’s really been asked that question far too many times today for it to be a coincidence, so there’s no use in trying to deny it anymore.

“You invite a complete stranger – a stranger that’s actually stolen from you already – to come live with you in your apartment?” Sam sums up. “Are you insane?”

“Yes,” Steve groans.

“What if he ends up stealing your stuff?” Sam asks harshly. “Or worse, what if he actually kills you? You have no idea what kind of issues this guy might have! He could be so doped up on drugs, he’ll end up killing you in your sleep without even realizing it!”

“He’s not on drugs,” Steve says firmly.

“Oh, let me guess, because he told you so?” Sam retorts sarcastically, and Steve deflates a little.

“Yeah,” he admits, “he did. But I believe him,” he adds quickly, hearing the way Sam sighs at him through the phone.

“Steve, you’d believe a cat if it told you it was a dog,” Sam points out with what sounds like genuine pity.

“I don’t think he’ll do anything,” Steve insists. “He just needs a chance to get back on his feet, that’s all.”

“There are shelters for that,” Sam informs him soberly. “Educated people with proper programs.”

“I know, but— Sam, I don’t think he needs a program,” Steve argues. “I think he needs a friend. Someone who actually sees him as a person and not just some number in a statistics folder.”

“You can’t save everyone, Steve,” Sam says. “Listen, I know you mean well, but this is way above your skill set, man.”

“If I can keep him off the street when the snow comes, then that’s payment enough,” Steve declares stubbornly, and on the other side of the line, Sam lets out another dejected sigh.

“I’m not gonna be able to talk you out of this one, am I?” he asks.

“Not very likely,” Steve agrees.

“Thought so.” There’s a brief silence. “First thing tomorrow, you call me, do you understand?”
“Sam—”


“That’s funny,” Steve snorts, “Bucky said the exact same thing.”

“Bucky?” Sam repeats. “That’s his name?”

“Yeah, it is.”

“His real name?”

“It’s the name he gave me,” Steve says simply, and Sam groans.

“You really need to grow yourself some self preservation, pal,” he scolds, and Steve lets out a bitter laugh.

“Yeah, tell me about it.”

There’s another short pause.

“Is he hot?”

“Sam!” Steve chokes, and Sam laughs.

“Oh,” he muses, “so he is?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Steve grumbles, sending his door a scandalized look, as if he’s afraid Bucky might accidentally hear them through the wall.

“Only if you’re straight,” Sam points out, “which we both know you’re not.”

“Bucky and I already had that discussion,” Steve grunts, “it’s not happening.”

“Wait, what?” Sam asks, suddenly and obviously confused. “You already brought the hanky-panky up for debate? Dude, he’s been in your home less than half a day!”

“It doesn’t matter, okay?” Steve groans, because really, that part of the story would take way too long to explain properly. “Just— Listen, I’ve gotta go. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“You better,” Sam says seriously. “If I haven’t heard from you by nine AM, I’m calling the cops.”

“Fine,” Steve grunts, standing up, “then I’ll call you at eight fifty nine.”

“Whatever, as long as you call,” Sam says, before adding, sincerely, “Just be careful, man, all right?”

“All right,” Steve agrees.

“Talk to ya in the morning.”

“Yeah, I’ll remember,” Steve promises, and then he hangs up the call.

He takes a few moments to collect himself before he tucks the phone back into his pocket and opens the door to head back out into the living room.

Bucky is already there when he comes out. He is sitting on the far end of the couch with his elbows
braced on his thighs and his fingers laced together in between his knees, as if he’s awaiting judgement of some kind. He is wearing the clothes Steve picked out for him, including the knitted sweater.

Steve has to admit that seeing him dressed in Steve’s own clothes feels a bit…odd. Mostly because Steve’s style doesn’t really go hand-in-hand with the piercings and long hair, and yet, at the same time, it also sort of…does?

It’s a contradiction, for sure, but for some reason it still works. Without the distraction of the leather jacket and hostile clothing, Bucky looks a lot cleaner. Softer. Like a stone polished into a perfect sphere – expected cold and hard to the touch, but still smooth at the same time – and as he stands there, looking at him, Steve can hear Sam’s question from before echo inside his head.

*Is he hot?*

The answer is yes. A big, obvious yes, but Steve shakes the thought away. He didn’t invite Bucky here to flirt, he invited him to help, end of story. So when Bucky looks up at Steve as he enters the living room, Steve smothers the butterflies inside his stomach with a determined push, and focuses on another topic that’s just caught his attention.

“What happened to your hair?” he asks, motioning to the left side of Bucky’s head, which is no longer sporting the bright red color it had back at the shopping mall. Bucky shrugs, pursing his lips a little.

“I washed it,” he says simply, but when Steve just gives him a completely dumbfounded look in return, he continues, “It was just colored hairspray. It’s cheaper than actual dye. And more flexible.”

“Oh,” Steve says quietly as the puzzle piece falls into place. Bucky nods again, and Steve mimics the movement. He has no idea what to say, and for a few, excruciatingly long seconds, the living room falls silent as neither of them say anything.

“Are you hungry?” Steve asks eventually. “There’s still time to get pizza if you’d like?”

“Nah,” Bucky says, shaking his head as he stands up from the couch. “I’m good. I think I’m gonna call it a night, if that’s okay?”

“Of course,” Steve says, stepping aside to let Bucky pass. “Sure.”

“All right,” Bucky mumbles. He throws Steve a quick glance, looking a bit awkward where he stands. “I’ll…see you tomorrow, I guess.”

“Yeah, absolutely.”

Bucky nods again, and then slowly makes his way towards his bedroom.

“Goodnight,” Steve calls after him, and Bucky slows, sending him a look over his shoulder. This one, however, is more out of genuine surprise rather than suspicion, and Steve has to suppress another swarm of rebellious butterflies when Bucky mumbles back a quick “Goodnight,” before disappearing into his room and closing the door behind him.
It’s one AM when Steve snaps his eyes open. It takes him a few moments, and then he registers the sound of the toilet flushing and the faucet in the bathroom being turned on. It’s an unfamiliar sound for Steve to hear inside his own apartment, especially since it’s not caused by himself, but at the same time, it’s also oddly…domestic. He hears the faucet as it’s turned back off, and shortly after, how the bathroom door opens and closes. It's followed by the sound of shuffling footsteps as Bucky then makes his way back into the guest room. Even though he obviously tries to stay silent, Steve still hears the loud thud when Bucky fails to close the door quietly behind him, and the faint sound of bedsprings creaking as the other lies back down.

The mental image of Bucky trying – and apparently failing – to be stealthy makes Steve smile where he lies in the dark, and once the apartment has gone quiet again, Steve closes his eyes with a soft sigh, and goes back to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Aaand that's chapter two :) 
I hope you guys enjoyed it! 
Please feel free to follow me on tumblr as well for more Stucky goodness and I'll see you again tomorrow <3 
Thank you so much for all the support so far, I never expected to get this much feedback (or attention) for this. Truly, thank you <333
Sunday, November 27th

Steve wakes up at three minutes past eight, and even though he knows that there's supposed to be something different about this particular morning, it still takes him about ten seconds to remember exactly why.

Then, the memories come flooding back to him, and just like that, he’s wide awake.

Quickly, he gets up and gets dressed, telling himself that he’s not feeling at all giddy (or nervous) about the upcoming day, or about the house guest currently staying across the hall from his bedroom, for that matter.

As he pulls his socks on, Steve ponders what to make for breakfast. The pantry is obviously still depressingly empty, but they could always go out for breakfast. Or, perhaps if he’s quick about it, he could go get them breakfast and be back before Bucky wakes up? That would be considered a pretty welcoming gesture, surely.

He opens his door, and looks across the hall, and some of his enthusiasm dwindles when he finds the door to Bucky’s room to be wide open. A step further out into the hallway informs him that the guest room is also empty, and that the bed has already been made.

Steve frowns, but then decides not to let himself be disappointed about his foiled plans. They can
still go out to eat, if Bucky wants to.

“Hey, you up already?” he calls out towards the living room.

There is no answer.

He pads down the hallway, looking around the corner towards the sofa in the living room, only to find it, much like the guest room, also empty.

“Bucky?”

There is no one in the kitchen either, and for a moment, Steve just stands there, staring at the gapingly empty seats of his kitchen table. Slowly, he walks back down the hallway to stand in the doorway to the guest room, and it takes him a few seconds to realize that Bucky’s backpack is nowhere to be seen.

Shit.

Still staring at the bed, he pulls his phone out of his pocket and dials, holding it up to his ear with a strangling sense of panic growing inside his chest while the call connects.

“Hey,” Sam greets him. “Glad to hear you’re still alive.”

“He’s gone,” Steve says, and Sam pauses.

“What do you mean, ‘gone’?” he asks carefully.

“I mean that he’s gone,” Steve repeats. “His stuff isn’t here.”

“Is your stuff still there?” Sam counters.

“Why…yeah,” Steve says slowly, glancing towards the desk. “My laptop’s here, at least.” He turns back towards the living room. The TV’s still in place, as are his media center, and all of his DVDs too. “It’s all here.”

“What about your wallet? Your keys, do you still have them?”

Steve strides up to the coat hanger in the hall, and yup, they’re both there, safe and sound in the pocket of his jacket where he left them the day before.

“They’re here,” he reports into the phone.

“Huh.”

“Why would he leave?” Steve asks, anxious disappointment pushing in against the back of his throat. “I don’t get it.”

“Told you the mattress in that bed sucks, man.”

“Sam, please,” Steve groans, “I’m serious.”

“Hey, man, I don’t know what else to tell you. Maybe he felt bad or something?”

“But I still don’t—” Steve cuts himself off when the front door suddenly opens. Bucky walks in, only to stop dead when he spots Steve standing just half a step inside the doorway, phone still pressed against his ear.
Steve stares back at him, gaping dumbly for what feels like ages before he finally gathers himself enough to speak into the phone again. “Sam, I’m gonna have to call you back,” he says, and without waiting for an answer, he ends the call with a quick press of his thumb. Tucking the phone back into his pocket, he turns towards Bucky with a welcoming smile.

“Hi,” he greets faintly as he takes a step back to give the other enough room to come in.

“Hey,” Bucky responds hesitantly. He sends Steve’s face a quizzical glance, as if he wants to ask what that call had been all about. Then he seems to change his mind as he walks inside and closes the door behind him.

He is still wearing the borrowed clothes, which looks more than a bit odd when matched up with his own black combat boots and leather jacket. He has got his backpack slung over his shoulder, and in his hands, he’s carrying—

“Is that…my laundry bag?” Steve asks slowly.

“Uh…” Bucky ducks his head. “Yeah, I— Since you talked about getting my clothes washed, I figured I might as well do yours at the same time.” Bucky holds the bag out, and Steve takes it. “You’re gonna have to hang it up, though,” he adds, apologetically. “I wasn’t sure if some of the stuff should be tumble dried or not.”

“You went to the laundromat?” Steve asks. “Where did you get the money?”

“I had a few quarters left,” Bucky says, shrugging.

“Oh,” Steve breathes softly. Bucky’s gaze flickers to the side, and Steve’s willing to bet his entire Christmas bonus that those had also been Bucky’s last quarters. Bucky literally used the last of his own money to wash Steve’s clothes.

The thought behind that gesture leaves Steve struggling with so many emotions that it takes him another ten seconds of silent gaping to realize that Bucky is still clutching something in his other hand as well.

“What’s that?” he asks, nodding towards the brown paper bag.


“You—” Steve cuts himself off, eyes narrowing. “Last time I checked, those things cost more than a couple of quarters,” he points out.

“Yeah,” Bucky admits while digging his hand into the pocket of his jacket. “That’s why I borrowed some money from your wallet before I left. Here’s the change, by the way.”

Steve reaches out to catch the few crumpled dollars and pennies that Bucky holds out for him, staring at them while Bucky kicks his boots off by the door and saunters past him into the living room.

“I got you a cinnamon latte,” he informs him, flopping down on the couch. “No offense, but you seemed like the type.”

Steve doesn’t answer. He is still staring down at the money in his palm, laundry bag in hand. He knows that he should be angry, or at the very least offended by the fact that Bucky took his money without asking, but on the other hand, he’s also too relieved by the fact that Bucky didn’t actually leave altogether to care. Besides, he had already planned to treat him to breakfast, so it’s not as if
Bucky did anything Steve wouldn't have done himself, eventually. He just beat Steve to it, that’s all.

“Hey?” Bucky calls out, yanking Steve’s thoughts back to the present. “You’re gonna stand there for the rest of the day, or what?”

“No,” Steve says quickly as he straightens up and puts the loose change into his pocket. “I’m coming.”

He leaves the laundry by the door and joins Bucky on the couch, watching Bucky haul out two takeaway coffee cups and a pair of bagels from inside the brown paper bag.

“Here,” he says, and Steve takes the cup handed to him with a grateful, “Thanks.” The coffee is warm through the cup, and Steve curiously brings it up to his nose to sniff it, smiling as the velvety scent of cinnamon fills up his nostrils. Bucky’s cup, on the other hand, clatters as Bucky picks it up, and Steve frowns at it.

“What’s in that thing?” he asks suspiciously.

“Iced coffee,” Bucky informs him as he brings it up to his lips to take a sip. “Black.”

“Fancy,” Steve comments with a grin, and Bucky actually gives a chuckle in response.

“Maybe,” he agrees, “but nowhere near as fancy as a cinnamon latte.”

“Touché,” Steve mumbles, humbly admitting defeat.

“Was I right?” Bucky asks with a nod towards Steve’s cup. “Is it your kind of drink?”

“Actually, I’ve never tried it before,” Steve confesses while picking up his cup to study it more closely. “I’ve meant to, though.” He puts the cup to his lips and drinks slowly to avoid burning his tongue on the hot beverage.

“Well?” Bucky prompts when he puts the cup down again, and Steve smacks his lips loudly.

“Very Christmas-y,” he decides.

“Should suit you perfectly, then,” Bucky comments smugly, and Steve nods, laughing in agreement.

“Yeah, it really does.”

The bagels are simple, with cream cheese and turkey, and Steve notices that Bucky has almost finished eating his before Steve's even had time to take his first bite. He finds himself wondering if it's a habit of sort; to eat as quickly as possible before someone else steals the food away, but he quickly pushes the thought aside, finding it way too depressing. That’s animal behaviour, and Bucky’s not some wild beast brought in from the wild. The guy’s probably got high metabolism, that’s all.

“So,” Steve says cheerfully, wanting to keep the conversation going. “Whatcha wanna do today?”

“To be honest,” Bucky says around the food in his mouth, “I thought maybe you'd have plans or something made already.”

“Not really.” Steve shrugs.
“We don’t have to do anything for my sake,” Bucky offers. “I mean, if you have work in the morning…?”

“Oh, I’ve taken this week and all of December off,” Steve says, snorting out a laugh when Bucky turns to stare at him.

“All of December?” Bucky asks. “Is that even legal?”

“Well, I got a pretty big bonus this year,” Steve explains humbly, “and the warehouse is basically down to just maintenance during the holidays anyway.” When Bucky still looks doubtful, Steve continues, “We send our products out to stores all over the world. Most of this quarter’s shipments went out in September and October in order to make it to the shelves in time for December. So now, we’re basically just waiting around until late January when the orders for Easter will start coming in.”

“Ah,” Bucky says, seemingly understanding the concept. “That…makes sense, I guess.”

“Yeah,” Steve admits. “The holiday dislocation can be a bit confusing sometimes.”

“So you've got literally nothing to do for the entire month?” Bucky asks, sounding more impressed this time around, and Steve shakes his head.

“Nope. Nothing but Christmas.”

“Oh…” Suddenly, Bucky's face drops, and the smile on his lips fades a little. “Right…”

“What?” Steve frowns, sensing the other’s hesitation, and Bucky sighs as he sets his cup down on the coffee table.

“I was just thinking,” he says, “about Christmas. I—I'm not really sure if I should be staying here for that long.”

“What are you talking about?” Steve asks. “Of course you should.”

“No, I'm— Listen, I'd only be in your way,” Bucky objects. “You just told me you're basically on vacation here, and I don't wanna screw that up for you.”

“Trust me, you're not,” Steve promises. “Honestly, I wouldn't have asked you to come, if that's how I felt.”

“Jesus Christ, you don't even know me!” Bucky groans, tipping his head back against the couch. “You just invite me, like some—” He cuts himself off, sitting up higher in his seat. “Steve,” he says firmly, “I appreciate you wanting to do this, I really, really do, but…for fuck’s sake, don't you see how fucked up this is?”

“You're right,” Steve agrees. “It's absolutely nuts. It's crazy and impulsive – reckless, even – but that doesn't mean that it's gonna be bad.”

“God, have you even heard of the word pessimistic?” Bucky complains, closing his eyes in exasperation. “I can’t—” He cuts himself off again with another deep sigh, before looking over at Steve with a disbelieving frown. “Like, how come you even trust me enough to do this in the first place?” he asks.

“Don't know,” Steve admits. “How come you trust me enough to let me?”
“Honestly?” Bucky snorts. “Not a fucking clue.”

“Good,” Steve says, smiling. “So until we find a reason not to trust one another, how about we just take this one day at a time, and see how it goes?”

“You seriously think that's gonna work?” Bucky asks, and Steve shrugs.

“Like you said, not a fucking clue,” he echoes, feeling his heart lighten when Bucky's response is to chuckle lightly. “So now that that’s out of the way; how’d you sleep last night?” he asks, changing the subject.


“Was there something wrong?” Steve asks, feeling worry rise in the wake of the other’s words, but Bucky shakes his head.

“No, not wrong ,” he explains, “just…quiet. Back at the shelter, there's always something going on, you know. People moving, snoring… Farting,” he adds with a grimace, making Steve laugh. “Sometimes you can even hear people have sex or jerk themselves off, and if you're lucky , they're not doing it on the sleeping mat next to yours.”


“Jesus fuck, no,” Bucky says with disgusted face. “But they were still normal sounds, in a way. At least there,” he adds. “Here, it's just…nothing. I mean, it's not quiet as in silent , but it's quiet in the way where you hear exactly everything . The clock in the kitchen, the neighbor flushing the toilet. The damn garbage truck. ” He sighs, waving his hand dismissively towards the guest room. “I'm not used to it, that's all.”

“So, in other words, you had a pretty crappy night,” Steve concludes.

“No, not crappy,” Bucky objects. “I was warm. Not hungry. Didn't have to worry about anyone trying to steal my shit…” He gives a bitter smile. “All in all, it was the best night I've had in quite some time.”

“Except for the part where you didn't sleep ,” Steve points out soberly.

“Yeah,” Bucky admits as he picks up his coffee cup from the table with a pointed glance towards Steve’s face. “I got myself black coffee for a reason.”

“Then how about this for today’s agenda?” Steve suggests. “First, we finish breakfast. Then we hang up the laundry so it doesn't get mouldy or something equally disgusting. After that, we spend the rest of the day watching old reruns on TV, and you can nap on the couch for a few hours. As for dinner, I’ll order in a family sized pizza or two, and then we can both eat until we puke, how’s that sound?”

“Like a pretty awesome day,” Bucky agrees. He purses his lips, thinking the offer over one more time. “Though, I'd rather not puke if I can avoid it.”

“Don't worry,” Steve promises, “I'll keep an eye on you.”

“I bet,” Bucky mumbles, making Steve frown in confusion. Then he takes a deep breath as he set his coffee cup down again before turning back towards Steve. “Steve—”

“No,” Steve says firmly, and Bucky closes his mouth with a frustrated huff through his nose. “You
don't get to argue anymore,” Steve decides. “I'd like for you to stick around. And as long as you're not telling me straight up that you actually wanna leave, I'm not taking no for an answer.” He pauses, looking Bucky in the eye. “Do you wanna leave?”

Bucky opens his mouth, and then he closes again. Then he looks away with a slow shake to his head, and Steve's heart breaks for him, all over again.

“Listen, Buck,” he says softly. “You don't have to repay me with anything. No rent, no laundry. You won't have to buy me any food, either. As long as you promise to help keep the apartment clean, I'll be thrilled. And if you really want me to give you some sort of real condition for staying, then how about you spend your time here looking for a job?”

“I wasn't planning to sit around on my ass the entire time,” Bucky mutters sullenly. He looks ashamed, as if Steve's trying to hand him something he doesn't feel worthy of accepting.

“I didn't assume you were,” Steve assures him with a smile. “You're not the type.”

“How the hell would you know?” Bucky says with a snort, still looking down at the floor.

“Because people who sit around on their asses don't get up at seven in the morning just to do someone else's laundry,” Steve reminds him. “Just like they don't return things they’ve stolen to the lost and found at the mall.”

And there's the blush again. God, Steve can't get over how someone with such an intimidating look can manage to be so darn cute at the same time.

“I just wanna help you,” Steve continues. “I know it's hard to believe, but it's the truth. And I honestly can't stand the thought of leaving you out there in the cold on your own. Not when I'm actually able to do something about it.”

Bucky snorts again as he sends Steve a glance from the corner of his eye. “So, what?” he asks sarcastically. “You've decided to appoint yourself my guardian angel all of a sudden?”

“As a matter of fact, yeah,” Steve retorts. “Because the one you have is apparently doing a pretty shitty job.”

Bucky blinks, and Steve catches sight of the shallow bob in the other man's throat as Bucky's fingers tighten around his cup. Steve watches him pull at his lower lip with his teeth, and Steve only just has enough time to notice the sudden wet gleam in his eyes before Bucky stands up from the couch and walks up to the window.

Looking outside, Bucky pulls his hand through his hair, fisting it slightly at the back, before turning around again. When he looks at Steve this time, his eyes are dry, but Steve knows perfectly well what he saw, even if he already knows that he'll never mention it out loud.

“All right,” Bucky grates out. “Fuck it, you win.”

“Oh course I do,” Steve says with a gentle smile, and Bucky rolls his eyes to the ceiling with a groan, perching his hand on his hip.

“That's just because you're such a nagging bastard,” he decides defensively. “Jesus, at this rate, you're gonna make my ears fall off within a week.”

Steve laughs, pretending that he doesn't notice the way Bucky shifts his weight from one foot to the other while delivering the feigned insult. It's pretty clear that he's touched by Steve's offer – he
simply doesn't know how to handle the care and thoughtfulness without being sarcastic about it. A self-defense mechanism, no doubt.

Which is a depressing thought, really. Who needs a defense mechanism against people being nice?

Steve isn't given much time to linger on the thought, though, before his phone gives off a low buzz inside his pocket. He checks it, seeing Sam's name light up the screen along with the text message icon.

Everything okay? Do I need to call the cops?

I'm fine. Steve types back. Stop worrying.

Did you find him?

Yeah. He came back just as I was talking to you. The guy actually went and did my laundry, can you believe that?

I have to admit, that's not what I expected.

Steve smiles.

That makes two of us.

So, what now? What are your plans?

Movie night and pizza.

You sure this is still a rescue mission? Sam types back. Because it's beginning to sound more like you're trying to make a move on the guy.

Shut up.

Just admit it. You think he's hot.

Steve pauses, staring down at the screen of his phone. He glances to the side where Bucky is still standing by the window, looking outside while drinking from his cup with one hand shoved down the pocket of Steve's sweatpants.

Maybe a little.

He sighs, and then quickly types out the rest of the message before he can change his mind.

Now shut up.

\\\\

Bucky does, in fact, fall asleep on the couch. At a quarter past two, Steve looks over from his spot in the armchair to find the other snoring softly while lying curled up on his side over two-and-a-half of the couch's three seats. He has got his face buried in the crook of his left arm, which he's using as a pillow, while hugging around his chest with his right. There are a few stray strands of hair lying swept across his forehead, and going by his partially open mouth, Steve suspects that there's gonna be a pretty impressive wet patch of drool on Bucky's sleeve once he wakes up again.
In short, the sight is absolutely heartwarming, and Steve barely resists the urge to get up and drape one of the bright red blankets on the couch over him to complete the adorable scene.

He doesn't, however. Bucky would most likely find it embarrassing to be pampered like that, and since Steve wants Bucky to feel comfortable here, mother-henning him like a concerned parent would be downright counterproductive. So he lets him sleep, and graciously pretends not to notice the grimace Bucky makes upon waking up to find the knitted fabric of his left elbow damp with his own saliva.

There is a *Friends* marathon running on one of the channels during the afternoon, which they watch together, with varying levels of attention.

After about one-and-a-half episodes, Steve catches Bucky as the other absent-mindedly puts his feet up on the coffee table, only to drop them down just as quickly with a guilty glance in Steve's direction when he realizes what he's doing.

“It's okay,” Steve says calmly, without even taking his eyes off the TV. “I keep my feet up there all the time.”

Bucky doesn't say anything. He doesn't move, either, not right away. Then he slowly puts his feet back up, and slumps down into a half-sitting, half-lying position in his seat with a final, curious glance in Steve’s direction, before finally relaxing.

Steve immediately decides that seeing the other man so laid-back is quickly becoming one of his new favorite things.

On the screen, Joey makes yet another observation regarding the gang’s overweight nudist neighbor, and Bucky frowns. “Do you ever get to see the ugly naked guy?” he asks curiously, and Steve purses his lips as he regards the question.

“I don't think so,” he says eventually. There's a short pause.

“No, that's the upstairs neighbor,” Steve corrects. “With ugly naked guy, it's just a false alarm when he falls asleep on the balcony.”

“Oh right.” Bucky gives a short laugh. “Is that the same episode where they build a big stick to poke him with from across the building?”

“Yeah, that's the one.”

“I hope you don't have neighbors like that,” Bucky says with a snort, and Steve finally tears his eyes away from the TV to look at him with a raised eyebrow.

“What?” he asks, confused. “Fat naked ones?”

“No,” Bucky says with a snort while pointing to the screen at Monica and Rachel, who have rushed to the window to see what Joey's talking about. “Like them,” he clarifies. “People who spy at their neighbors through the window. It's creepy.”

“Well, I've never noticed anyone looking around here,” Steve admits, throwing a glance at the living room window. “There are trees blocking the view both out here and in the bedroom. I haven't thought about the office, but I don't think you have to worry about it there either.”
Not that there's any reason to worry, Steve thinks silently to himself. Steve bets that if Bucky had been living opposite of the Friends apartment, there would have been a totally different reason to why Rachel and Monica kept spying through the windows…

He glances over at Bucky again, but frowns when his eye catches on something on the sole of the other’s foot. He leans forward to see it better, and yup, there is indeed a big hole at the bottom of his sock, just below the big toe.

“Are those mine?” Steve asks curiously. “I didn't give you clothes with holes in them, did I?”

“What?” Bucky asks, looking away from the TV again, but when he sees where Steve’s looking, he quickly catches on.

“No, these are mine,” he explains, pulling his foot up to look at the sock in question. “I had a spare pair in my backpack. I washed yours.”

“Oh, right,” Steve says. He looks on as Bucky puts his foot back onto the table, but even though the thought of Bucky wearing clothes that are obviously too worn and tattered to fill their purpose correctly bothers him, he still decides not to voice his opinion on the subject.

At least not right now.

\\\\\\\\

They call for pizza at around seven. Steve insists that they order two extra-large ones, just like he suggested earlier, but even though they do their best to finish them both, they don’t succeed. Nobody pukes, however, so it's still considered a success.

They make an unanimous decision to store the leftovers away for breakfast, and then call it a day.

“You think you'll sleep better to tonight?” Steve asks as he puts the pizza in the fridge while Bucky sets the dirty dishes in the sink. “If you want, we can leave the TV on to make it less quiet?”

“Ugh, no,” Bucky says with a grimace. “I'll just get interested and end up watching the damn thing. Besides,” he adds with a smile, “if I'm gonna be staying here, I better get used to it being quiet anyway.”

“Point,” Steve chuckles.

Bucky walks ahead out of the kitchen, and Steve turns off the lights behind them before following Bucky down the hallway towards their rooms.

“Well, good night then, I guess,” Bucky says as he steps into the guest room.

“Well, good night,” Steve echoes. He's just about to walk into his own bedroom when he pauses and turns back around. “Hey, I was thinking,” he says, and Bucky halts, his door already halfway closed. “How about tomorrow, we go out shopping somewhere?”

“Shopping for what?” Bucky asks, frowning.

“I still have a few Christmas gifts I need to buy,” Steve explains, smirking as he adds, “since
someone interrupted me last time.”

Bucky rolls his eyes with a huff that only comes out sounding a little bit embarrassed.

“Also, I was thinking we could pick you up a new pair of socks while we're at it,” Steve adds with a shrug and Bucky's eyes immediately narrow into suspicious slits.

“Just socks?” he asks pointedly, as if he knows exactly what Steve's thinking.

“Well,” Steve says nonchalantly, “we might find a few other things too.” He cocks his head to the side and looks at Bucky's disapproving frown. “Let's face it, pal, you're gonna need at least one other set of clothes. Unless, of course,” he adds with a sweeping gesture towards Bucky's pants, “you wanna keep borrowing mine? Either way is fine by me.”

Bucky follows the motion of Steve's hand to look down on his current outfit, and when Steve's words hit home he stiffens, jaw clenching. For a moment, he looks torn, as if he can't decide which of the two alternatives would bring him the least amount of guilt.

When he looks back up, he has an expression on his face that Steve can't read, and just as Steve suspects that he's gonna have to argue his way through another one of Bucky's objections, Bucky's posture relaxes, and he smirks.

“All right,” he agrees. “As long as you promise not to dress me up like some kind of jock.”

“Deal,” Steve says, grinning back, and Bucky closes his door with an amused chuckle.

When Steve climbs into his own bed ten minutes later, he wonders to himself if he'll be able to convince Bucky to let him buy him something to use for potential job interviews as well. Like, not necessarily a full suit, but just a pair of dark pants and a button down shirt. Maybe a jacket. He'll probably need something other than a pair of military boots too. And a tie. Yeah, with his hair pulled back and his posture a little less hostile, that would actually work out quite nicely. The piercings and the little glimpse of ink on his neck wouldn't even be a problem. In fact, they'd make him look pretty damn—

With a screeching halt, Steve stops his brain from finishing that sentence, and his eyes snap open to stare up at his ceiling through the darkness.

He is not gonna think it. Won't allow himself to think it, no matter how true it might be. No matter how much it makes Steve's heart race to admit it, he won't do it.

The memory of black and gray ink on still-moist skin flashes through his head, and he resolutely fists his hands on top of the covers.

Once again, it's Sam's voice that comes floating to him from the corner of his mind that never seems to do what it's told. It's a smug voice, or rather, a line of text, and it shines up at Steve from within his subconscious, like a solar flare in the rear view mirror.

You think he's hot.

Hot. Bucky is hot.

And Steve…

Well… Steve is so fucking screwed.
Chapter End Notes

Thank you guys for reading <3 I really appreciate all the feedback so far, you are all so sweet and helpful ^^
Feel free to follow me on tumblr as well for more Stucky goodness ;)
See you tomorrow! <3
Monday, November 28th

The shopping crowd isn’t all that busy, this time around. Most likely because it’s a Monday, and because most people – unlike Steve – still have jobs to be at during this time of day.

They decided not go back to Staten Island, however. Instead, they take the subway over to Manhattan and Columbus Circle; making it more of a field day. Bucky looks slightly intimidated when they approach the large glass building that is the Time Warner Center, and Steve has to admit, it does look mighty impressive where it sits, crescent and towering above their heads.

“Where do you wanna start?” Steve asks cheerfully, once they’re inside the big square foyer of the mall, and Bucky sends him a hesitant flicker before glancing up at the glass-encased floors above them.

“How about you decide?” he offers, looking back at Steve again. “I have a feeling you’re better at this than I am.”

Steve gives him an assuring smile, nodding. “Okay,” he says. “Then let’s go look for clothes? I think True Religion might have some stuff you’ll like.”

“Oh,” Bucky says, sounding about as hesitant as if Steve just said they were gonna go check out some cool bird feeders. “Okay.”
They locate the store on the guide map, and Bucky follows Steve towards the escalators, which brings them up to the second floor. The moment they arrive at the store, however, Bucky stops, staring at the clothes in the shop window.

“You coming?” Steve asks, stopping as well when he notices that Bucky’s no longer following him.

“Are you sure you wanna buy me clothes in here?” Bucky says slowly, eyes still fixed on the display.

“Yeah, why?” Steve asks, confused. He looks at the mannequins in the window. Torn jeans, grunge shirts, hoodies and leather jackets. They all look like a style Bucky would consider wearing. “You don't like them?”

“Seriously?” Bucky retorts. “Out of everything in this window, that's what you're worried about?”

“What else should I worry about?” Steve asks, genuinely confused, and in return, Bucky cocks his head towards the lower half of the display. When Steve follows the gesture, he spots a sign at the mannequin’s feet, informing him that the jeans sell for about two hundred and seventy dollars, while the jacket is eight hundred.

“Oh,” he says, catching on, and Bucky groans, loudly.

“I don't fucking believe you!” he exclaims, grabbing around his head with both hands. “You didn't even look. You just—!”

“Bucky.”

Bucky shuts his mouth when Steve says his name, and slowly he drops his hands down by his side as he meets Steve's gaze. “Let me guess,” he says weakly, “I don't get a say?”

“Of course you do,” Steve objects. He walks back the few paces separating them, and puts his hand on Bucky's shoulder. “We're here for your sake, remember?”

Bucky sends a glance towards the window, looking at the mannequin there, and then he shakes his head while closing his eyes, as if he's trying to get rid of an unwelcome thought.

“C’mon,” Steve coaxes with a gentle shake to Bucky's shoulder, “let me do this for you.”

“I can't let you,” Bucky says. “All that money—”

“Is mine to spend,” Steve finishes firmly. “And I choose to spend it on you. I have clothes. You don't. Am I really gonna have to stand here and explain to you exactly why that is reason enough for me?”

“I don't need new clothes,” Bucky mumbles. “I don't have room for them in my backpack anyway.”

“You have an entire closet back home.”

“Your home,” Bucky retorts with a sullen glare. “I'm just a house guest, remember?”

“Fine, you have my closet, then,” Steve grants with a sigh. He cants his head, trying to catch Bucky’s gaze. “C’mon man, it's not as if I'm gonna buy you the entire store.”

Bucky gnaws on his lower lip while staring down at Steve's shoes. Then he glances towards the mannequin again before looking back at Steve.
“One change of clothes,” he says firmly, and Steve removes his hand from Bucky's jacket as he straightens up slowly, narrowing his eyes.

“Two,” he argues.

“One change of clothes, and a pair of sweatpants,” Bucky barters.

“One casual outfit and one for job interviews,” Steve retorts stubbornly. “And a pair of sweatpants.”

Bucky lets out a snort through his nose, but then rolls his eyes with a defeated groan.

“Fine, whatever,” he grumbles. “For some reason, I doubt I'll be able to stop your crazy ass anyway.”

“Got that right,” Steve says, grinning victoriously before giving Bucky's shoulder a hard pat. “Now, c’mon. Let's go find you something to wear.”

They decide to get the job interview outfit out of the way first, for personal reasons that Steve refuses to acknowledge.

Bucky doesn't look all too impressed with the mostly plain pair of black jeans and indigo blue button-down shirt Steve holds out to him, but he takes the garments and goes into the changing room nonetheless. Steve waits outside, and after a couple of minutes, he hears Bucky give an unidentifiable noise from within the cubicle.

“I look fucking ridiculous in this,” he declares firmly, and Steve lets out a disbelieving chuckle as he leans in closer to the door.

“What do you mean ridiculous?” he asks. “Did we get the wrong size?”

“No, they fit,” Bucky says, and Steve hears him as he lets out another one of those noises that sounds like something in between a whimper and a snort. “I just— I mean, I look like someone's dad.”

“Now that's something I find really hard to believe,” Steve says with a laugh. “Open the door, let me see.”

Reluctantly, the door opens, and Steve peeks his head inside, fully prepared to find Bucky in whatever state of ridicule the other has already decided he's currently in.

He chokes.

Oh, daddy, indeed, his brain whoops, without his consent, causing Steve to blush at the crudeness of his own dirty mind.

Bucky looks like a mashup between a chivalrous gentleman and a bad boy in the rough. His hair, which he's still wearing pulled back in the same thin hair band as he had put on that same morning, leaves his face open and uncovered, with the exception of a single stray strand that falls down the side of his face in a way that just has to be deliberately provocative. The blue shirt Steve picked out
for him is snug, and fitted across his chest in a way that makes Steve wanna reach out and touch it, just to see if it feels as firm as it looks. Bucky didn't button the thing all the way up, and it turns out Steve had been right; the glimpses of tattooed skin that peeks out from underneath the fabric at his collar and neck are more than enough to make Steve become horribly aware of his own heartbeat.

The jeans are perfect, and Steve can't help the quick glance he sends the mirror inside the cubicle, seeing the way they hug around Bucky's backside as if they had been molded from his body. Damn, it's a nice view, and Steve swallows hard when he moves his gaze up the reflection to slide it over the broad span of Bucky's shoulders.

It's a very nice view, and Steve makes sure to clear his throat properly, twice, before even attempting to speak.

“That's a keeper,” he decides, tapping his index finger in the air towards Bucky's chest. “Really, you have absolutely no idea how good that looks on you.”

“You think so?” Bucky asks skeptically as he looks down at the shirt while running his hands down the sides of his torso to rest them on his hips.

Oh, please, don't do that, Steve thinks with a mental whimper as he watches Bucky's fingers move over the satiny fabric to grip at the firm bulk of muscle Steve knows perfectly well resides just underneath. “Oh, yeah,” is what he says, however, swallowing again. “Positive.”

“If you say so, I guess…” Bucky mumbles, straightening up. “Like I said, you’re probably better at this stuff than I am.”

“Shopping?” Steve says sarcastically.

“Work,” Bucky corrects. He twists his body arounds to look at himself in the mirror. “I mean, I know you’re supposed to dress nice and all for a job interview, but…I’ve never been to an interview that required me to dress up like this.”

“Never?” Steve asks. “What kind of jobs have you been doing, exactly?”

“A little bit of everything,” Bucky says with a shrug, still looking at his own reflection. “Mostly temporary jobs. Washing dishes, industrial work… You know, the kind where people don’t actually get to see you.”

“Because of the way you dress?” Steve asks.

“Probably. I don’t think these help either,” Bucky adds, gesturing at his face and ears.

“That’s a shame,” Steve says, and he means it. “You’re smart. People are missing out on some quality material.”

Bucky’s lip quirks up into a smile, but he doesn’t say anything else. When he brings his hands up to unbutton the shirt, Steve takes that as his cue to close the cubicle door, and he does so with an unsettling mix of both disappointment and relief.

When Bucky comes back out, once again dressed in his black cargo pants and leather jacket, the shopping continues.

They pick up a few pairs of socks, like Steve had promised they would, along with some underwear, and a pair of black sweatpants. Steve also adds a twin-set of black and white tank tops to the mix – the cheapest, because Bucky gives him a vicious glare when he makes a move for the
They end up buying two pairs of jeans. One red, and one black. The red ones, which Steve discovers aren’t really red upon closer inspection, looks like a pair of blue jeans that someone first dumped a can of white paint over, only to follow the action up with another bucket of rusty red. Steve can tell that Bucky is itching to try them on, and so he just picks them off the hanger and hands them towards him with a throw of his head towards the dressing room.

The black ones are referred to on the label as “biker jeans”, and they have a pattern of seams sewn across the knees that resembles kneepads. Together with the acid washed effect of the fabric, they look cool as hell. They pair it up with a white t-shirt with the faded print of a skull at the front, along with the store’s own brand name on top of a bar of bright red. The back features a long list of city names in the same font as the front print, which Steve suspects have some sort of relation to the store in general, even though he has no clue about what.

Steve also catches Bucky eyeing a t-shirt on their way to the check-out; a light gray one with the bolded capital words “Bad Seed” in off white, and a haphazard pattern of white, rust red and turquoise skulls on the back.

“It’ll go well with your jeans,” Steve declares, and adds one to their growing collection of clothes before Bucky has the time to object.

They also pick up a black and dark gray raglan shirt with another, messier True Religion print on the front, because Steve insists Bucky’s gonna need a warmer shirt as well. Bucky lets him, even though he doesn’t look all too happy about Steve spending even more money on him.

Steve already knows that it’s a stretch as he begins to casually saunter towards the outdoor wear section of the store, and sure enough, the moment he reaches out to look at one of the thick down jackets hanging on the nearest rack, Bucky’s hand closes around his wrist like a vice.

“Oh, no, you don’t.”

“What?” Steve says innocently. “I was only looking.”

“No, you weren’t,” Bucky insists and Steve gives up the act, realizing that he’s been caught.

“All right, so I wasn’t,” he admits. “But you told me yourself that you’ve been looking for a warmer jacket.”

“Yeah,” Bucky retorts, “in a charity dumpster. Not in a store where they cost—” He looks at the price tag of the jacket Steve had been aiming for, and Steve has to hold back a giggle when Bucky promptly chokes, eyes going wide. “— four hundred dollars,” he continues hoarsely.

“It’s quality,” Steve defends himself.

“It’s robbery,” Bucky insists, gazing out over the other garments around them. “Jesus fuck, and people call me a criminal.”

“It would look good on you,” Steve tries, abandoning reason in favor of vanity as he holds the jacket up, pleased to see that it’s plain black with just a few silver details and a fur trim around the hood. “You can pimp it up whichever way you want.”

“We’re not getting it,” Bucky argues and Steve gives up, turning his face towards the ceiling with an exasperated groan.
“You’re hopeless,” he decides. “You’re telling me you’d rather freeze to death than accept my help?”

“I’m not gonna freeze to death,” Bucky grumbles stubbornly, shoving his hands into the pocket of his own jacket.

“Yes, you are. You’re gonna end up a human popsicle out there. You don’t even have a scarf, for Christ’s sake.”

“I don’t like them. They itch.”

“They’re warm,” Steve points out blankly. Bucky glares at him, and Steve decides to give it one last try. “Then how about this,” he suggests, “we buy the jacket now, and when you get a job, you can reimburse me for it? That way, technically, you’ll be the one buying it.”

Bucky looks up, his glare easing up a little.

“That could work…” he admits.

“Or,” Steve continues, smiling, “You’ll pay for half, and I’ll give you the other one. As an early Christmas gift.”

He’s not expecting it, and therefore he feels twice as dumb when Bucky’s face immediately goes grim in response to his words.

“No, thanks,” the other says flatly, yanking the jacket off its rack and turning away. “As soon as I get the money, I’m paying for it myself.”

Steve opens his mouth to object, but the words get stuck in his throat as he’s faced with the silent width of Bucky’s back when the other strides off towards the registers. It’s a lot of money for someone in Bucky’s situation, he knows that. That’s why he suggested that he’d pay for half of it, to make it a bit easier, but apparently that had been the wrong way to go about it.

Bucky is obviously very sensitive about getting stuff handed to him for free, which is a rather unexpected standpoint, coming from a pickpocket, but Steve gets it. He realizes that his offer probably sounded as if he was suggesting that Bucky might not ever be able to pay him back, even if he does get a job. It was clumsy, and Steve curses his own tactlessness as he follows Bucky to pay for their purchases.

When they leave the store, Bucky still looks gloomy, and he trudges along next to Steve with his hands in his pockets and his eyes fixed on the floor in front of his feet. Steve already volunteered to carry the bags, but Bucky still refuses to let him carry the one containing the jacket.

As they follow the stream of shoppers through the mall, it strikes Steve that perhaps Bucky’s just hungry. They’ve been gone from home for quite a while now, and being friends with Nat, Steve knows all there is to know about the consequences of low blood sugar.

“Hey,” he says as they approach a coffee shop at the upper floor of the mall. “Wanna eat something?”

Bucky looks up, following Steve’s gaze towards the sign above the shop’s entrance.

“I’m not really that hungry,” he mumbles, but Steve is not about the let that stop him.

“We’ll share something,” he prompts, taking an encouraging step towards the entrance, thinking
that Bucky might be more inclined to let Steve treat him, as long as he doesn't buy Bucky something separately. “C’mon, the toasted sandwiches here looks awesome.”

Bucky doesn't look too overjoyed by the information, but he still follows Steve inside, which Steve counts as a victory.

The coffee shop has their holiday decorations up, and there are little vases of holly set out on all the tables. The napkins are bright red, and there are Christmas songs playing from the speakers hanging behind the register. It's bright, cozy and as they sit down, Steve's convinced that Bucky will be back to his old self in no time at all.

For the second time that day, he turns out to be mistaken.

The longer they sit, the more annoyed Bucky seems to get. After the waitress arrives with their sliced up toast, he barely even touches his half, and even though Steve tries to strike up a conversation, Bucky's answers are all short, tense, and single-syllabled.

A pair of women take a seat at the table next to theirs while they eat, and Steve can see Bucky glower at them whenever they happen to laugh or talk too loud. He also sends foul looks towards the stereo behind the counter, and Steve can hear him mutter something under his breath about how the barista must to be nearly deaf with the volume they're keeping on that goddamn music.

He watches in silence how Bucky pokes at the holly sitting in the vase on their table, before he moves on to tug at the leaf so hard it makes the vase wobble. When Steve reaches out and catches the vase, just before it topples over, Bucky glares at him, as if Steve just ruined a perfectly good destructive action. Then he rolls his eyes, sighing.

“All these damn decorations make me wanna puke,” he declares firmly to the seat next to him. “I don't get how people stand putting up with this shit every fucking year…”

On his side of the table, Steve deflates. Hyperawareness immediately kicks in, and suddenly, he can only see exactly how much their surroundings consists of Christmas-related items. Everything from the garlands hanging underneath the shop sign to the little snowman shaped hat of a toddler being pushed past in a stroller in the hallway outside.

He had forgotten all about Bucky's comment from the day before, about not liking Christmas. Of course going to the most Christmas-y place in the whole mall won't be helping his already bad mood.

“You know,” Steve says, stretching leisurely in his seat, “I'm starting to get tired. What do you say about heading back?”

“Yeah, sure,” Bucky mumbles, as if he couldn't care less. The tone of his voice makes Steve feel like a total jerk.

They pay and leave. They don't speak much as they head back to the subway, and Steve notes how Bucky continues to clutch around the bag with his new jacket throughout the entire train ride home.

The moment they get inside Steve's apartment, Bucky kicks his shoes off and is already heading for his room before Steve has even gotten the door closed properly. His shoulders are squared and his head hung low, and Steve's entire being is screaming out for Steve to stop him. That he simply can't allow the day to end like this.

“Bucky, wait,” he calls out, and Bucky stops dead, mid-step in the doorway leading into the corridor.
“What?” he grates without even turning around.

Steve sighs and rubs at the back of his neck. The words are hard to find, because even though he knows that he must have done something wrong, he's still not entirely sure exactly what the thing was.

“I'm sorry,” he says, settling with the most honest alternative.

“For what?” Bucky asks. His voice is still tight. Still angry.

“For the things I said back at the store,” Steve apologizes, “I didn't mean to make it sound like—Listen, I'm really sorry, okay?”

Bucky slowly turns back around, but the look he sends towards Steve isn't the one of anger that Steve expects. Instead, he looks confused, and perhaps even a little bit annoyed.

“What the hell are you talking about?” he grumbles. Steve blinks, and then he frowns as well.

“The thing I said about payment for the jacket,” he tries to clarify. “I didn't want to make it sound as if you wouldn't be capable of doing it yourself. I didn't mean to make you feel bad, and I'm sorry.”

Bucky stares at him for what Steve counts as the longest five seconds of his life. Then he slowly puts the bag with the jacket down on the floor and buries his face in his hands with a muffled, yet very heartfelt, “Fuck…”

He takes a deep breath, and exhales, lifting his head to look at Steve again.

“It wasn't about the money,” he says. “I didn't mean to—” He closes his eyes and gives a helpless shake of his head. “You thought I was mad at you?” he asks.

“Well…yeah,” Steve answers truthfully. “I mean, everything was going fine until I brought up the money.”

“You've bought me more clothes today than I've owned in a year,” Bucky points out. “Why the fuck would I be mad about that?”

“I don't know,” Steve says, throwing his arms out to the sides with a flustered whimper. “Because I'm an asshole who throws money around like nothing, while you have to struggle to even find food for the day?”

“That doesn't make any goddamn sense,” Bucky declares with an equally dumbstruck throw of his hand, and Steve closes his eyes with a wince.

“All right, all right,” he says, holding up a hand. “So if you're not mad at me, then what are you mad about?”

For a moment, Bucky looks as if he's been caught with his foot in a bear trap, but then he walks past Steve towards the couch and sits down upon it with another heavy sigh and a groan.

“I'm not mad,” he explains. “I'm just…frustrated.”

“About what?”

“This,” Bucky says, gesturing towards the inside of Steve's living room. “Christmas.”
Steve considers this information for a few seconds.

“What?” he says, somehow even more confused than before, and Bucky groans as he hides his face in his hands for the second time.

“This godforsaken fucking holiday that everyone is so insistent about celebrating every goddamn year!” he exclaims behind his palms.

“You’re mad at Christmas?” Steve asks, demanding the clarification.

“Yes!”

“Why?”

“Because—” Bucky cuts himself off with a noise that Steve decides to interpret as a whine, as he sits up against the backrest of the couch. “I just am,” he finishes defiantly. “All right? Just because you decided to live inside Santa’s fuckin’ workshop doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

Steve watches as Bucky leans forwards again, wringing his hands in between his knees while staring down at them, as if he’s trying to rub something unpleasant off his skin. He is tense again, and his jaw keeps clenching and unclenching as he drags in deep breaths through his nose.

Just like that, Steve realizes that this runs deeper than just annoyance over-exaggerated winter aesthetics. There’s more to this, at least if Bucky’s behaviour is of any indication.

“When’s the last time you celebrated Christmas?” he asks, on a whim. Bucky shrugs.

“Years,” he grates out simply.

“Well…” Steve walks around the coffee table, stopping in front of the other man. “Maybe you just need to experience a proper Christmas, then? It might change your mind?”

“I seriously doubt that,” Bucky mumbles.

“Won’t know unless you try,” Steve says encouragingly.

“Yeah, right,” Bucky mutters back, before looking up at Steve with a sharp gleam of suspicion in his eyes. “Wait, what exactly are you talking about?”

Steve smiles and hunches down, crouching in front of the other on the floor.

“I’m gonna give you the best Christmas experience of your life,” he declares solemnly, and Bucky groans.

“Please, don’t,” he says with a condensing snort.

“Oh, c’mon,” Steve retorts. “It’ll be fun, I promise.” When Bucky still looks doubtful, he continues, “We can get drunk on eggnog together and then watch The Grinch like, fifty times in a row. After that, we can make our very own Christmas-pizza with turkey, mashed potatoes and gravy. And cranberries,” he adds with an exaggerated grin.

This time, Bucky’s snort ends up in a poorly concealed giggle, and Steve can’t help but grin even wider when Bucky shakes his head with a short laugh.

“Wow,” he says, “I’m gonna need something way stronger than eggnog if I’m gonna eat that shit.”
“At least it’s a start”, Steve says benevolently, before adding, more teasingly. “C’mon, Buck. Prove me wrong.” He looks up at Bucky’s face, canting his head to the side with a sly smirk. “I’ll bet you the jacket,” he offers sweetly.

At that, Bucky glances up, and Steve catches the competitive gleam that flashes across his eyes. Then Bucky’s lips widen into a confident grin.

“All right,” he agrees. “If you wanna get your ass whooped so badly, sure. Bring it on.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you guys for reading, and I hope you enjoyed it ^^
In case you're curious about the clothes Steve bought for Bucky, they can be found on True Religion's webpage, but if you don't feel like going looking for them yourselves, here are a few image links for you ^^

Red "paint bucket" jeans
Black biker jeans
White Tour shirt - front
White Tour shirt - back
Grey "Bad seed" shirt - front
Grey "Bad seed" shirt - back
Raglan shirt - back
Jacket

Let me know if any of the links are broken, and I'll upload proper images instead.
Feel free to follow me on tumblr as well for more Stucky goodness ;)
See all of you again tomorrow ;) <3
Tuesday, November 29th

Bucky looks on as Steve sets the big bowl down on top of the kitchen counter, before diving back down to get another, smaller one from inside the base cabinet.

“Cookie baking?” he asks skeptically. “Really?”

“Yup,” Steve declares, grinning as he emerges with the second bowl, along with a handful of cookie cutters, which he hands to Bucky with a faint jingle.

“So this is your brilliant plan to convert me?” Bucky challenges, as he eyes one of the cutters with a faint snort. “Gingerbread men.”

“Best plan of them all,” Steve insists, making Bucky roll his eyes to the ceiling.

“Do you even know how to make these things?” he asks while dangling the cookie cutters in front of Steve’s face, but Steve just grabs them and puts them down on the counter with an amused huff.

“Of course I do,” he says as he reaches up to open the kitchen cupboard above the counter. “I’ve got the recipe right here.” He points at the inside of the door, where several recipes – both handwritten and printed – has been taped up. Bucky leans in to read the one Steve motioned towards while Steve takes out a bag of flour from the top shelf.
“Hate to rain on your parade here, Stevie,” he says, “but the recipe says the dough is supposed to be kept in the fridge overnight before baking it.”

“I know.” Steve closes the cupboard again, turning away, and Bucky frowns.

“So how are we supposed to bake?” he asks in confusion as he watches Steve stride across the kitchen. “We can’t do anything without dough.”

“That’s why we’re gonna use…” Steve says triumphantly, pulling the refrigerator door open, “…this dough.”

Bucky peers at the plastic wrapped bowl which Steve picks up from the bottom shelf of the fridge.

“When the hell did you make that?”

“The day before yesterday,” Steve admits while closing the fridge again.

“Of course you fucking did,” Bucky grumbles, trying to sound annoyed, but failing. Steve just smiles as he puts the bowl down and pulls off the plastic wrap. Luckily for them, gingerbread dough can last several days in the fridge before baking it, so they don’t have to worry about it having gone stale yet.

“There’s a rolling pin in the bottom drawer,” Steve instructs. “Would you mind getting it out for me?”

“We’re not gonna make a brand new one in Santa’s workshop?” Bucky mutters, even though he’s already moving towards the drawers to oblige Steve’s request.

“Not today,” Steve says with a smile. He grabs the bowl and tips it upside down, revealing a big lump of raw gingerbread dough as it rolls out onto the countertop. Bucky retrieves the rolling pin and shuts the drawer with his foot, handing it over to Steve with a nonchalant flick of his wrist. Steve takes it, and then goes to work.

First, he divides the dough into two equal pieces; one for him and one for Bucky.

“Here you go,” he says, handing the lump over to the other man, who takes it with a grimace.

“Now all you have to do is make it flat and then the worst part’s done. After that, it's all shapes.”

“Do I really have to use the cookie cutters?” Bucky whines, dropping his dough down onto the counter with a thump.

“Not unless you want to,” Steve offers. “But it's usually a lot easier.”

Bucky huffs, sounding as if he has trouble believing that information, and he looks on in silence for a few seconds while Steve pours some flour over the countertop and begins to roll his dough out. Then, without waiting for Steve to finish so that he can use the pin himself, Bucky begins to make cookies of his own.

It’s a rather primitive strategy, Steve has to say. Instead of using the rolling pin, Bucky simply grabs little chunks of dough and rolls them into little balls in his palm before pressing them down against the counter top and flattening them with his hand. It works, technically, even though his cookies don’t get the smooth surface that Steve’s cookies do.

Bucky makes a Pacman cookie, and several little Pacman ghosts to match. Then, to Steve’s combined joy and surprise, he eyes the cookie cutters and picks up the one looking like a candy
cane. Steve’s triumph is short-lived, however, when it turns out that the only reason Bucky chose that particular cutter, was so that he could make a cookie that looks like a penis.

“What are you, twelve?” Steve asks with a wince as he looks over and discovers the other’s handiwork.

“Actually, I’m twenty-nine” Bucky informs him dryly. “And what’s got your panties in a twist? I thought you said you had a preference.”

“I do, but that thing’s still not going in my oven,” Steve declares firmly, pointing at the cookie in question.

“Why not?” Bucky objects, before adding in a mock tone of sympathy, “You think it’s too small?”

“It being too small isn’t my biggest concern,” Steve says with a snort. “Now get that hideous thing off my baking sheet.”

“Fine,” Bucky shrugs, upon which he then proceeds to pick the unbaked gingerbread phallus up, and shove it into his mouth.

“Oh, my god, you’re such a child,” Steve berates, trying hard not to laugh at the sight of Bucky's bulging cheeks, and failing.

“Not my fault the dough tastes better raw,” Bucky defends himself, after having swallowed down enough of said dough to speak properly. “I don’t get why you even bother to bake it.”

“Because that’s the way you're supposed to make gingerbread cookies,” Steve says with a chuckle. “You can't build a gingerbread house if the parts are all limp.”

Bucky bites his lower lip, and Steve gets the feeling that the other is thinking about some other, probably highly inappropriate retort to that statement. Then he seems to change his mind, and picks up the snowflake cutter from the counter and starts pressing it into the irregularly flattened dough in front of him without a word.

Steve is relieved when the rest of the baking session passes without any new genitalia-inspired shapes, and in the end, they successfully manage to fill up four entire baking sheets’ worth of gingerbread cookies.

While they wait for the cookies to bake, Steve shows Bucky how to make icing. Normally, he would have used several different colors to make the cookies look a bit more fun and artistic, but seeing as he only owns three piping bags, he decides to just go with plain old white icing, just this once.

Bucky, as suspected, spends the entire time looking at Steve as if he’s the weirdest person on the planet. Although, when Steve finally pours the finished icing into the piping bags – one for them each – Bucky makes a face that Steve decides to interpret as unwillingly fascinated.

Once the gingerbread is baked, they take a moment to wash up the dishes in order to let the finished cookies cool down enough to actually be decorated. They still have to wait a few minutes for them to reach the right temperature, and after that, Steve hands one of the piping bags over to Bucky.

“Now this,” he says, “is what I like to refer to as, ‘the creative’ part.”

Bucky sends him a puzzled glance, but takes the bag nonetheless, turning it over in his hands.
“I’ve never used one of these,” he says, looking it up and down.

“Oh, it’s easy,” Steve promises. “You just put the tip against the cookie and squeeze, gently. Here, watch me.”

He leans down over the baking sheet, and picks out a snowflake shaped cookie. He then proceeds to pipe out an intricate pattern on top of its surface, adding little dots and sprinkles as extra details.

“Like that,” he declares proudly, once he’s done, and Bucky leans over to look at his work with an approving purse of his lips.

“Not bad,” he compliments.

“Thanks. Now, you try.”

“Oh, no,” Bucky says, taking a step back from the counter with a chuckle. “I can’t do that. I’ll just end up making a mess of things.”

“Excuses, excuses,” Steve says with a snort, pointing towards the sheet with Bucky’s uneven cookies. “They’re all gonna get eaten, eventually. Just try it.”

Bucky rolls his eyes, but when Steve just motions towards the cookies for a second time, he walks up to the counter and leans down to put the end of the bag against the cookie closest to the bottom of the sheet.

Steve looks on as Bucky decorates his very first gingerbread cookie – a Christmas tree.

First, Bucky commits the classic rookie mistake of squeezing the bag too hard, and ends up with a big blotch of icing at the top of the tree. Then, he doesn’t squeeze hard enough, and ends up having to re-do the same line over and over before finally getting the pressure right. After that, it’s all about focus, and Steve bites his lip in order not to snort out a giggle when he sees the tip of Bucky’s tongue peek out at the corner of the other’s mouth while Bucky puts the finishing touches to his work.

Once he’s done, Bucky straightens up, and sends an evaluating glance towards Steve’s snowflake before looking back at his own, slightly crooked Christmas tree.

“Mine looks like shit,” he declares sullenly, and Steve reaches out and puts a comforting hand on his shoulder.

“Nah, you just need practice,” he promises. “Besides, when was the last time you saw a Christmas tree in real life that was actually even?”

Bucky shrugs, wrinkling his nose at the cookie.

“Try leaning your elbow against the counter for the next one,” Steve suggests as he picks up his own spritzer. “It’ll make your hand steadier.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Bucky grumbles, but he does as he’s told nonetheless, and Steve hides a victorious smirk as he turns his attention back to his own cookies.

They work in silence, and it doesn’t take long before Steve’s gotten completely absorbed by the delicate process of piping out lines and ribbons of frosting onto the tan cookies. In fact, he doesn’t look back up until he’s almost finished with both of his baking sheets, only to find that Bucky’s still not even halfway through his first.
“Hey,” he says, noticing the other’s struggle. “Try angling your wrist a little. Like this.” He shows
Bucky what he means as he puts the finishing touch on a reindeer cookie. “It makes it easier to
move the tip around.”

Bucky mimics the angle of Steve’s hand, and finishes his candy cane with a surprised arch of his
eyebrow when the icing settles in an even, straight line across the cookie’s surface.

“See?” Steve asks triumphantly. “Better, right?”

He looks on as Bucky straightens up with a grimace when his back creaks in protest from the
awkward angle he’s been standing in. Glancing over at Steve’s cookies, Bucky then proceeds to let
out a snort under his breath.

“Wow,” he says dryly, “you sure have done this before, haven't you?”

“Every year, actually,” Steve confesses. “I have friends who’d actually consider killing me, if I
don’t.”

“They’re that good?” Bucky asks, sounding genuinely curious.

“I don’t know,” Steve says with a chuckle as he places the pipe against a new cookie. “I don’t eat a
lot of them, to be honest. But they’re fun to make, so I don’t mind.”

“Fucking show-off,” Bucky mutters, smirking, and Steve’s lip twitches.

“I’m not being a show-off,” he defends himself flatly, without looking up from his work. “I’m just
more talented than you, that’s all.”

A moment of silence passes, and then Steve flinches when a thick streak of something wet and
uncomfortably sticky is smeared across his right cheek. Realizing what it is makes him close his
eyes, and he drags in a slow, deep breath, gritting his teeth.

“Ooh, you did not just do what I think you did,” he threatens with a poorly concealed chuckle as he
turns his head to give Bucky a threatening stare. Bucky just looks back at him, face blank in spite
of the tell-tale dab of icing still covering his index finger. When Steve’s gaze locks onto his, the
corner of his mouth twitches, struggling not to widen into a smile, and half a second later, Steve
smears a near full cookie’s worth of icing all over the other man’s nose and mouth.

“You dick!” Bucky cries out, wiping at his face with the back of his hand, “That’s so not fair, I
only grazed you!” Next thing, Steve lets out a highly unmanly squeal when Bucky proceeds to
raise his own spritzer and squeeze out a big blotch of icing into the hair on top of Steve's head.

After that, there are no more rules as the icing fight becomes a fact. As the war proceeds – with a
lot of giggling and a bunch of half-finished, breathy insults – there’s soon more icing covering the
two of them than there is on the actual cookies, which are all still sitting innocently upon the
kitchen counter.

Bucky wins, eventually, but only because he manages to steal Steve's bag halfway through the
battle. Steve fights valiantly, but he's forced to surrender when Bucky pins him against the fridge
and succeeds in dumping what's left of the icing beneath the edge of Steve's collar with a
triumphant, “Hah!”.

It’s hard to keep fighting after that. Both because there’s no icing left to use as ammunition, and
because moving around with icing sticking to your skin and clothes is just about as unpleasant as it
sounds.
One massive cleanup of the kitchen, along with two quick showers and changes of clothes later, they're back at the counter again, eyeing the fruits of their creative labour.

Some of the cookies are splattered with icing from the fight; little white dots that cover the gingerbread surfaces like specks of snow. Somehow, it manages to look nearly deliberately done.

Steve’s cookies are all neat. Picture-perfect, while Bucky’s have crooked lines and icing smeared around the corners, looking a little bit as if they’ve been made by someone still attending kindergarten.

“Wow,” he says, looking down at his tray with a disappointed frown. “They really do look like shit.”

Steve laughs, and Bucky snorts as he reaches for one of the cookies and picks it up. It's a reindeer. Its icing is smeared and cracked in places, and as Bucky lifts it, another piece of it chips off and lands on the tray beneath with a faint plonk.

Steve tries to stop laughing, but instead he just produces this half-assed gigglesnort, that has him clamping a hand over his mouth when Bucky sends him a mortified glare from the corner of his eye. How someone can even accomplish such a thing.

Steve gathers himself, and as he straightens up, he clears his throat, gently picking the raggedy cookie out of Bucky's hand.

“It’s not the looks that counts,” he states wisely, lip still twitching, “it’s the taste.”

As if to prove a point, he then bites the reindeer’s head off, humming approvingly. Bucky is silent as he watches Steve chew for a few moments.

“So what you're saying,” he says flatly, “is that it's basically like dick.”

Steve chokes on the cookie with a surprised laughter, and Bucky smiles, obviously pleased with the reaction.

“Yeah,” Steve manages, once he’s finished coughing. “A little, I guess.”

Once again, Bucky goes quiet as he seems to contemplate this information further. “So,” he says after a few beats. “Which do you prefer?”

“Looks or taste?” Steve asks.

“Cookies or dick,” Bucky counters bluntly.

Steve blinks, caught of guard by the sudden change of topic. Then he laughs.

“Well, I guess that depends,” he decides.

“On the dick?” Bucky asks curiously.

“On the cookie,” Steve shoots back.

Bucky frowns, and Steve sighs while picking up one of his own, postcard-worthy cookies from the other tray.

“Like, this is a good cookie,” he explains, holding it up in front of Bucky’s face. “I know, ‘cause I made it myself. But, the truth is, that there are millions of cookies out there, just as good as this
one. I could go get an entire box full from any supermarket in town, right now, and I probably wouldn’t even be able to tell the difference.”

Bucky raises a cynical eyebrow, and Steve shifts his focus to Bucky’s crooked, half-eaten cookie once more.

“Now this one, on the other hand,” he says firmly, “is a one-of-a-kind sort of cookie. Even if I go out to search the entire city, I will never be able to find another cookie as extraordinary like this one. It’s not traditionally pretty, but in a way, that’s what makes it so much better.”

“Your point being?” Bucky asks slowly, looking as if he’s trying his best not to laugh.

“Average cookie. Totally replaceable,” Steve clarifies, briefly holding up his treat again before switching back to Bucky’s cookie. “Unique cookie, which means I wouldn’t trade it for any dick in the world.”

Bucky narrows his eyes, pursing his lips. Then he picks up one of Steve’s cookies – a candy cane – from the counter at the same time as he grabs the headless reindeer out of Steve's hand.

“All right, but,” he says, holding up the candy cane, “what if this was the best dick you'll ever have in your entire life? Like, perfect in every single way, while this…” He moves his attention to the reindeer, which has now lost almost half of it’s frosting from the journeys back and forth between them, “is the most perfect cookie you'll ever eat. And you’ll only get to pick one. Which would you pick?”

Steve chuckles as he looks at the cookies in Bucky’s hands. Then he raises his gaze, and meets the look out of Bucky’s gray eyes, and just like that, his stomach is nearly twisting in on itself with nerves. Suddenly, he gets the feeling that they’re not talking about cookies anymore; that Bucky’s actually asking him about something else entirely.

His palms feel sweaty as his pulse begins to pick up speed, and Bucky’s looking at him so intently, it feels like Steve’s got an iron fist squeezing around his lungs.

“Well…” he starts, licking his lips, “I don’t know, really. Wh—Why can’t I have both?”

“Well?” Bucky asks.

“Yeah.”

“Cookie and dick?”

“Yeah.” Steve clears his throat, and slowly reaches out to pick the cookies out of Bucky’s hands. “I mean…why choose? Like, why can’t this one,” he holds out the reindeer, “and this one,” he continues, placing the candy cane on top of it, “be one and the same?”

“You’re saying you want a cookie flavoured dick?” Bucky says with a laugh, and Steve swallows, trying to keep the blush he feels coming on at bay.

“All I’m saying is that I wouldn’t turn it down,” he defends himself. “I mean, that’s definitely not something you stumble on every day.”

Bucky looks at him again with a calculated squint, and then he snorts out a laugh through his nose while shaking his head.

“You’re insane,” he declares solemnly, and Steve laughs, feeling the tension ease from around his
“Yeah, as if we haven’t already established that…” he mumbles. “What about you, then?” he asks with a nod towards the two trays. “Dick or cookie?”

Bucky glances at the trays, and then shifts to look at the two gingerbreads still layered in Steve’s palm.

“They’re sweet,” he says with a shrug. Then he raises his gaze, looking Steve dead in the eye as he continues, “I prefer my treats salty.”

Steve takes a breath, fully prepared to give a sarcastic, clever retort to that statement, but all he manages is some sort of strangled noise in the back of is throat. He sees the corner of Bucky’s mouth curl into a smirk, lip piercings gleaming black in the lights from above the counter. He can’t move, and his inability to breathe is suddenly worse than ever as Bucky slowly reaches out and takes the candy cane out of Steve’s hand. Without breaking eye contact, he then proceeds to studiously put the curved end of the cookie into his mouth. The little flash his tongue piercing gives off when he curls his tongue around the gingerbread cane somehow manages to do both horrible and wonderful things to Steve’s insides all at once.

The spell is broken as Bucky turns on his heel and saunters out of the kitchen with the long end of the cookie still sticking out from the corner of his mouth, and Steve leans back against the counter with a shaky breath.

It takes him a little while to gather himself, and once his heart rate has gone back to normal, his body feels as if he’s just been through the equivalent of an assassination attempt.

What just happened, exactly? What had they been talking about?

Thinking back, he can’t even remember what had been said in detail, but the memory of Bucky staring him down from across such a short distance is enough to make his stomach jolt with excitement.

The rush of adrenaline in his veins is still making his hands shake as he plucks a plate out from the cupboard over the sink, and the porcelain gives off a light clatter when he sets it down upon the counter.

Somehow, he manages to assemble a selected collection of the cookies from the two trays and put them on the plate without breaking them. Then he takes a deep, grounding breath, picks the plate up, and heads out into the living room to join Bucky on the couch.

Hopefully, some sugar and a crappy rerun of *Cheers* will be enough to get his rampaging nerves back under control.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading, guys. Feel free to follow me on tumblr as well for more Stucky goodness and I'll see you again tomorrow <3
It has to be done eventually, even though both Steve and Bucky try to put it off for as long as possible.

By now, nearly half a week has passed since Bucky moved in, and as Steve enters the kitchen on Wednesday morning, he realizes that the inevitable fact is now upon them, whether they want it to or not.

They need to go grocery shopping.

Steve’s pantry and fridge are both echoing empty, and there’s not even enough ingredients left to make plain old pancakes. Normally, Steve doesn’t mind grocery shopping, not at all, but at the same time, not having to stand in line at some boring supermarket for hours every week is also kind of nice.

They do need to eat, however. Steve didn’t offer to take Bucky in just to let the guy live on stale bread and tap water. Said and done, an hour or so later, they both step through the doors to the local supermarket, and Steve picks a cart out of the row next to the entrance before heading on inside.

They decide that they are in grave need of breakfast components, because eating leftover pizza and
gingerbread men just isn’t gonna work out in the long run. Which means they need to look for cereal, milk, bread, and some eggs and orange juice too, amongst other things.

“How much would you say you eat for a regular breakfast?” Steve asks, eyeing two different loaves of bread. One is a family-sized loaf, while the other is only about half the size of the first.

“I don’t know,” Bucky says as he comes up to stand next to Steve in order to read the different labels. “The shelter always serves different kinds of breakfast, depending on the day and what people donated. The portion sizes vary.”

“Huh,” Steve says, frowning down at the bread, before deciding to keep the family-sized one and put the smaller pack back onto the shelf. “So that’s breakfast,” he declares, eyeing the current content of the cart as he drops the loaf into it. “What do you wanna get for dinner?”

“Don’t look at me,” Bucky says, taking a wary step back, “I’m not cooking shit.”

“I’m not asking you what you wanna cook, stupid,” Steve says. “I’m asking you what you wanna eat.”

“Oh.” Bucky pulls at his lip piercing with his teeth, looking around.

“Stop it,” Steve says sternly, and Bucky flinches in spite of himself.

“What?” he asks defensively, and Steve walks past him towards the meat counter with a reprimanding look.

“You were checking the price tags,” he points out, “that’s not how we decide what to eat. At least not today.”

“Dick…” Bucky mutters, shoving his hands into the pockets of his leather jacket with what Steve has learned by now is only a feigned glare and a pout. Making Bucky stop worrying about money is going to be a tough habit to break, but Steve is fully prepared to wait it out.

“Are you allergic to anything?” he asks, ignoring the other man’s sullen behaviour as he leans down to look at a pack of chicken. “Citrus, shellfish? Nuts?”


“Then what’s your favorite kind of food?” Steve prods, and Bucky shrugs again.

“Don’t know. Pizza? Pasta? Lasagna’s good too.”

“So…Italian food?” Steve concludes, and Bucky nods.

“Basically. Can’t go wrong with a common steak, though.”

Steve immediately puts a packet of steak into the cart, and Bucky rolls his eyes at him, smiling. “You’re gonna spoil me rotten, you know,” he comments dryly. “It’s not gonna end well. And I’ll get fat.”

“Have you seen yourself, lately?” Steve says with a skeptic snort. “You’re pretty damn ripped, pal.”

“Is that your way of complimenting me?” Bucky asks with a smirk. The silver barbell catches the gleam of the spotlights above when Bucky arches his eyebrow at him, and Steve turns away with a
grumbled, “Hn, you'd wish…” while trying not to blush.

They continue through the store, reaching the dairy section, where Steve immediately picks up a big carton of eggnog.

“Are we really getting that?” Bucky asks hesitantly, and Steve gives him a ‘duh’ sort of look.

“Of course we are,” he says.

“It doesn’t even have alcohol in it,” Bucky complains sourly.

“So we mix it with some ourselves,” Steve decides. “It tastes better that way.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Bucky confesses as he looks down at the carton. “I’ve never tasted it.”

“Never?” Steve asks.

“Nope. Always thought it sounded disgusting. I mean, isn’t it all like, raw eggs and milk, or something?”

Steve laughs at the grossed-out look on Bucky's face, and then demonstratively picks up a second carton and adds it to the one already in the cart.

“Really?” Bucky asks dryly.

“You’re gonna love it,” Steve promises with a wink and Bucky squints at him.

“If you trick me into drinking some gross-ass shit, I’m gonna make you drink both of those packs by yourself. With a funnel,” Bucky threatens, but Steve just grins.

“Not if you end up keeping both cartons for yourself,” he teases, and Bucky shakes his head with a snort while they continue through the store.

They’ve barely made it out of the dairy section when Bucky suddenly groans and sends a vicious look towards the ceiling, where a set of speakers just started chiming out the cheery tunes of Boney M’s Mary’s Boy Child.

“Jesus Christ, this shit again?” he sneers. “It’s not even December yet, and I’ve heard this goddamn song at least five times just on the way here. Could the radio stations only afford what, three songs this year?”

“It’s a nice song,” Steve argues, discreetly slipping a packet of lasagne sheets into the cart.

“It’s boring,” Bucky groans. “Hark, now hear the angels sing,” he mimes along, sarcastically grimacing, “Like, who even uses that kind of language?”

“People from the 50’s, apparently,” Steve informs him lightly, “since that’s when the song was written.”

“Dude, how do you even know this stuff?” Bucky grumbles.

“Because I’m an intellectual,” Steve smirks. “Contrary to some.”

The jibe doesn’t go by unnoticed, and Bucky immediately shifts his focus from the song playing on the radio to Steve as he narrows his eyes at him.
“Didn’t you tell me just three days ago that you thought I was clever?” he asks.

“Yes, I did.” Steve agrees, “but there’s a difference between being an intellectual and being *smart*.” He gives Bucky a sweet little smile, and Bucky’s eyes turn into suspicious slits as he regards him in silence for a few seconds.

“You know,” he says slowly, “I can’t tell if you’re just trying to fuck with me, or if this is you making an actual attempt to win the argument.”

Steve fights the sudden urge to lick his lips as he makes a very conscious decision not to linger on Bucky’s choice of words, or the mental images they conjure up inside his head.

“I’m just messing with ya,” he confesses, looking away instead. “To be honest, I think you might even be smarter than I am.”

“Based on what?” Bucky asks with a snort of disbelief.

“Well,” Steve suggests, “when’s the last time you invited a potential homicidal maniac into your home and forced them to bake cookies with you?”

“Touché,” Bucky admits, smirking at him, and once again, Steve resists the impulse he has to lick his own lips. Or Bucky’s lips, he’s not quite sure.

They get the remaining stuff they need – some extra rolls of toilet paper, and a new toothbrush for Bucky, amongst other things.

Steve is in the middle of picking out new toothpaste when his phone suddenly chimes from inside his pocket, and he temporarily abandons the hunt for minty freshness to pull it out and look at the screen.

*Everything still alright? Haven't heard from you in a few days.*

Steve sighs tiredly and types Sam a quick reply.

*Everything's fine. Stop worrying.*

He dumps two tubes of his ordinary brand of toothpaste into the cart, and then his phone chimes again.

*Did you sleep with him yet?*

Steve throws a scandalized look over shoulder, grateful for the fact that Bucky is still busy browsing toothbrushes.

*I did not and I won't. he types quickly. Now knock it off or I'll block your number.*

*Just sayin, if you wanna get your dumb ass killed, you might as well get laid first.*

Steve snorts out a laugh through his nose and then tucks the phone back into his pocket. He then returns to Bucky's side, and in less than five minutes, they're all stocked up and ready to go.

They’ve already begun to head towards the exit when Steve catches Bucky’s gaze pulling towards the snack aisle when they walk past, and he quickly makes a sharp turn into it, acting as if he just remembered something he was gonna get.

“You want anything?” he asks innocently while stuffing a random can of Pringles into the cart and
Bucky, predictably enough, immediately goes rigid.

“We don’t have to—”

“That’s not what I asked,” Steve points out. “I asked, do you want anything?”

Bucky glances at the shelves, and his eyes immediately locks onto a big bag of Cheetos, only to flicker to a Doritos bag a split second after. Steve waits, and he watches Bucky swallow as the other shifts his weight from one foot to the other while thinking his options over.

After a while, Bucky's gaze slowly begins to drift further down the row, and he’s looking at the prices, Steve knows it. Joke’s on him, though, because the prices are not all that different from one another, and he keeps coming back to the two original choices over and over, gnawing on his lip piercings in frustration.

“You can pick more than one,” Steve points out with a smile, and Bucky immediately sends a sharp look his way. It’s a question, and when Steve just nods, Bucky reaches out to pluck one Doritos and one Cheetos bag from the shelf before quickly dropping them into their cart.

He looks up at Steve, as if daring him to say anything about it, but all Steve does is give him an encouraging smile as he slowly begins to saunter towards the registers, and Bucky follows him in silence.

They pay for their things, and then exit the store.

Apparently, while they were inside, a group of carolers had lined themselves up outside the supermarket entrance, and as Steve and Bucky walk out, they are greeted by bright, cheerful singing.

A few feet in front of the ensemble, stands a man with a ribbon with the words ‘Small change, Big difference,’ worn across his chest. He has a charity box held out in front of him, encouraging people to donate a penny or two for a good cause, smiling and thanking the passers-by who do.

As Steve and Bucky emerges from the store, he immediately turns his attention towards them. He already has his mouth open to request their assistance, when he spots the way Bucky is glaring at him, and promptly clamps his lips shut again.

Before Steve has a chance to say or do anything, Bucky has already walked past, and Steve gives the man an apologetic smile before hurrying after him.

“The only thing worse than having to listen to people sing badly,” Bucky says, even before Steve has opened his mouth fully, “are people who expects me to pay for the goddamn thing.”

“Aren’t you being a little bit cynical now?” Steve says as he adjusts his grip around the plastic bag of groceries in his hand. “It’s for a good cause.”

“Good cause,” Bucky echoes with a snort. “It’s shallow, that’s what it is.”

“Oh, c’mon,” Steve objects.

“I’m serious,” Bucky retorts, glaring at him. “Why else would they only do these kinds of things during Christmas? People need help all year around, and yet those people only care enough to actually do anything about it for one lousy month out of twelve.”

“Now, that’s not fair,” Steve argues. “You have no idea what else they do. It’s caroling. People
love that stuff, and it brings in good money. Money used to help people like you, I might add.”

“That’s not the point,” Bucky retorts sharply. “The point is not what they do, it’s why.”

“Does it matter?” Steve asks.

“Of course it fucking matters,” Bucky exclaims, loud enough to make a group of people walking past them turn their heads to look at him. “This is just to prove to others how fucking good and charitable they are. ‘Oh, look at me, I have more money than I can spend. Look at me as I donate this entire dollar out of my hundred dollar savings account, because I’m such a fucking good person.’ It's selfish, that's what it is. God, I hate people like that...”

“You mean people like me?” Steve says, smiling. Instantly, Bucky's jaw drops, and then clenches tight as the hostility drains away from his posture, turning into shame.

“You're different,” he mumbles.

“Different how?” Steve prompts, and Bucky sends him panicked look from the corner of his eye. It makes Steve take pity on the poor guy, who obviously got cornered by Steve's previous comment, and he laughs, nudging Bucky in the side with his elbows.

“I’m just messing with you again,” he says. “I hope you realize I didn't take you in simply because it's Christmas?”

“I know,” Bucky answers quickly, still looking sheepish as he trudges along by Steve's side.

“You're a good guy, Buck,” Steve says. “I've only known you about a week, but even I can see that.”

“Guess that actually does make me smarter than you, then,” Bucky shoots back, refusing the compliment in his usual, sarcastic manner.

“That being said,” Steve continues, ignoring the comment, “your Christmas spirit sure could use some work.”

“What do you want me to do?” Bucky says with a snort. “Dress up like Santa and parade around a couple of hospitals?”

“It doesn’t have to be something grandiose like that,” Steve objects, desperately trying not to imagine what Bucky would look like dressed up in a Santa Claus outfit. “It could be something simple.”

Bucky mutters something under his breath that Steve doesn't quite catch, but he's pretty sure Bucky just called him a “frickin Christmas freak.”

As they get closer to the subway that lies in between the supermarket and Steve's apartment complex, they discover that another group of carolers have positioned themselves just outside the entrance to the station. They've already attracted a rather large audience who have stopped to listen to the music rising from the group, and as Steve and Bucky gets closer, it becomes clear that it's a children’s choir that's succeeded to draw such attention. When Bucky pulls an annoyed face at the slightly off-key music, Steve decides that this will be the perfect opportunity for Bucky to work on his Christmas cheer intolerance.

That's why, when they reach the spot where the choir is performing, Steve suddenly stops without a word. Bucky takes a few more steps before he notices that Steve is no longer moving. Then he
gives the singing children a single, wide-eyed look, which he then moves to Steve's smirking face, before he makes an attempt to continue walking.

He doesn't succeed, as Steve catches him with a firm grip around the collar of his leather jacket, forcing him to a rather abrupt halt.

“Not so fast, buddy,” Steve berates softly. “It's time for Christmas lesson number one.”

”But it's not even December ,” Bucky laments, shoulders slumping in defeat. Steve doesn't care, and he firmly pulls Bucky in to push him towards the front of the crowd, just as the children begin to prepare for their next song.

Fumbling with their mittens, they each somehow manage to produce a set of tiny little hand bells from within their pockets. Seconds later, the first, slightly swaying tunes of Jingle Bells fill the air as the children begin to sing.

It's absolutely adorable, Steve decides. Does it sound good? Not really, but that's also sort of the point.

The children are barely capable of sticking to the melody, and Steve's becoming more and more certain that only half of them knows any words other than the actual jingle bells, the longer the song progresses.

There is a brown-haired little girl standing at the very front of the ensemble, dressed in a bright blue coat with a fur trim, white knitted gloves with a matching scarf, and white, fuzzy earmuffs. She's cradling a big, chocolate colored teddy bear in her arms while jingling away on the bells for all she's worth. Off rhythm, of course.

Bucky is staring at her with a mixed look of pained sympathy and blatant horror on his face that only gets worse the longer the singing drags out. Even Steve has to admit, it’s not exactly what he had been expecting from a public performance.

Still, once the children has managed to finish the song – somewhat simultaneously, even – Steve shoves his elbow into Bucky's side, urging him to applaud their achievement while doing the same himself. Bucky does, of course, even if the look he sends Steve makes it seem as if he’s questioning Steve’s sanity more than anything else.

Steve then proceeds to pick up two dollar bills from inside his wallet, and discreetly nudges one of them into the palm of Bucky’s hand while pointing towards the little collection box sitting on the ground in front of the group.

Bucky looks down at the bill, and then watches as Steve walks up to demonstrate. As he crouches down to put the money in the box, Steve waves at the girl in the blue coat, and the girl smiles back, hugging her teddy while swaying from side to side.

“Your turn,” he murmurs, once he turns back to Bucky once more. “And smile , for god’s sake, you look like you’re about to murder someone.”

“Watch it, or I just might,” Bucky grumbles back. Still, as he drops down on one knee to poke the dollar through the slot of the collection box, Steve sees him send a hesitant, one-sided little smile towards the same girl with a barely-there wave of his other hand.

The little girl immediately responds by hiding behind her stuffed toy, and Bucky’s smile falters. Then she peeks out from behind one of the teddy’s fluffy ears, and the bell in her hand gives a shy little jingle as she uses it to wave back at him.
Steve does his best not to grin at him when Bucky returns. He just starts walking, knowing that Bucky will follow. Once they’re out of earshot from the group, however, he playfully elbows the other in the side again, not even attempting to hide his glee.

“See,” he says, “that wasn't so bad, was it?”

“Are you kidding?” Bucky snorts. “They couldn't even hold a tune. I've heard *drunks* sing better than that.”

“That's not the point and you know it.”

Bucky sighs, and then groans in defeat. “All right, so the girl with the bear was kind of cute, I guess,” he admits wryly. “And the bells were a nice touch, but it still sounded horrible.”

“You liked it,” Steve grins confidently.

“Don’t look so goddamn smug,” Bucky mutters. “It was just *one* Christmas carol, it’s not as if that’s gonna change anything.”

Steve smiles, but he lets the comment go by. Like Bucky has already pointed out, twice today, it’s not even December yet.

There will be plenty of time for changes.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading, guys <3
Feel free to [follow me on tumblr](http://example.com) as well for more Stucky goodness, and I'll see you guys tomorrow ^^
Take care!
Thursday, December 1st

Steve shuffles out into the kitchen, eyes bleary and his brain still half-asleep. He has got his pyjama pants on, and his feet are nice and warm inside thick wool socks. He feels cold today, which isn't all that normal for him. He had even considered putting on a sweatshirt on top of his white t-shirt before leaving the bedroom, just to get the heat going.

He hits the switch to the coffee maker on his way to the fridge. Yawning, he then opens the door and peers in amongst the shelves before picking out a carton of milk. Sending it a suspicious frown, he gives it an investigative shake just as Bucky comes straggling through the doorway, stifling a yawn of his own behind the back of his hand.

“Morn’n,” he grates as he brings the hand back down to scratch across his abs through his tank top. “Is there any coffee?”

“Soon,” Steve replies, holding out the milk towards him while still squinting into the fridge. “Would you please throw the empty cartons in the trash instead of putting them back in the fridge when you're done with them?”

“Sorry,” Bucky mumbles remorsefully, and he quickly takes the carton out of Steve’s hand and tosses it in the trash under the sink. Meanwhile, Steve picks out a new one from the fridge, along with some butter and jelly.
Bucky has already pulled out the toaster when Steve turns back around, and while Steve fetches a butter knife from the drawer, Bucky pops two slices of bread into the apparatus and presses the button down.

By the time the toast is done, the coffee is too, and Bucky hands Steve a mug from the cupboard in passing as he heads on to pour a mug for himself. The liquid steams as he fills up his cup, and he makes sure to take his time blowing on it before even attempting to have a drink.

Steve follows his example, and taking a deep breath, he lets the smell of freshly-brewed coffee fill up his nostrils with a content sigh.

“You’re gonna have to buy more of this,” Bucky informs him. “I think we have enough grounds for three more pots and then we’re out.”

“Yeah, I forgot about that yesterday,” Steve admits as he walks over to the counter to put some butter jelly on his toast before it goes cold. “I was too busy thinking about buying food, I forgot all about drinks.”

He grabs the butter knife, sending a fleeting glance out the window, and all thoughts of breakfast are instantly vaporized from his mind. Instead, he finds himself staring out the window at the big, fluffy flakes of snow that are whispering down through the air outside.

There's a thick layer of it covering the window sill too, and leaning forward to take a closer look, Steve can see that the street three stories below is also completely white.

Man, no wonder it felt nippy today.

“Hey, it's snowing!” he announces cheerfully, and Bucky nods, swallowing down his mouthful of coffee with a confirming hum.

“I saw,” he says. “Shit must have been coming down all night.”

“You know what this means, right?” Steve asks enthusiastically as he turns his back to the window in order to grin at Bucky from across the kitchen.

“Morning traffic’s gonna be a nightmare?” Bucky guesses while innocently, yet painfully obviously, avoiding the topic. When Steve's only response is to give him a mischievous smirk, he groans, setting his cup down with a dejected sigh. “I’m not gonna like this, am I?”

Steve just smiles as he takes another sip out of his coffee. Going by the nervous look on Bucky’s face, he's just going to assume that the other has decided to take his silence as a ‘no’.

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“I knew I wasn’t gonna like this,” Bucky grumbles. He finishes the sentence by kicking at the snow with his boots as he trudges along behind Steve, dressed in his brand new winter coat and one of Steve’s old knitted scarves. He looks about as happy as a cat in a bathtub.

“What are you talking about?” Steve objects, throwing his arms out towards the park around them with a beaming smile. “This is awesome! Snow on the first of December is almost too good to be true.”
Bucky’s answer turns into a surprised yelp as a group of children comes sprinting past between them, too immersed in their shouting and laughing to notice that the proximity of their propulsion nearly sends Bucky stumbling to the ground. He manages to keep himself upright, however, and sends the disappearing group a sullen glance out of the corner of his eye as he mutters, “Depends on how you wanna define ‘good’.”

“Don’t be such a Scrooge,” Steve berates him with a grin. “There’s no harm in enjoying the weather. Even if it’s cold.”

“In case you’ve forgotten,” Bucky reminds him sourly, “I don’t have that many good experiences with cold weather. Or snow in general.”

His testy tone has Steve turning around to walk backwards through the snow while beaming a wide smile at him. “Then I say it’s about time we make a few,” he decides simply. “Just to get you started.” Without waiting for a reply, he then stops, drops, and lands on his back in the snow with a soft floph.

“What are you doing?” Bucky asks with an exasperated sigh as he stops to look down at him from above.

“A snow angel,” Steve replies, throwing the snow into the air as he begins to flail his arms and legs around. “What does it look like I’m doing?”

“Like you’re going insane,” Bucky retorts flatly as he sends a quick glance around the park. There’s a family with a child in a stroller standing less than thirty feet away from them, and the child is pointing a mitten-clad hand at Steve while looking up at his parents with wide, quizzical eyes.

“C’mon, people are staring,” Bucky murmurs.

“So let them,” Steve retorts.

“They’re gonna call the cops on you,” Bucky threatens. “Drunken man terrorizes children in local park. Is that really a headline you wanna end up associated with?”

“It’s a snow angel,” Steve points out. “Not a public display of nudity.”

“Have you no shame?”

“Not at the moment,” Steve decides, waving for Bucky to come closer. “Get down here, there’s plenty of space for you to make one too.”

“Oh, no way,” Bucky refuses.


“Steve,” Bucky orders sternly, “get up.”

“No, you get down,” Steve argues. Without giving Bucky any time to respond, he then sits up, grabs hold of Bucky’s leg, and yanks it away from underneath him, sending Bucky toppling backwards into the snow with a startled cry of surprise.

The sight is so comical, Steve bursts out laughing before Bucky’s even fully on the ground.

“I’m sorry,” he chokes out between giggles, “Are you okay?”
His concern earns him a palm full of snow to the face as Bucky sits up and hurls the powder at him with a murderous glare.

“Fuck you, Rogers,” he snarls, spitting around the scarf that somehow managed to get caught in his left lip piercing during the fall. Steve tries (but fails) not to laugh as he watches Bucky untangle himself from the knitted garment, and how he then grimaces as he reaches back behind himself with his hand. “Oh, god, it’s in my jeans,” he groans. When Steve’s response is to laugh even harder, Bucky sends him another venomous look from the corner of his eye.

Next thing, Steve gets a second handful of snow tossed at his face, forcing him to duck.

“You’re such a goddamn punk,” Bucky mutters while pulling with his fingers at the snow clumping in his hair.

“Oh, so I’m the punk?” Steve asks, chuckling in disbelief.

“Yes!” Bucky snaps. As an emphasis, he finishes the one-worded sentence by hurling another deformed snowball at him, hitting Steve square in the chest.

“That’s rich coming from the guy who wears safety pins all over his clothes,” Steve points out dryly. He grins at Bucky while he brushes his pants off, standing up.

“At least I have a sense of style,” Bucky quips, doing the same and grimacing again as the snow stuck to his scarf falls down the edge of his collar. “Your closet is about as exciting as a trip to the Smithsonian.”

“Wow, I can’t believe you thought up that insult all by yourself,” Steve mocks. “Especially since I’m the one who help pick out over fifty percent of your current outfit.”

“Beggars can’t be choosers,” Bucky says with a sly smirk, and Steve narrows his eyes at him. Slowly, he leans down to scoop up a handful of snow from the ground with a calculated look at the other man, and Bucky immediately tenses, taking a step back.

“No,” he says firmly, and Steve grins.

“It’s just snow,” he coaxes.

“I don’t care,” Bucky retorts, eyes warily fixed on Steve’s hands as they begin to squeeze the snow into a solid clump.

“Don’t be such a baby,” Steve complains.

“Steve, if you throw that, I swear—”

“You’ll throw one back?” Steve asks hopefully. “Good. That’s sort of the whole point.”

“Don’t you fucking dare.”

“Watch me,” Steve challenges, raising his arm. Bucky opens his mouth to say something else, and Steve lets the snowball fly.

It hits Bucky’s shoulder, and Bucky flinches, squeezing his eyes shut as the projectile explodes into a hundred freezing particles that splatter up against his face. For a moment, he just stands like that, his entire body rigid, and then he drags in a slow, deep breath through his nose.

“Oh, I’m gonna kill you,” he hisses, opening his eyes. Studiously, he reaches down to grab a load
of snow, and Steve grins.

“You sure about that?” he mocks, bracing himself for an attack. “Because you don’t look all that threatening to me.”

“Maybe you should get your eyes checked?” Bucky says with a snort. “Wearing glasses might at least make you look smart.”

“Ouch,” Steve says sarcastically. “I’m sorry, was that supposed to hurt?”

“Not as much as this will,” Bucky retorts, and then Steve has to duck in order not to be hit by the snowball Bucky hurls at him. It sails past his ear with less than an inch to spare, and Steve grins widely.

“Your aim like you dress!” he whoops as he comes back up, only to get immediately silenced by a new snowball that hits him right on the nose.

“Guess that makes me one good-looking bastard!” Bucky triumphs. He’s already working on another snowball when Steve manages to get the snow out of his eyes, and seeing as he’s suddenly found himself in a hopeless disadvantage, Steve does the only sensible thing he can think of.

He legs it.

“Get back here, you coward!” Bucky shouts, taking up chase.

Running in snow – no matter how shallow – is not a very dignified way of moving, for anyone, much less two full grown men. It’s clumsy, and requires a lot more effort than one might think, especially if one’s boots aren’t really made for moving around in snow in the first place.

The group of children that minutes earlier had nearly sent Bucky crashing to the ground, are left staring open-mouthed as Steve and Bucky bombards each other with snow, both grinning like idiots and choking back fits of laughter. Steve braves a quick wave and a smile their way when he sprints past, heading for a group of trees with Bucky figuratively nipping at his heels.

He makes it to the trees just in time, and Bucky’s attack hits one of the trunks in the height of Steve’s head, just as Steve disappears behind it.

“I’m gonna get you, Rogers!” Bucky threatens, but his confident statement is quickly contradicted by the way his eyes widen as he’s forced to duck in order to avoid Steve’s counterfire.

“You shouldn’t talk so big!” Steve calls back from his safe place behind the tree. “It’ll just make it more embarrassing for you when I win!”

He expects there to be some sort of cocky reply, but none comes. He tries to hold his breath, even though it’s very difficult given the way he’s still panting, but he still doesn’t hear anything.

“Hey?” he calls out, swallowing down a chuckle. “Did you faint back there, or what?”

Daring a quick look, he pokes his head out from around the tree trunk to scout his surroundings. The spot where Bucky had been standing less than a few seconds ago, is now glaringly empty, and Steve’s stomach curls together tight with alarm when he realizes what’s about to happen. Sadly, the insight comes a split second too late.

As he makes what he already knows is a futile attempt to break for it, Bucky appears on the other side of the tree and trips him. Steve stumbles, but even though he doesn’t fall, he knows that it’ll
just be a matter of time before Bucky gets the upper hand.

So, he does the only thing he can do, which is to launch himself forward in a half-stagger, half-attack, and tackle his opponent to the ground by latching his arms around Bucky’s waist.

They fall to the ground with two simultaneous yells, and Steve uses Bucky’s temporary surprise to get a better grip around the other’s torso with his arms. He straddles Bucky’s waist, trying to hold him down, but the moment Bucky catches on to his intentions, he makes an attempt to throw Steve off by twisting around to face the other way.

He manages to get one knee on the ground and braces himself on all fours to stand up, but Steve’s already one step ahead of him. Taking advantage of Bucky’s imbalance, Steve manages to wrestle him to the ground once more, this time from behind. In less than five seconds, Steve’s got Bucky pinned, with both arms in a tight grip around his chest and both his legs wrapped around Bucky’s waist to keep him from squirming.

Bucky lets out a snorted laugh that morphs into a frustrated groan as he tries to twist and wriggle his way out of Steve’s hold, but his attempts to escape don’t do anything but make him run out of breath.

“Let go of me!” he grunts, still trying to pry Steve's arms away from his chest. “Goddamn cheat, you can’t—”

He cuts himself off with a choked out gasp, followed by a strangled noise in the back of his throat when Steve proceeds to shove the equivalent of half a snowman down the back of Bucky’s collar and in underneath the t-shirt beneath.

“That’s revenge for yesterday,” Steve giggles, victoriously gloating when he feels Bucky’s body lock up in startled shock against his.

“You motherfuck—!” Bucky gasps. “The icing wasn’t even cold, you asshole!”

With a sharp twist to his upper body, Bucky manages to free himself from Steve's grip, and he lands on his stomach in the snow with a grunt. He doesn’t stay there, however, and Steve doesn’t have enough time or even strength left to escape it when Bucky straddles his waist and roughly shovels a heap of snow up the front of his jacket.

“Oh my god!” Steve cries out, choking out a panicked laugh when Bucky reaches for more snow.

“All right, I give! Stop it, I give! You win! Jesus…!”

Bucky sits back on his heels, breathing hard as he looks down at Steve from above.

“That’s what you get,” he pants victoriously, shoving his index finger hard against Steve’s chest. Then, his posture sags with exhaustion as he voluntarily flops down to land on his back next to Steve in the snow with a groan. “Fucking punk.”

“Jerk,” Steve huffs back, and to his surprise, Bucky starts laughing. Not a snort or a chuckle, but a genuine laugh, and the sound of it is so warm and intoxicating, it travels down Steve’s spine to settle in his gut like a shot of alcohol.

“Well, what do you know?” Steve pants. “He laughs.”

“Shut up,” Bucky giggles, throwing his hand out against Steve’s chest in a reprimanding slap.

“No, seriously,” Steve insists. “I was getting a bit scared you didn’t actually know how.”
“Well, maybe you’re not as funny as you think you are, then?” Bucky retorts, and in turn, Steve raises his arm and pretends to toss another heap of snow at him, reveling in the adorable little flinch he gets in return.

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When they eventually get back home, the wet patches of snow on and underneath their clothes have already brought a frosty chill to their limbs. It’s not a problem a hot shower can’t fix, however, and being the gracious host that he his, Steve lets Bucky go first while he goes to put on a robe instead.

While Bucky showers, Steve also gets a new pot of coffee going, cursing under his breath as he realizes that they forgot to buy new grounds, again. By the time the coffee’s done brewing, Bucky emerges from the shower, dressed in sweatpants and his black tank top, and with the steam billowing behind him like a cloud.

“There better be some hot water left for me,” Steve warns him, holding out a cup of coffee for Bucky to take as the other sinks down onto the couch.

“Don’t worry, there’s plenty,” he says dismissively, taking the cup out of Steve’s hand. “Thanks.”

Steve’s not entirely sure if he believes him or not, but he decides that a short hot shower is better than none, and he doesn’t have enough patience to wait. Luckily for him, Bucky wasn’t lying, and Steve gets to enjoy his shower without any nasty dips in temperature.

Afterwards, he follows Bucky’s example and puts on a pair of sweatpants and a shirt, along with one of his favorite knitted jumpers, before padding back out into the living room to join Bucky on the couch with his own cup of coffee. For a moment he considers if he should bring his sketchbook with him, but he decides not to. He’s too pleasantly tired to focus on drawing right now, anyway.

Glancing out the living room window when he sits down, he notes that the snowing has stopped. There is still a thick layer of white draped on top of the tree branches visible through the glass, however, and the snow gleams bright in the light of the setting sun.

“So,” he says, throwing one of the couch’s blankets over his naked feet. “Would you still say that you’ve only had negative experiences with snow?”

Bucky glances at him, and then smirks as he raises his cup to his lips. He doesn’t answer, but Steve decides to take the other’s secretive silence as a ‘no’.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, guys <3
Also, feel free to follow me on tumblr for more Stucky goodness ;)


I'll see you again tomorrow!
Saturday, December 3rd

Steve decides to give the task of finding Tony a Christmas gift one final try. It’s the only one he’s got left to buy for all his friends, and it’s bothering him like nothing else that he still hasn’t been able to figure something out. He needs to find something, and so, once again, they head out onto the streets of New York in hunt of a – somewhat, at least – worthy gift for Tony.

The snow from yesterday has already melted off the ground, leaving the streets bare again. The air is still a bit nippy, however, and even though it’s barely mid-day, the Christmas lights are already lit to fight the dark rapidly settling over the city.

“Can’t you just give the guy a book or something?” Bucky suggests, pointing towards a bookstore as they pass it on the street. Steve sends it a quick glance, and then shakes his head.

“Tony’s not that much of a reader,” he says apologetically. “He’d sooner write a book of his own rather than be influenced by someone else.”

“Sounds like he’s got a stick up his ass, if you ask me,” Bucky mutters, and Steve snorts out a laugh.

“Actually, you might have a point,” he says. “But he’s fully aware he has it, so it’s more of a charming personality trait than a problem, really. Once you get to know him.”
“So,” Bucky asks, shifting his body a little to let a few other pedestrians past on the sidewalk. “What’s your plan?”

“I don’t know,” Steve answers truthfully, slowing down to a halt as he looks up at the different shop signs ahead. “I was sort of hoping I’d get spontaneously inspired once we got here, but…no such luck.”

“Yeah…” Bucky mumbles. “Sorry, I’m no help, I haven’t—” He cuts himself off, looking down at the ground for a moment before straightening back up. “It’s been awhile since I bought gifts for anyone. I’m a bit rusty.”

“It’s okay,” Steve assures him. “I’m just glad you wanted to come along. I know this isn’t exactly your favorite thing to do.”

Bucky shrugs, as if it’s not that big of a deal, and Steve goes back to eyeing the stores around them.

“That one,” he decides, pointing towards a fancy looking shop window filled with mannequins in expensive suits.

“Do you ever shop in regular stores?” Bucky asks tiredly, following Steve as the other heads on towards the shop door.

“Only when it’s for myself,” Steve calls back over his shoulder. He doesn’t have to look to know that Bucky’s immediate response is to roll his eyes at him.

The little bell above the door gives a happy little chime as they step inside, and as he takes a look around, Steve experiences two emotions. One is expectation, because finally he might have found a store that actually carries something Tony might possibly want and like. The second emotion is dread, because as good as everything inside the store looks, he’s got a very specific feeling that whatever he chooses, it’s gonna end up digging a Grand Canyon-deep hole into his wallet.

“Well, doesn’t this look fancy?” Bucky mumbles, walking up to one of the mannequins in the store. “I hope you’ve got a secret savings account stashed in Switzerland or some shit,” he says as he holds up the price tag for Steve to see. “You’re gonna need it.”

Steve chuckles, and heads forward towards a glass case set up against the wall, filled with what appears to be tie clips and cufflinks. He has only taken a few steps in, however, when a male shopping assistant emerges from around a corner and spots him.

“Welcome,” he says, holding his hand out towards Steve. “My name is Paul, what can I do for—” The end of his sentence trails off as his gaze shifts towards Bucky, who’s still standing next to the door, and then a lot of things happen all at once.

First, Bucky looks confused. Then, his facial expression shifts as his jaw tightens, and his lips narrow into a thin line. His posture changes, going from relaxed and docile to rigid as his shoulders square defensively, and Steve can see his nostril flare out as he drags in a deep breath through his nose, straightening up.

Steve turns back to the shopping assistant, only to find the man still staring at Bucky with the same expression as when one happens to unexpectedly step in something particularly unpleasant. Steve doesn’t have to think long about why that is.

Bucky, who decided to wear his leather jacket today since they were gonna spend a lot of their time indoors, doesn’t exactly fit in with the overall style of the store. Compared to Paul’s fancy dark suit, Bucky looks more out of place than ever. Like a rat at a banquet, going by the look in the shop
assistant’s eyes, and Steve finds himself unconsciously curling his hands into hard fists inside his pockets.

“Yes?” he says, snapping the man out of his temporary daze by prompting him to finish his sentence. Paul blinks, and turns back to Steve, looking at him as if he had forgotten that Steve was even there. Then he clears his throat and smiles, flickering a hesitant glance at Bucky once more before speaking.

“Sorry,” he says, “I was just— How can I help you?”

“I’m looking for a Christmas present,” Steve says. “For a friend.”

“I see,” Paul says, and Steve clenches his jaw when the other’s eyes once again diverts in Bucky’s direction before coming back to him again. “Did you have anything particular in mind?”

“I’m not sure,” Steve says, determined not to look away from the man’s face. “Could you recommend me something?”

“Of course,” Paul says. “We’ve got— Excuse me for a moment,” he says, holding up a hand in front of Steve with an apologetic smile which disappears as soon as he turns around. “Hey,” he says sharply, glaring at Bucky. “Would you mind not touching those, please?”

Bucky, who had been about to pick up a shirt from a nearby table, slowly pulls his hands back and holds them up, palms out by his sides.

“Thank you.” Paul turns back to Steve with an apologetic throw of his head towards Bucky, who’s still glaring daggers at the other man’s back. “Gotta watch out with those,” he explains. “Look away for a second and they’ll steal half the store.”

“Is that so?” Steve says slowly, but Paul is obviously too wrapped up in his own self-righteous superiority to notice the cautionary tone of his voice.

“Oh, yeah,” he says instead, “I mean, look at that guy. Probably too stoned to even talk properly, by the looks of it.” He leans in further, lowering his voice into a confiding whisper as he continues, “You know, I heard that some of them will even make themselves look more ragged than they actually are, just to make us feel sorry for them. Goddamn freeloaders, if you ask me.”

“I see.” Steve has to force himself to keep his voice steady as he says it. Suddenly, he’s furious. There is a tremble to his limbs, like a cold slowly working its way through his veins, freezing him from the inside out as the rage continues to build inside him. How dare he? This pompous, gloating bastard, how dare he…!

“Anyway,” Paul says, clasping his hands together. “Never mind that, shall we? If you’d like to come this way, I’ll show you a few of our newest products. Arrived just the other day.”

“Your frien—”

Steve can pinpoint the exact moment the dots connect inside Paul’s head, but he doesn’t stick around long enough to actually let the man respond.

“C’mon, Buck, let’s get out of here,” he says instead, already moving towards the door. Bucky closes up behind him without a word, but Steve catches the smug little smirk Bucky sends the
other man when Steve holds the door open for Bucky to walk through.

“Merry Christmas,” Bucky says sweetly, giving Paul – who by now looks just about ready to sink through the floor – a little wave of his fingers before exiting the store, Steve following close behind. The jingle of the bell hasn’t even been muffled by the door before Steve gives a loud, exasperated groan as he turns towards Bucky, running his hands up through the hair at the top of his head.

“Jesus, I can’t believe that just happened,” he breathes. He looks at Bucky, chest twinning with guilt. “I’m sorry,” he begs, “I had no idea that place would be so— Goddamnit, what an asshole!”

“Steve,” Bucky chuckles, “Calm down. It doesn’t matter.”

“Like hell it doesn’t,” Steve snarls under his breath, turning to glare at the shop window. “People like that shouldn’t be allowed out in public!”

“Don’t let it get to you,” Bucky says. He looks at Steve and then reaches up and firmly pulls Steve’s hands – which are still tightly tangled in his hair – down by his sides. “The world’s full of asshats like that, there’s nothing you can do about it.”

“I could always go back and punch that asshat in the face,” Steve objects sullenly, and Bucky laughs.

“Trust me,” he says, “the satisfaction is temporary.” He gives Steve another evaluating look up and down, and then sighs as he goes in to clasp a hand over the top of Steve’s shoulder. “C’mon, let’s go find some food. You’ll feel better once you’ve had something to eat.”

Steve opens his mouth to argue, but closes it again as he remembers that if there’s one topic Bucky’s more familiar with than any other, it’s probably what it feels like being hungry.

They walk along for another two blocks before they happen on a Subway, and together they decide that a couple of sandwiches will do just fine for lunch. In less than ten minutes, they’re sitting down by a table by the window, chewing contently on their food.

Steve realizes that he actually was pretty damn hungry, but even though the food makes him a little less irritable, he still can’t help but feel annoyed and bothered by the things that had gone down back at the store.

“How do you deal with it?” he asks earnestly. “Having prejudice people talk about you like that?”

Bucky takes another bite around his sub, chews and swallows. Then he shrugs.

“I just do. It’s not like I can stop them from thinking that way about me, so why bother?”

“But doesn’t it piss you off?” Steve prompts. “I mean, they look at you as if you’re some—”

“Hobo?” Bucky offers helpfully.

“Criminal,” Steve corrects. “Like you’re a villain whose only agenda is to make their lives miserable.”

“Ah, yeah, like that,” Bucky says. “You get used to it after a while.”

“How?” Steve says. “How does one get used to being treated like crap? That’s horrible, Buck.”

“I don’t care about that,” Bucky explains patiently. “It doesn’t matter what people think of me. My
life is of no one else’s concern.”

“You don’t think the way you look has any sort of impact on your surroundings at all?” Steve asks skeptically, and Bucky rolls his eyes at him.

“Of course it fucking does,” he says with a snort, “that’s the point.”

“But why dress that way then? If you know that people are gonna look at you like some sort of maniac, which might even end up ruining your chances for a job, then why do it?”

“Let me ask you this instead,” Bucky says, leaning across the table, waving his half-eaten sub at Steve’s face. “Why the fuck would I wanna spend my time hanging around people, or work a job where looks matter that fucking much?”

Steve licks his lips, chewing his food slowly.

“What I’m saying,” Bucky continues, “is that if my appearance is what’s gonna keep me from getting a job, or gaining a friend, then that’s not a job, nor a friendship I’d want. So why abandon my own sense of self to conform to an agenda that I don’t wanna be a part of in the first place?”

Steve swallows, and nods. He gets it. He wouldn’t want to do any of that either.

“So how long have you been dressing like that?” he asks instead, and Bucky shrugs.

“Since I was twenty-something,” he says. “It grew on me over the years, I guess.”

“So you didn’t just wake up one day and decided to put safety pins on everything?” Steve asks with a chuckle while nodding towards the left sleeve of Bucky’s jacket. “I mean, did you make that yourself, or…?”

“No,” Bucky says, chuckling as well while shaking his head. “I can’t sew to save my life. I had a friend who was pretty good at it, though. His name was Jacques. French guy. Didn’t speak a word of English, but we got along just fine anyway.” He pauses, frowning before mumbling, “I still don’t know what happened to him.”

Steve nods, sensing that they’re approaching some rather sentimental topics. Bucky looks down at his arm, and then shakes his head, returning to the present.

“I put the pins on by myself, though,” he says while proudly holding up the arm. The silver of the safety pins gleam in the sunlight shining in through the window, forcing Steve's eyes into a squint.

“It looks cool,” Steve says. “Have you ever counted them?”

“Actually, I stopped when I passed two hundred,” Bucky says, grinning. “But it took a while.”

“I can imagine,” Steve marvels. He glances up, looking at Bucky’s hair, which is once again pulled back in that one-sided braid on the left side of his head. “So, you wanna stop by on the way home and get some more of that haircolor spray you talked about before?” he offers.

“Nah,” Bucky says. “It’s all right. The stuff would only stain your pillowcases anyway.”

“I can buy new ones,” Steve suggests.

“Yeah, I bet,” Bucky says with a short laugh. “And I’d probably have to sell my soul three times over, just to pay you back.”
The suggestion makes Steve laugh so hard he nearly chokes on a piece of his sub. Just the thought of Bucky trying to make a deal with the devil over some pillow cases for Steve’s sake is just too hilarious not to. Mostly because, for some reason, Steve has the nagging suspicion that Bucky would win.

Bucky laughs too, and as they share a quick, amused look from across the table, Steve feels a warm, fuzzy sensation build in the pit of his stomach. It feels nice, in a way that Steve knows he shouldn’t be allowing himself to feel, but he can’t stop it.

Even as he sits there, feeling the tension from before seep out of his muscles with every glance from Bucky’s eyes, he can’t help the guilt that blooms inside his ribcage whenever their gazes meet. They’re roommates. Dammit, Steve’s not even sure if they pass as friends yet, and here he is, getting the tingles over something as silly as the color of the guy’s eyes.

They’re beautiful, of course, Bucky’s eyes. Even more so now when Bucky’s actually smiling, and good Lord, what a smile it is. So bright and wide and toothy. Unrestricted. It’s worlds apart from the way he had smiled during the first few days at Steve’s place. Just watching it makes Steve wonder how much else there is to Bucky’s personality that he has yet to see; how much of his true self that still remains hidden, begging to be explored like a diamond in the rough.

God, he’s so pretty. It makes Steve heart ache with sorrow and sing with joy, all at once.

“You know,” Bucky says suddenly, “I actually worked at a Subway once.”

“What?” Steve laughs. “No, you haven’t.”

“Yes, I have,” Bucky insists. “For three months.”

“What about…” Steve points towards Bucky’s piercings, and Bucky smiles, giving him a ‘duh’ look.

“ Took them out while working.”

“And that one?” Steve continues, pointing towards his own tongue.

“It’s in my mouth,” Bucky points out. “I didn’t make the sandwiches with my tongue.”

“Yeah,” Steve agrees, “I guess it would have been a bit difficult to toss the salad on, using that.”

“Unless you’ve had enough practice,” Bucky counters, and had it not been for the sly tone of his voice, Steve wouldn’t even have caught onto the crude innuendo he had just created for himself. Looking up, he finds Bucky looking back at him from across the table with the corner of his mouth tilted up in a lewd smirk.

Steve blinks, and then swallows once, hard.

“So,” he says slowly, without really knowing why he's asking in the first place. “did you practice? With…salad?”

“Well, I didn’t,” Bucky says, still smirking, “but I've seen others do it, and I thought it looked pretty…interesting.”

Steve’s not really sure what is happening, only that something is. Bucky is looking at him as if he just told him a big secret, and Steve has a pretty good idea about what that secret is about. As he watches, Bucky lazily flicks his tongue out and licks a dribble of dressing off his thumb, tongue
piercing gleaming as it slides against his skin. Jesus…

Steve swallows again, and clears his throat when Bucky won’t stop looking at him. He should probably ask, just to make sure that this is what he thinks it is. That Bucky’s actually saying what Steve thinks he’s saying, but he only gets to open his mouth before he’s interrupted by a girl who’s rapidly approaching their table.

“Hi, excuse me,” she says shyly, turning towards Bucky as she places a hand on top of the chair next to his. “Is this seat taken?”

“No, not at all,” Bucky responds as he makes a move to help her lift the chair away. “Go ahead.”

“Thank you,” she says, smiling, and in return, Bucky smiles back. That wide, bright smile that had taken Steve over a week to get. And then he winks.

“No problem, sweetheart,” he says, and the girl ducks her head with a slight giggle and a blush that makes Steve’s insides twist uncomfortably. Watching the girl walk away, he feels the jealousy wind its way up his spine and into his chest like a venomous snake. Suddenly, the craving to be in that girl’s place becomes overwhelming. To be on the receiving end of Bucky’s flirtatious wink and pet name.

“Man, that was almost too easy,” Bucky says under his breath, snapping Steve out of his thoughts.

“What?” he says, and Bucky smiles.

“Seriously?” he asks, and when Steve just continues to look dumbfounded, he snorts out a laugh and leans across the table, lowering his voice into a whisper. “There are five empty tables around us, yet she came here to ask if she could have that particular chair. Why?”

Steve looks up, realizing that Bucky’s right. The girl, who by now has returned to her friends at their table on the other side of the room, giggle as he turns his eyes on them, and Bucky waves for him to come closer, whispering, “Her friends made her a bet in the line, that if she walked up and talked to us, they’d pay for her food.”

Steve blinks.

“You heard that all the way from here?” he asks in disbelief.

“You didn’t?” Bucky frowns.

“No, I— I just thought you were being…friendly.”

“C’mon, you know me,” Bucky says, leaning back in his chair. “I’m not the friendly type.”

“Then what type are you?” Steve asks. “Dark and mysterious?”

“If that’s what you’re into,” Bucky replies, and Steve’s heart nearly stops dead inside his chest when Bucky follows the statement up by winking at him.

“Yeah,” he manages, grinning, unable to stop himself, “because that’s not cliché at all.”

“What can I say?” Bucky says with a dramatic flick of his wrist. “I’m a sucker for the classics.”

“You’re also a bit of a drama queen, in case you haven’t noticed,” Steve quips, and in return, Bucky makes a move as if he’s gonna toss the rest of his soda in Steve’s face.
They end up buying Tony a book on robotic engineering at the bookstore on the way back home, along with a gift card in case he doesn’t like it. Because, as Bucky so delicately put it as they exited the shop, “Even a self-proclaimed genius could use some help every now and then”.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading guys <3

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Until tomorrow, darlings! <3
Sunday, December 4th

“Here,” Steve says as he sets one of the two shot glasses down in front of Bucky on the coffee table. “Drink up.”

Bucky eyes the creamy beverage with a skeptic look, pinching his lips together. “It looks like cashew milk,” he decides.

“Well, it doesn't taste like it, I can promise you that,” Steve says. “Try it.”

Bucky picks up the glass and gives it a sniff, and then brings it to his mouth. Steve watches him drink, swallow, and then smack his lips.

“Well?” he asks.

“Not bad,” Bucky admits reluctantly. “A bit sweet maybe?”

“Ah, yeah,” Steve says, grinning as he stands up from the couch. “There's a fix for that.”

He can feel Bucky’s eyes on him as he walks up to the cabinet next to the TV set, and opens it up to retrieve two bottles from inside.

“Meet my buddies, rum and scotch,” he says, turning back to the coffee table with a wide smile.
Bucky arches his brow and gives an amused whistle.

“Wow, I didn’t peg you for a drinker,” he says with a smirk, as Steve sets the bottles down next to the open carton of eggnog.

“I drink, occasionally,” Steve objects. “Not enough to be infamous for it, but enough not to be considered boring.”

“I have hard time believing that,” Bucky says.

“That I drink?”

“That people don't think you're boring,” Bucky quips, smirking at Steve, who sticks his tongue out with a grimace.

“Ha ha, hilarious,” he mutters. Without waiting for Bucky to come up with some other clever joke at his expense, he unscrews the cap of the rum bottle and pours just shy of a finger’s worth into their respective shot glasses, before topping them up with more eggnog.

“Cheers,” he says, raising one of the glasses into the air, waiting for Bucky to do the same with his glass before knocking it back.

“That's better,” Bucky comments, “but still pretty damn sweet.”

“Try a whiskey one,” Steve prompts while holding out the bottle of scotch towards Bucky, who takes it with a contemplating squint at the label. He pours them both another shot, and Steve fills up the glasses with more eggnog. The whiskey always has a bit of a burn to it, in Steve's opinion, but it blends pretty well with the cream of the beverage.

“Oh, yeah, now we're getting somewhere,” Bucky hums, turning the once-again-empty glass around in his hand with an appreciative look.

“Told you it was good,” Steve points out, and Bucky shoots him a sideward glance, setting the glass down.

“It's okay, I guess,” he decides. “Not the best I've tried, but not horrible.”

“Glad to see you so enthusiastic,” Steve says with a snort. Then he reaches out and takes the bottles, setting them down onto the floor next to the couch. He pretends not to notice Bucky's slightly disappointed face when he also takes the eggnog away.

“So, let's get down to business,” he says cheerfully, rubbing his hands together.

“I'm gonna need more booze for this,” Bucky groans, but Steve ignores him in favor of picking up the plastic bag of supplies from the floor and empty its content onto the coffee table.

String, tape, gift cards and wrapping paper tumble out, and Bucky gracefully catches a pair of scissors just as they threaten to slide over the edge of the table.

“Smooth,” he comments.

“Sorry,” Steve apologizes.

“You sure you should be handling sharp objects after all that drinking?” Bucky taunts, gesturing with the scissors towards the liquor bottles. “People could get hurt, you know. And by people, I mean me.”
“You don't have to worry,” Steve says, before adding with an amused grin, “Knowing you, I've got a feeling you'll probably be able to hold your own against me just fine.”

Bucky smirks, glancing out at the colorful rolls of wrapping paper, before moving his gaze towards the pile of unwrapped gifts lying on the other side of the table.

“So how do you wanna do this, exactly?” he asks. “Do you cut and tape as you go, or do you measure and shit first?”

“I'm more of a spontaneous wrapper, actually.” Steve says, chuckling. “I just go with whatever feels right. And if the paper runs out, then a little patchwork never killed anybody.”

“Really?” Bucky says, looking at him. “By the way you've been talking about Christmas, I pegged you for the fanatic *everything-must-be-perfect* kind of guy.”

“Nah, Christmas is supposed to be fun,” Steve explains. “You can't have fun if you're busy freaking out over everything.”

“Wow,” Bucky says with a sceptic smile, “That's deep coming from a guy who has his bookcase ordered alphabetically.”

“It makes things easier to find,” Steve defends.

“Do does this mean you won't tear me a new one if I happen to pick out the wrong colored paper for a gift?”

“You don't *have* to help, you know,” Steve points out when Bucky holds up the scissors and gives them an experimental snip in the air.

“I know,” Bucky replies simply, without even looking back at Steve as he says it, and Steve decides that he probably shouldn't push the subject.

After all, if Bucky is willing to help him wrap Christmas presents for Steve's friends, then Steve's not gonna risk putting him off by questioning his decision.

Steve lets Bucky start with Nat’s gift because it's already boxed up in a neat little package which makes the actual wrapping a lot easier. Steve himself decides to take care of Clint’s present, and it quickly becomes evident, that even though Steve doesn't care much about how the presents turn out looking, Bucky obviously does.

Steve has never before seen someone make such an effort to wrap a gift in his entire life. Bucky cuts the paper with such precision, he could just as well have used a scalpel. When he folds the edges, he does so slowly and delicately, making sure that there are no inappropriate creases ruining the perfection.

He's not fast, not by a long shot, but Steve decides that it doesn't matter. Just like when he put frosting on his gingerbread cookies, Bucky seems dead set on doing every little thing as correctly as he possibly can. Steve has to admit that compared to how his cookies had turned out, Bucky makes his gift wrapping skills look damn near professional.

“You know, you don't have to be so thorough,” Steve says in a gentle attempt to make Bucky relax a little.

“I know,” Bucky mumbles back, and then Steve hears him bite back a low curse when Bucky unintentionally messes up the folding around Tony's book.
“Hey, don't worry about it,” Steve soothes, and he firmly puts his hand over the half wrapped gift when Bucky makes a move as if he's going to tear the paper off to start over. “No one's gonna notice an extra crease here and there, and the paper's gonna come off later, anyway.”

“I know,” Bucky says, sharper, once again without looking at Steve. He reaches for the tape, and once Steve's sure that Bucky doesn't intend to unwrap the book again, he takes his hand off the gift to let him continue.

Watching in silence, he then looks on as the tip of Bucky's tongue peeks out from the corner of his mouth as Bucky carefully and meticulously places a piece of tape over the crinkled fold, sealing the gift shut.

“Then why put so much effort into it?” Steve asks, now genuinely curious, and Bucky shrugs, pulling out a piece of string to curl with his scissors.

“Because it's important to you,” he says. “Indirectly.”

“What do you mean?” Steve asks, and Bucky drops the string and scissors down onto his lap with a groan, tipping his head back to the ceiling.

“Because,” he says slowly, “if these were my gifts to give, I probably wouldn't even bother with wrapping them in the first place. Like you said, the paper’s just gonna come off, so why waste energy?”

“But?”

“But,” Bucky continues, “these are not gifts from me. They're from you. And I can't offer to help you wrap them and then make a half-assed job out of it, because that would be a pretty shitty thing to do.”


“Shut up,” Bucky grumbles.

“No, I mean it,” Steve objects when Bucky obviously mistakes his comment for sarcasm. “That's really considerate.”

Bucky huffs out something that can be both a thanks and a fuck off, but as the other reaches down to pick up the string and scissors, Steve can see the bashful shade of pink that rises on Bucky's cheeks in response to Steve's praise.

“Thank you,” Steve says earnestly, and by now, the blush on Bucky's cheeks has risen all the way up to his ears, making them flush hot as he tries to curl the metallic red string with the scissors in his hands. He keeps his gaze stubbornly downcast, obviously embarrassed, and Steve smiles.

“This string sucks,” Bucky grumbles, throwing his hand up in the air after having dragged the blade over the plastic surface for the fifth time, without any visible result. “Look at it, it's fucking useless.”

“Hey, hey, hey,” Steve berates as he plucks the scissors out of Bucky's flailing hand. “Easy. You'll poke an eye out if you keep waving those around like that.”

“Fine, dad,” Bucky mocks him, tossing the less than curly string back onto the table. He's still blushing a little, but the color of his cheeks are quickly returning to normal as he flops back against the couch with a sullen glare in Steve's direction.
“Watch it,” Steve reprimanding sternly, setting Bucky's shot glass back onto the table. “Or daddy will revoke your alcohol privileges.”

Bucky chuckles, and he pulls at his lip piercing with his teeth as he watches Steve pour them both another shot each.

“To crappy string,” Steve proclaims firmly, raising his glass, and Bucky does the same, clinging his against the rim of Steve's own.

“And cheap drinks,” Bucky adds, grinning at Steve before knocking his shot back with a one eyed wink.

Smug bastard.

“Man, this stuff really grows on you,” Bucky confides with an impressed sigh, having swallowed the shot down.

“Again,” Steve says, “told you.”

“Yeah, yeah, you're a goddamn genius,” Bucky snorts, already moving to pour himself another one shot.

“You know,” Steve points out, “you're gonna end up drunk off your ass if you keep going at it like that. You're really supposed to be savoring these, not tequila-slam them.”

“I can hold my liquor,” Bucky snorts. “I'm not sixteen.”

“Yeah, that's what they all say.”

“Including you?” Bucky asks cheekily, and Steve straightens up with an indignant huff.

“At a point, yes,” he confesses proudly. “Though, I was actually eighteen at the time.”

“Oh, c’mon,” Bucky challenges. “As if you haven't gotten wasted since you were eighteen years old!”

“I didn't say that,” Steve objects calmly. “I just said that I haven't claimed to be immune to getting wasted since I was eighteen.”

“Yeah, right.” Bucky snorts. He raises his glass again, but then stops, looking at Steve over the edge of his glass with a calculated squint.

“I wonder what you're like drunk,” he says, leaning forward a little, and Steve laughs.

“Embarrassing, most likely.”

“I bet you're a cuddler,” Bucky concludes, eyes narrowing even further as he continues to scrutinize Steve from his end of the couch. “That you get all kinds of clingy once you've had enough to drink.”

“What makes you think that?” Steve asks with a curious arch to his eyebrows.

“Just a hunch,” Bucky says.

“And what kind of a drunk are you, then?” Steve counters. “The loud, obnoxious kind? Or the kind that falls asleep on the rug outside the bathroom door after his fifth drink?”
“Me?” Bucky chuckles. “I’m not sure if I should tell you. Especially not since you’ve obviously spent the past hour and a half trying to get me tipsy.”

“Now, why would I wanna do that?” Steve says, laughing out loud, and the corner of Bucky’s lip quirks up into a slanted smile.

“How about you tell me?” he suggests.

Steve lets out a chuckle, and then swallows hard when Bucky doesn't laugh back. Instead, Bucky just continues to look at him, as if he's genuinely curious to what Steve's answer will be, yet also as if he already knows. It's a look that sends Steve's blood rushing through his veins, and he knows that he should probably be saying something, rather than just sit there like a moron, but he simply can't gather himself up enough to even think of a response.

He clears his throat, opening his mouth to say something, anything, and promptly manages to choke on his own breath, sending him into a coughing fit right there on the couch.

“You all right there, Stevie?” Bucky drawls, and Steve can feel a blush begin to heat up his ears when the alternate version of his own name reaches them.

“I'm fine,” he manages, turning away. “Just— Forgot how to breathe there for a second.”

“I know, I have that effect on people,” Bucky says, shamelessly, and Steve barely knows what to do with himself. Bucky straightens up, looking away from Steve to slide his gaze over the little pile of wrapped gifts on the table. Suddenly, his eyes go wide as he lets out a barking laugh, and reaches out to pick up one of the gifts with his left hand, still with his unfinished drink in the other.

“What the hell is this?” he asks, obviously amused, holding the cylinder shaped present up in the air. “Some kind of fancy ass rolling pin?”

“Oh, that,” Steve says, grateful beyond words for the change of topic. “It's my gift for Thor. He's a real gym junkie, so I found him this muscle roller stick that's supposed to help you massage the kinks out when you're feeling a bit stiff.”

“Oh, it'll massage the kinks all right,” Bucky says, grinning even wider as he gives the present a little shake to test out its flexibility. “It looks like a big-ass dildo.”

“It does not,” Steve says, yanking the present out of Bucky's hand with a snort. “It's not even finished yet. I still need to come up with a Christmas rhyme for it.”

“A Christmas rhyme?” Bucky asks.

“Yeah. Thor’s family’s from Scandinavia, and apparently that's something people do there. It's like, a little clue about what's in the package and then the person gets to guess what it is before opening it. I thought I'd do it as a surprise for him.”

“Sounds dumb,” Bucky deadpans firmly.

“Call it what you want, I'm still doing it,” Steve decides. “In fact, you can help me come up with some good rhymes unless you wanna go back to massacring the string.

“Fine,” Bucky sighs, snatching the stick back and looking down at it. “How long does it have to be? Will one line be enough, or am I gonna have to go all Dr. Seuss on its ass?”

“I have absolutely no idea,” Steve admits. “One or two lines should be enough, as long as it passes
for a riddle when you're done.”

“Yay…” Bucky mumbles sarcastically. He goes quiet, licking across his lower lip. Then he lets out a snorted laughter. “Even though it isn't thick, I hope you'll like this rubber stick,” he recites, eyes crinkling at the edges when he turns to look at Steve.

“Oh, god, that's absolutely terrible,” Steve whimpers.

“Oh, then what about this?” Bucky says, chuckling, “Use it in bed, or in the shower, either way, it's happy hour.”

“Jesus, stop!” Steve wails, grinning in spite of himself.

“No, no, wait, I've got it!” Bucky chokes out in between giggles. “Feeling stiff? Fear no more, though this might leave you slightly sore.”

Steve breaks down in a fit of laughter, slumping back against the couch while clutching over his heart with his hand.

“Bucky,” he tries to explain through his fits of laughter, “Thor’s over six two and built like a brick shit house! You wouldn't even be able to imagine what he’d do to me if he thinks I bought him a sex toy.”

“Depends,” Bucky shoots back. “Does it involve the toy?”

“You're horrible.”

“No, I'm creative,” Bucky states firmly. “Some people might even call that a good thing.”

“Well, obviously those people have never heard you rhyme,” Steve shoots back.

Bucky just laughs, and puts Thor’s gift back onto the table. Steve takes a deep breath, and then sighs as he looks out at the remaining supplies on the table.

“Well, might as well get this over with while I still have all the stuff out,” he decides before turning towards Bucky and giving his shoulder a little shove. “Get up, you can't be here for this.”

“What, you're gonna try out Thor’s gift?” Bucky comments smugly. “Because if so, I wanna watch.”

“No, and no,” Steve says firmly, “but you can't stay here while I wrap up your gift, stupid.”

The grin on Bucky's face falters a little, turning into a gape of confusion and surprise. “You bought me a gift?” he asks slowly.

“Duh,” Steve says. “I can't have you stay for the holiday in my house without getting you a gift.”

“But,” Bucky says, looking at the heap of gifts on the table, “I haven't—I mean…”

“Don’t worry,” Steve orders softly, sensing where the conversation is going. “It wasn't that expensive, so you don't have to feel bad about it. Besides,” he adds, “I always buy gifts for my friends.”

Bucky swallows, looking down at his lap for a moment.

“Friend, huh?” he mumbles under his breath, so quiet Steve barely hears it. Then he snorts loudly
as he stands up and stretches lazily. “Way to sell a gift short, buddy,” he says, “but fine, I'll leave. But only because you'll probably force me to write a fuckload of Christmas cards or something, if I decide to hang around.”

Steve snorts, shaking his head while Bucky empties his shot glass and sets it down in the table with a sigh, before heading towards his bedroom.

“Oh, and in case you're still curious,” he says, abruptly turning around in the doorway on his way out to send Steve a look as he leans around the corner, “I'm a flirty drunk.” He nods against the two bottles, still sitting in the table. “If you'd let me empty one of those, you might've even had a chance to see so for yourself.”

With that, he then turns back around and disappears down the hallway, leaving Steve behind to struggle in the tidal wave of thoughts and emotions Bucky's words send washing over him.

For some reason, Steve feels as if he'd just been given the hint of a lifetime, and instead of taking it, he had just let it go right over his head. With a sigh, he slumps forward and lets his head fall onto the coffee table with a loud thunk.

“Idiot,” he groans. “Why didn't you just offer him the entire bar?”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading guys <3

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Until tomorrow! <3
Chapter 10 - Silent Night

Monday, December 5th

When they wake up on Monday morning, it’s snowing again, with light fluffy flakes falling softly from the sky to the ground below. It’s idyllic enough, but by the time they’ve decided what to eat for dinner, it’s coming down hard. As the sky grows dark above the rooftops of the city, the wind also begins to swoop down in squalls outside the window of Steve’s living room.

“Looks like there’s gonna be a storm,” Bucky says. He’s looking at the TV when Steve enters the room, and Steve can see that he’s watching the Weather Channel, where indeed the satellite picture shows a big storm cloud rolling in over New York City.

“Good thing we have plenty of food in,” Steve comments. “I don’t wanna go out shopping in that.”

“Yeah,” Bucky mumbles, glancing out the window where the darkness lies thick in between the buildings. “I don’t think anyone wants to be outside tonight…”

Steve instantly feels like a complete idiot. Here he is, talking about the discomfort of getting himself food, when he knows damn well that less than a month ago, Bucky was out there starving in the cold. He, like so many others.

“Sorry,” he offers remorsefully, and Bucky turns to him, looking genuinely confused.
“For what?” he asks.

“You know,” Steve says, nodding towards the window. “For being an insensitive jerk.”

Bucky blinks, and then turns his gaze to the floor as he catches on to what Steve's talking about. Steve looks at him for a moment, before walking up to the window to glance out at the snow coming down. To be out there, in this, with nowhere to go...

“What did you do?” he asks slowly. “Before, I mean. If the weather turned bad?”

Bucky is silent, and Steve doesn't turn around. He can tell that this is a difficult topic for Bucky to discuss. For some reason different than speaking of past jobs, and so he allows the other man as much space as he can to settle on an answer.

“Mostly, I went to different apartment complexes, like this one,” Bucky says after a while. “I just… rang on random doorbells until someone buzzed me in. Then I hung out in the laundry room until the storm was over. Or someone came down, caught me and threw me out.”

Steve swallows, jaw clenching. It’s the truth, he knows that, but that doesn’t make it any less difficult to listen to. What kind of a person knowingly throws another human being out into a snow storm? Sure, they have no idea of knowing Bucky’s intentions, or whether or not he poses a threat, but Steve still can't picture someone who's ever spoken to Bucky like a genuine person to treat him like that.

“It’s hard, you know,” Bucky continues, unprompted, turning Steve's attention back to the present. “To look out the window and immediately wonder where it would be warmest to spend the night, should you need it. Even though I know I’ve got a perfectly good bed waiting for me just a few feet away from where I’m sitting.”

“I can’t even imagine what that’s like,” Steve says. It's true. He can't.

“One time, I deliberately got into a fist fight, hoping I’d get hurt bad enough to spend the night at a hospital,” Bucky confides quietly, almost as if he's talking to himself. “Sadly, I only managed to get my nose broken along with a light concussion, so…no dice.”

“I’ve never—” Steve cuts himself off with a violent shake of his head. “God, it makes me feel so stupid.” He turns around, wincing inwardly as he looks at the man sitting on his couch. “Spoiled,” he declares, gesturing towards his own chest. “That’s what I’ve been. And meanwhile, you’ve been out there on your own, and I’ve never even considered—”

“You don’t have to feel guilty about that shit,” Bucky objects. “It is what it is.”

“Well, it shouldn’t be,” Steve grumbles. “I don’t like not caring.”

“Yeah, believe it or not, I’ve sort of noticed,” Bucky says with a chuckle, and how the hell the guy can even bring himself to smile while they're having this conversation is something Steve just can't fathom.

“What did you even do for food?” he asks, and Bucky shrugs.

“Food markets, mostly,” he says. “The fancy places usually have samples and shit out on a regular basis. Or common supermarkets where they hand out dishes to promote some random campaign going on.”

“You went there every day?” Steve asks in surprise, and Bucky shakes his head.
“God, no, not every day. It was more of an emergency plan, for when the shelters didn’t have enough food to make it go around. I had to stop though, because the management decided that my kind wasn’t welcome there anymore, so…” He trails off, swallowing before throwing his hand out to the side. “I decided to make use of a skill set I’d already promised myself I wouldn’t use anymore.”

“Picking pockets,” Steve concludes, and Bucky nods.

“Yeah…” he mumbles. “Not a talent I’m particularly proud about.”

“Where did you even learn to do that?” Steve asks. “I mean, I’m no expert, but you seemed pretty damn good at it to me.”

“The same way everyone learns how to do illegal things,” Bucky says with an eye roll. “Got in with a bad crowd. Picked up a bad habit. Got my ass busted more than just a few times over it, but even that was fun, at the time. Breaking the rules. Being bad…” He sighs heavily. “Then, one day, suddenly it wasn’t anymore, and I left. Cut ties and went off on my own.”

“They just let you do that?” Steve asks skeptically. “From what I know, gangs rarely encourage people to leave the group.”

“Once I made it clear I wasn’t gonna help them steal anymore, they more-or-less kicked me out, actually,” Bucky confesses. “Told me they had no need for a pussy faggot on their team.”

“Wow, that’s harsh,” Steve comments.

“Yeah,” Bucky snorts. “I think I only got that because I didn’t wanna put out for the guy who ran the show.”

Steve swallows. There it is again. Those subtle, nonchalant hints that all send Steve’s heart racing.

“So, you’re…?” He trails off. Christ, how is he even supposed to formulate this without sounding like an insensitive dick? Or an overly eager one, for that matter… “I mean, I know I’ve never really asked about this, but are you—?”

“Gay?” Bucky finishes for him. “Yeah.”

“Oh.” Steve makes an attempt to swallow, but finds that he can’t. Suddenly, his throat feels bone dry. Bucky looks at him, and it’s the same look. The same, clever little smirk at the corner of his mouth, and Jesus, Steve can barely breathe.

“So…” He clears his throat, forcing himself to break the eye contact and get back on topic. “What did you do then? Where did you go?”

“Nowhere.” Bucky shrugs. “Everywhere. Went to stay in Queens for a little while, but it didn’t feel right. When I came back to Staten Island, I spent about a month drifting from shelter to shelter, looking for…something.”

“Did you find it?”

“Actually, it found me,” Bucky says. “You know that woman I mentioned, back at the shelter? Peggy?”

“The woman in the lobby?” Steve asks.
“Yeah, her. She caught me in the soup kitchen one morning, discussing the food with one of the volunteers. She offered to help me out in exchange for working at Shield whenever I stayed there. She’s the one who found me that industrial job I mentioned too.”

“That’s nice of her,” Steve comments. “She must have cared a lot about you.”

“She’s dedicated to her work,” Bucky answers. “We got along well. I don’t want to assume, but I think she got a bit disappointed when I told her I was leaving.”

“That sure would explain the glaring,” Steve murmurs under his breath when he remembers Peggy’s hostile expression from when she had spotted his presence back at the shelter. Obviously, she had not trusted Steve enough to like the thought of Bucky leaving with him all on his own. Then he frowns, recalling what Bucky just said a few moments before. “So, you worked at the shelter?” he asks. “Doing what?”

“Cooking,” Bucky says without a beat, and Steve’s eyebrows shoot up.

“I thought you said you couldn’t cook?”

“No, I said I don’t want to cook,” Bucky corrects him. “Not that I couldn’t.”

“So you’ve left me in charge of the food all this time because you’re lazy? ” Steve prompts, but Bucky just grins back without responding, and Steve shakes his head.

“I honestly don’t get it,” he says, gesturing towards the other man. “I mean, you’re smart, you’ve got a great sense of humor. You look great,” he adds, trying not to put too much emphasis on the word, before continuing, “and you’re obviously not afraid to work.” He looks at him, shaking his head once more in disbelief. “How does someone like you end up homeless in the first place? What happened, Buck?”

He sees Bucky’s face shift. Sees the relaxed smile slowly falter, and how the bright gleam in his eyes flickers and dies before turning into something dull and filled with pain. He sees how Bucky opens his mouth, drags for breath, and then, he doesn’t see anything.

The light goes out around them, plunging them both into the sudden pitch black darkness of the room. White spots dance in front of Steve’s eyes as he stares out into the empty air in front of him, like lingering ghosts of the light that just left.

He can hear Bucky shift in his seat in the dark, and then he hears him stand up, slowly.

“It’s a blackout,” Bucky says quietly, and Steve realizes that he’s right. That’s why the room is so dark – the streetlights outside the window aren’t shining anymore.

“You think the power’s gonna come back?” Steve asks. He’s whispering. He doesn’t know why, but the situation seems to call for it.

“Probably not,” Bucky says, also in a murmur. “They said on the news that power outages were to be expected. We might be in it for the long haul.”

“Shit…” Steve brings his hand up to run it through his hair. “Good thing I’m all stocked up on candles.”

“If you can find them,” Bucky points out, and Steve sighs, turning around to feel his way through the living room.
Five minutes, three cupboards, and one stubbed toe later, Steve lights the first candle on the coffee table while Bucky lounges back on the couch with a bag of freshly opened potato chips in his hand.

“Nice to see your Christmas mania coming in handy for once,” he comments with a grin as he pops a chip into his mouth.

“Glad you feel that way,” Steve says, leaning in to light the other candles of the group, eventually making the centre of the coffee table look a little bit like it’s on fire.

“Snack?” Bucky offers Steve the bag when Steve sinks down on the couch next to him, and Steve gratefully grabs a handful of chips, picking one up and raising it to his mouth. Then he puts it back down, and slowly places the snacks on the coffee table.

“Do you wanna tell me?” he asks softly, turning towards Bucky again. “About what happened?”

He can feel it through the seat of the couch when Bucky tenses up, and he hears Bucky hold his breath, just for a tad bit longer than what’s considered normal. Then Bucky lets the air out in a torn sigh, only to go quiet once again. Steve has just about decided that Bucky’s not gonna answer him, when Bucky opens his mouth and speaks.

“Do you really wanna know?” he asks hoarsely.


Steve barely dares to breathe. The silence is so solid, it’s nearly deafening where they sit, less than two feet apart. He can see the flicker of the candles where the light reflects itself in the surface of Bucky’s eyes, and he sees the piercings gleam when Bucky slowly licks across his lips in a hesitant swipe of his tongue. Then Bucky lets out another heavy sigh through his nose as he puts the bag down next to Steve’s little pile of snacks on the table.

“All right,” he mumbles, before saying it once more, as if to strengthen his own resolve. “All right…”

Steve waits, giving Bucky the time he needs, and when he finally speaks, the other man’s voice is steady. Calm.

“My mom died when my sister was born,” Bucky starts. “I was eight at the time.” He pauses, as if waiting for Steve to say something. When Steve doesn't, he swallows, and continues, “Dad was heartbroken, of course, but he had both me and Becca to care for, so he couldn’t let his feelings get the better of him. He raised us. Loved us like only a father could, I guess. He spoke of mom often, and made sure we grew up the way she would have wanted. Being polite, staying out of trouble, not doing drugs or…getting into bad company.”

“Sounds like a good plan,” Steve comments, and Bucky nods.

“Yeah,” he agrees. “When I became homeless, I chose to ignore those rules for a while. But it also made me feel terrible, because it felt as if by doing so, I was dishonoring her memory. Even later, when I only did things like that to keep myself alive, I always felt guilty for doing it. Stealing and shit.”

Steve nods, and Bucky pauses, fiddling with the hands in his lap while searching for the right words.

“We were close,” he says eventually. “The three of us. My sister and I, we… She was my best friend, in a way. Even though there were times when I honestly felt like I could have murdered her
in her sleep.”

“I’ve heard that’s what siblings are for,” Steve comments, and Bucky nods in agreement with an acknowledging arch of his eyebrows.

“She was a real pain in the ass,” he mumbles, “but I still loved her.”

Loved. Was. Steve can’t pretend he hasn’t noticed the way Bucky speaks of his family as if they’re something that only exists in the past. It makes him suspect what’s coming, and he braces himself mentally when Bucky continues.

“Then, when I was twenty-four, my dad left town for the weekend. He had to work, and I was left in charge of Becca. It wasn’t the first time, I mean, we weren’t toddlers, but I never thought—”

He drops his head down, and the fidgeting of his fingers stills as he grips around his own hands, limbs shaking.

“She said she wasn’t feeling well and was going to bed early. It didn’t even occur to me that she was lying.” He takes a deep breath, and the air shakes down his lungs with such force Steve can nearly feel it in his own bones. “She snuck out the window and went to a party at a friend’s house,” Bucky grates. “Climbed down the fire escape. I’m the one who had taught her how to do that.”

Steve swallows hard when Bucky’s voice begins to shake, and Bucky closes his eyes as he continues, “It was only a quarter past eleven when I got the call that she was gone. Apparently, she was already dead when she arrived at the hospital. OD’d in the ambulance.”

Just like that, Steve can hear the ghosts of his own and Bucky's voices echo inside his head; a memory from the past that he had nearly managed to forget already.

*Drugs?*

*No! No, I don't do shit like that.*

It all makes sense, of course. Bucky would never do drugs, or even go anywhere near them, no matter how horrible things turned out. Not when drugs were responsible for the death of his sister. Bucky would never give that inner demon the satisfaction of following down the same path, not even if he had to crawl through the gutter for the rest of his life.

It's a heartbreaking realization, and it makes Steve's throat go thick with emotions when he opens his mouth to speak.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “Really, Bucky, I am, I— I'm so sorry.”

Bucky shakes his head. “I still have no idea exactly what she took, or who gave it to her,” he grates, voice lowering into a growl, “but if I ever find out, I’m gonna tear their fucking lungs out through their throats.”

Steve knows that someone might say something along the lines of ‘vengeance won’t bring your sister back’, or ‘violence is not the answer’, at this point, but he doesn’t. Because even though it’s the truth, it’s a truth without comfort, and thusly it doesn’t have a place in this conversation. Empty words, nothing more.

“Dad was beside himself,” Bucky continues, rubbing the palm of his hand across his mouth. “I remember him crying when mom died, but with Becca… He just went quiet. He blamed me for what happened. He never said it out loud, but I could tell, because he couldn’t even look at me
without going all empty in the eyes. It was as if I was living with a ghost.”

“He stopped talking to you?” Steve asks in genuine shock, and Bucky nods.

“Yeah. He…pretty much stopped doing everything,” he says. “Talking. Eating. Sleeping. The only thing he kept up was the drinking, and he didn't even get that part right.”

Alcoholism. Jesus Christ…

“I’m so sorry, Buck,” Steve murmurs. He knows that he's repeating himself, but he can't think of anything else to say that sounds genuine enough.

“James.”

“What?” Steve asks, losing track.

“It's James,” Bucky repeats while kneading his hands together. “James Buchanan Barnes.”

Buchanan.

Bucky.

Steve realizes perfectly well what he’s being told, but even though he feels honored beyond words for having been given the privilege of knowing Bucky's real name, he also doesn't want to embarrass the other by telling him so. “Oh,” he breathes out instead, in an attempt to express his emotions in sound rather than words.

“I know,” Bucky says with a snort. “Sounds fancy doesn't it? Hardly fit for a street rat like me.”

“I think it suits you,” Steve objects slowly. “It's a nice name.”

“Of course you'd say that,” Bucky mumbles, looking down. “I could be named John fucking Smith and you'd still probably try to convince me it was a unique name. James…” He grimaces, saying the name as if the mere sound of it left a bitter taste of disappointment in his mouth.

“You don't like it?” Steve asks carefully.

“Don't know,” Bucky says flatly. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Yes, it does,” Steve counters, and Bucky looks up at him, frowning. For a moment, Steve thinks he’s gonna say something, but then Bucky looks away again as he clears his throat.

“Anyway,” he says, returning to topic, “after the accident, it took my dad over three weeks before he even managed to say my name again. And even then, he was yelling. He was drunk off his ass, more so than usual, and… I couldn’t keep my mouth shut. We got into a fight. I said some shit, and he— Well, he wasn’t much better. In the end I left. Walked out the door and slammed it shut behind me.”

“Where did you go?” Steve asks.

“Nowhere, really,” Bucky murmurs. “I just walked. Spent hours just…wandering around. When I got back——” He inhales, and then exhales in a rush. “The cops were waiting for me. Turns out, while I was gone, my dad took the car and ran off the side of the road. And I don’t know, because I can’t be sure, but I— I think he took the car to go looking for me.”

“Did he——?” Steve starts, but he doesn't have to finish his question before Bucky nods.
“Yeah,” he whispers, and Steve winces.

“Jesus Christ…”

“So,” Bucky continues, not lingering on Steve’s shocked tone. “That’s how I ended up spending my twenty fourth Christmas packing everything that was left of my family into boxes. Clothes, pictures, personal belongings…the works. Outside, people were talking about Christmas cheer, about food and gifts, but inside—”

“You don’t have to explain it,” Steve says softly. “I understand.”

God, no wonder Bucky loathes Christmas the way he does. Every single thing about it must be nothing but a painful reminder of what had happened. Of the pain, the loss and the sorrow… And Steve had brought Bucky along to live smack in the middle of it all, Jesus Christ.

He opens his mouth to apologize, but before he can do so, Bucky is already talking again.

“When I packed up Becca’s room, I found—” He chokes. Taking a deep breath, he continues, “I found her Christmas gift. Or, rather, my Christmas gift.” He looks up, and Steve can see the tears in his eyes clearly in the soft light of the candles on the table. “She got me a gift card,” he says. “For a tattoo. She knew I had secretly been saving up to get a sleeve done, and she wanted to help. Even if just a little.” Bucky snorts out a bitter laugh through his nose. “I still have the Christmas card she wrote me,” he confesses.

He brings his hand up, and slides his fingers along the length of his left arm, tracing the line of the roses there. “In the end, I got this. It took me almost twenty five hours in total, and hurt like fuck the entire time, but I got it.”

His fingers linger at the edge of the bright blue butterfly sitting at one of the rose petals of the sleeve, right above the inside of his elbow.

“What does it stand for?” Steve asks, doesn’t even have to guess in order to know that the tattoo has an emotional significance.

Bucky gives him another look, as if he’s trying to decide if Steve’s being genuinely interested or just polite. Then he moves his hand, and points to the tattoo’s only red rose, placed over of his deltoid muscle.

“Mom,” he says quietly, moving the finger down to point it at the skull on his bicep. “Dad.” The finger slides an inch to the right, stopping at the butterfly. “Becca. She, uhm—” He cuts himself off, wiping across his nose with the back of his hand with a sniffle. “She loved butterflies.”

“What about the clock?” Steve asks.

“Time lost,” Bucky replies simply.

“And this?” Steve motions to the outline of the delicate beads that curl their way up throughout the entire tattoo.

“Me,” Bucky says quietly. “It’s a rosary. I figured I should have something representing asking for forgiveness in there since—” He draws another shaky breath, and then he slumps forward to hide his face in his hands as a broken whine slips out between his gritted teeth. “I got them killed, Steve,” he grates, voice breaking. “I got both of them killed.”

“No,” Steve whispers. “Bucky, that’s— No. ” He scoots closer, wanna reach out and touch, to help
, but he doesn’t have a clue of how Bucky will react to such a gesture, so he doesn’t. Forces himself not to. “Listen to me, you— You are not responsible for what happened back then,” he reasons. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” Bucky grits back as he swallows back the tears with well-practiced discipline. “Less easy to believe.”

“I know,” Steve says earnestly. “And I also know it’s not my place, but... Bucky, you didn’t tell your sister to go to that party. Just like you didn’t tell your dad to get in that car. They made those choices for themselves.”

“So you’re saying, what?” Bucky grates out behind a snivel, his voice suddenly hard. “That they deserved it?”

“No!” Steve objects, horrified. “No, jesus, that’s not—” He pauses and takes a deep, grounding breath before he continues, “All I’m saying is that you didn’t make them do any of those things. You can’t blame yourself for what happened, because you weren’t even there.”

“Exactly,” Bucky mutters. “I wasn’t there. Had I been, I might have been able to stop them. Save them.”

“Don’t do this to yourself,” Steve begs softly. “Nothing good will come from thinking about it like that.”

“Then how should I think about it?” Bucky asks bitterly, fidgeting with his fingers while picking at his nails in sharp, twitchy movements. “I’m the reason they’re gone.”

Steve knows that Bucky doesn’t mean it, not really, but it still hurts to hear him speak so harshly about himself.

“You’re a good man, Buck,” he argues. “And I know you might not believe me for saying this, but I’m glad that I’ve met you. Even though I literally had to chase you down first.”

At that, Bucky snorts out a bitter little laugh, and once again, Steve has to fight the urge to reach out and touch him, just to let him know he’s there.

“So, is that why you ended up on the streets?” he asks softly instead. “You couldn't afford a place to live?”

Bucky nods, pulling at his lip piercing with his teeth. “Yeah,” he says under his breath, before straightening up a little in his seat. “After I lost dad, the little salary I had wasn’t enough for me to keep the apartment for myself. Not that I wanted to stay… I ended up sleeping on a friend’s couch for about three months, but it didn’t feel right, because I could tell it made him uncomfortable. He tiptoed his way around me, and I just couldn’t stand it. The shelters are bad, sure, but…at least there, no one knows who I am. Or what I’ve done.”

“You didn’t do anything,” Steve says firmly.

“Didn’t stop me from trying to punish myself for it,” Bucky says with a snort. “Quit my job, moved to a different part of the city… Living on the streets by myself, because in my own head I didn’t deserve a proper home.”

Steve closes his mouth with a wince, and Bucky glances at him.

“Does it make you uncomfortable to hear me say that?” he asks.
“No,” Steve answers earnestly. “Just sad.”

Bucky blinks, and then swallows hard. “Well,” he says with a wry smile. “What are friends for, right?”

His face is so open, and at the same time so filled with sorrow, Steve moves before he even knows he’s about to.

He leans in and wraps both his arms around Bucky’s body, pulling him in tight against his chest. He can feel Bucky tense up against him, for a moment going rigid as a board in the firm grip of Steve’s arms. Then he exhales, and slumps against Steve’s chest with a shuddered breath as he brings both hands up to clutch hard around the fabric at the back of Steve’s t-shirt.

He doesn’t cry, and he doesn’t move, but he also makes no attempt to shy away, or to tell Steve to let him go. Neither of them says anything, but sitting there in the dark, Steve figures that neither of them really needs to.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading guys <3

You're more than welcome to follow me on tumblr if you want, and for those of you who use it, I'm also on Twitter. Feel free to drop me a line! :)

Until tomorrow! <3
Tuesday, December 6th

The power returns just a few minutes after midnight, but by that time, neither Steve nor Bucky are feeling like staying awake long enough to enjoy it. The sudden re-lighting of all the lamps inside the apartment leaves them both blinking owlishly on the couch, where they had been in the middle of a game of ‘Go Fish’, aided by the flickering candles on the coffee table.

Apparently, the amount of potato chips that end up on the couch while eating them multiplies when you eat them in the dark. Steve begrudging makes the call that they’re gonna have to vacuum both the couch and the floor in the morning, and Bucky immediately offers to help since he’s the one who brought out the chips in the first place.

By the time they go to bed, they’ve decided to make Tuesday a cleaning-up day.

Steve, however, realises that he might have underestimated Bucky’s enthusiasm for housekeeping, as he wakes up the next day to the sound of the vacuum cleaner starting up out in the living room.

He squints at his alarm clock and yawns, noticing that at least Buck had shown the decency to hold off until after eight o’clock before he started. He then gets up, gets dressed, and walks out into the living room, still yawning.

“You could have waited, you know,” he points out with an amused look from the doorway. Bucky,
who’d just flung a couch cushion down onto the floor to vacuum beneath it, looks up, startled by his sudden appearance.

“And do what?” he asks. “Sit around and do nothing while waiting for your lazy ass to wake up?”

“For example.”

“Yeah, no thanks.” Bucky snorts, tossing a second cushion down before leaning down to pick something up from where it had just been. “Man, these things are everywhere,” he mutters, and flings the coin onto the coffee table to join the rather impressive pile of coins already there. “You really do throw your money around, don’t you?”

“Oops,” Steve says with an not-so-apologetic smirk.

“Dick,” Bucky accuses. “Go fetch a duster or something and make yourself useful.”

Steve rolls his eyes with an exaggerated sigh, and then goes to retrieve a dust cloth and some detergent from the closet in the hallway.

While Bucky gives the couch a good once-over, Steve goes through all the flat surfaces of the room. The bookcase is a quickly done, since it’s brimming with books, but the more Steve looks around the rest of his interior, the more he realizes exactly how much dust there really is.

“Jesus fuck, Stevie,” Bucky groans as he pulls the couch out from the wall to vacuum behind it. “How long’s it been since you did this?”

“How long’s it been since you did this?”

“Don’t know,” Steve says, grimacing at the near black layer of dust he just swiped up with the cloth from behind the TV. “A year?”

“A year?”

“Slob,” Bucky scolds.

“Hey, I clean,” Steve defends himself. “Just not... there.”

Bucky gives a short little laugh at the offended huff in Steve’s voice, and Steve smiles. Seeing Bucky smile and hearing him laugh is a reassurance that Steve can’t help but be grateful for. After last night, Steve is actually impressed that Bucky still can smile, considering the things he’s been through.

Looking at him now, Steve can suddenly make sense of all the little signs Bucky’s been showing him this far, regarding his reluctance to share things about his past. To carry the self-appointed guilt of not one, but two family members... That’s more than any person should be forced to endure.

Steve pauses, mid-sweep of the windowsill as he continues to look on while Bucky pushes the couch back to its original spot. Bucky looks happy, and the energy he’s showing right now is stronger and brighter than Steve has ever seen it. It makes him happy as well, and Steve smiles, even as Bucky straightens up with a quizzical frown his way.

“What?” he says, and Steve’s heart gives a hard clench of endearance at the hesitant little smile that flashes across Bucky’s lips as he asks.

“Nothing,” Steve says quickly, but then he changes his mind. “Or, actually, I was...thinking about yesterday.”

Bucky swallows. Looking down, he makes a big deal out of adjusting the couch cushions.
“What about it?” he asks. He sounds indifferently curious, but Steve knows better by now.

“I just wanted to say that I’m really glad you told me,” Steve says earnestly. “I know that was hard for you, and… I’m grateful.”

Bucky looks up, seemingly genuinely surprised by Steve’s words, and then he looks back down just as quick with a bashful smile playing on his lips.

“Thanks,” he mumbles. “It feels… better, actually. Now that you know.”

“I’m glad,” Steve says. “And you know,” he adds, “you won’t have to worry about me tiptoeing my way around you. You’re a tough guy, I know you won’t break.”

“Thanks,” Bucky repeats with a chuckle. Then he looks at Steve again, frowning slightly. “What about you?” he asks. “Do you have family living nearby?”

“No really,” Steve answers. “My mom died five years ago from lung cancer, and Dad’s working abroad. He’s got an studio over in Manhattan, but work keeps him from staying there most of the time.”

“You guys talk?” Bucky asks.

“On the phone,” Steve says with a smile. “Neither of us are that great at staying in touch, though, and with the time difference, it gets even harder.” He looks out the window and sighs. “But I’ve gotta say, I’m gonna miss him this year. Usually, he makes it back for Christmas, but… not this time. He’s apologized like a million times already, and I get it, but… it’s still gonna feel weird having Christmas without him.”

“So,” Bucky says, straightening up, “if you hadn’t invited me over to stay, are you saying you would have spent all of Christmas on your own?”

“Unless one of my friends took pity on me,” Steve says. “Yeah, pretty much.”

“Man,” Bucky says. “I mean, I’m no Christmas fan, but even I can tell that would suck.”

“Lucky for me you came along then,” Steve points out with a grin, and Bucky snorts out an amused laugh through his nose.

“So your dad,” he says curiously, “is he a Christmas junkie too? Like you?”

“Dad?” Steve laughs. “He’s one of the normal ones, I think. Though, when he comes back home, he’s usually so sick of Christmas food he can barely stand the smell of it. They invite him to all kinds of Christmas dinners for work, you know. We usually just put a random movie on and eat spaghetti and hot dogs for dinner when he gets here.”

“That’s your Christmas dinner?” Bucky asks skeptically. “Spaghetti and hot dogs?”

“Dad can’t cook to save his life,” Steve explains, grinning, “and that’s what he used to make me when I was a kid, so it only seems fair I return the favor. It’s sort of become a tradition. Even though it’s the most un-Christmas-y thing ever, Christmas Eve still doesn’t feel quite right without it. God, now I want hot dogs,” he finishes wistfully, and Bucky laughs at him.

“Well, I know what you mean,” he says. “When I was a kid, my mom taught me how to make these paper garlands and snowflakes to hang in the windows. After she passed, I never got around to making some for the next Christmas, and… somehow it just wasn’t the same.”
Steve nods. Then he glances towards the kitchen, and then at the window.

“You know what we should do?” he asks. “After we’ve finished cleaning, we should make paper garlands and hang them up here, in the living room.”

“Are you serious?” Bucky snorts.

“Absolutely.” Steve counters. “Think about it, we can make snowflakes too. And then we’ll have spaghetti and hotdogs for dinner.”

“That’s kid’s stuff,” Bucky complains.

“Yeah,” Steve counters sweetly, “and since you’re just about the biggest baby I’ve ever met, it should work out quite nicely.”

“You’re insane,” Bucky groans, sounding annoyed, even as the corner of his lips twitch as he says it.

“I thought we had already established that, but sure,” Steve retorts. “C’mon. Remember how good the cookies turned out? And the eggnog?”

“Those were things you could eat,” Bucky points out. “Things you can eat are always good.”

“This will be too!” Steve insists, and Bucky tips his head back towards the ceiling with an exaggerated sigh, throwing his hands out.

“Fine,” he agrees. “But I’m not coloring the damn things.”

Getting scissors and tape isn’t hard, but Steve has to give up his supply of printer paper in order for them to have enough for their little Christmas project.

Laying the things out over the kitchen table, Steve whistles a cheery little tune while Bucky looks on from the spot where he’s leaning against the counter, arms folded over his chest.

“You’re being disgustingly happy about all this,” he comments dryly, but Steve just sends him an amused look over his shoulder as he pulls out one of the kitchen chairs, offering Bucky a seat.

Bucky rolls his eyes and sighs dramatically, but sits down nonetheless.

“I printed some instructions for us,” Steve announces proudly.

“Yay,” Bucky cheers sarcastically. He tries to sound unimpressed, but Steve can see the smile playing in the corner of his mouth as he says it, which just makes the whole charade even better. Bucky knows that Steve knows as well, so he simply sits down at the opposite side of the table, looking out over their equipment.

“Let’s see, we’ve got reindeer, a Christmas tree, and snowmen garlands,” he counts, pointing to the stack of papers on his right, before placing his hand down on top of another stack on the left. “And here, we have a whole bunch of different patterns for the snowflakes.”
“You’re not supposed to have patterns for it,” Bucky points out as he picks one of the papers up from the snowflake pile. “You’re supposed to come up with your own designs. Otherwise it’s cheating.”

“Wow, look who’s suddenly taking this seriously,” Steve muses, upon which Bucky flips him the bird from his seat. Steve smirks and reaches out to push a pair of scissors across the table top towards the other man. Bucky takes it, and then snatches one of the blank sheets from the third pile on the table, and begins to fold.

The first snowflake turns out looking a bit like a square Swiss cheese, which sends Steve into a near hysterical fit of laughter, that lasts long enough to make Bucky threaten to throw his scissors at him.

Steve goes straight for the reindeer garland, but that too turn out a complete failure. After a couple of tries, Bucky manages to produce something that at least resembles a snowflake, and after another five minutes, he nonchalantly picks one of the templates out of Steve’s pile of patterns. An action Steve graciously pretends not to notice.

Once Bucky has made a snowflake with the help of the template, however, things seem to come back to him. Soon enough, there’s an increasingly growing pile of snowflakes forming on the table next to his elbow, each one different from the other.

After three equally horrible attempts, Steve abandons the reindeers in favor of a snowman garland, which actually turns out quite nice. Especially after he’s used a few color pens from the office to draw on little scarves and facial expressions on them. One of the snowmen gets a turnip for a nose instead of a carrot, and on impulse, Steve gives another a bunch of facial piercings, just to see if Bucky will notice.

Feeling as if something’s still missing, Steve then goes on a hunt once more, only to return a few minutes later with an old box of craft supplies from the closet. There’s glue and a few pieces of brightly colored paper, and most importantly; glitter.

“Here,” Steve says as he tosses a tube of silver glitter towards Bucky, who catches it mid-air with one hand. “Try putting some of that on the snowflakes.”

“I swear, sometimes I think you’re still eight years old,” Bucky complains, even as he reaches for the glue, and Steve hides a smile by ducking his head down to focus on sprinkling red glitter over one of the snowmen’s mittens.

The snowflakes turn out great with glitter, as does the garland. There’s a slight setback when Steve accidentally ends up gluing the garland together with itself, which forces them to cut it in half, much to Bucky’s polite, yet unmistakable glee. A few delicately applied pieces of tape later, however, they’re back on track once more.

Given, the garland ends up a bit crooked due to the surgery, but looking at Bucky’s grin as they hang the thing up in the kitchen window, Steve decides that he doesn’t care.

Bucky snatches the tape away as soon as the garland’s been put in place, and Steve helps him tape up all the snowflakes onto the living room window, until it nearly becomes impossible to see through. It looks nice, though, more so than Steve would have thought, and he can tell by the way Bucky keeps smiling that he thinks so too.

While Bucky vacuums the kitchen floor in order to clean up after their paper cutting adventures, Steve gets dinner started. He chops up the hot dogs, and pierces each slice with five strands of
spaghetti, before setting them aside to wait for the salted water in the pot to boil. Once that’s done, he dumps the entire batch of pasta-infused hot dog slices into the pot, and moves on to set the table while Bucky puts the vacuum cleaner away.

“So,” Bucky says as he curiously lifts the lid of the pot to peek at its content. “This is your Christmas dinner?”


“Even your dad?”

“Yeah,” Steve says, laughing, “reluctantly so.”

“What do you eat it with?” Bucky asks with another glance at the boiling pasta, and Steve shrugs.

“Not much. Some pasta sauce maybe? Usually we just eat it with ketchup.”

“Wow,” Bucky snorts, “your dad really can’t cook for shit, can he?”

“You’ve got any other suggestions?” Steve asks, upon which Bucky rolls his eyes to the ceiling.

“Duh,” he says, before giving Steve’s side a push with the elbow. “Move over, I’ll show you.”

Steve does as he’s told, and turns away in order to hide yet another smile when Bucky starts rummaging through the pantry and the spice drawer.

“Here,” Bucky says, tossing a garlic in Steve’s direction. “Chop that up. Do you have any onions?”

“In there,” Steve says with a nod towards the cupboard next to the fridge, and Bucky immediately heads over to retrieve it. After a couple of minutes, they’ve successfully added garlic, chopped onions, basil, tomatoes, soy sauce, and some leftover half-and-half from the fridge into a pan. Steve has to admit, the smell that rises as a result is damn near intoxicating.

“Taste this,” Bucky says as he holds out a spoonful of the finished sauce for Steve to try, and Steve obediently leans forward and blows on it before taking the spoon into his mouth.

“Well,” he says with an impressed arch of his eyebrows, “it sure doesn’t taste like dad’s anymore.”

The words barely have time to leave his mouth before Bucky’s face drops.

“Shit,” he mumbles, looking at the pot. “I ruined it for you, didn’t I? This was supposed to be your thing, and I just went ahead and changed it completely.”

“It’s not that important,” Steve says with a nonchalant wave of his hand. “Like you said, my dad ain’t exactly a master chef. This, on the other hand, is amazing.”

“You think so?” Bucky says with a disbelieved chuckle and Steve nods.

“Oh, yeah. Trust me, I’d rather have this than ketchup. Besides, that’s all just nostalgia – it never tastes the way you remember it, anyway, right?”

Bucky smiles and nods, relaxing again, and Steve quickly swipes the spoon away from his unguarded grip and steals himself another spoonful of sauce from the pan with a wink. Unfortunately, he forgets that the content is still boiling hot, and he hisses as the sauce scalds his tongue, leaving him grimacing in pain as he dives for the tap in the sink.
“Serves you right, thief,” Bucky mocks with a friendly smirk as he grabs two oven mitts to move the pans from the stove to the dinner table. Steve just makes a grumbling noise around the water in his mouth, informing Bucky that he of all people definitely shouldn’t be preaching about thieves.

When he straightens back up from the sink, Bucky has already taken the liberty of serving them a plate each of the food, and as Steve sits down, his stomach gives a stoked rumble. Taking the fork in hand, he digs in, but this time he actually remembers to blow on the food before putting it in his mouth. It does indeed taste delicious, and Steve ends up emptying his plate in close to no time at all.

“Fuck me, you weren’t kidding about liking this stuff, were you?” Bucky asks as Steve goes in for seconds, and Steve shakes his head with a firm, “Nope,” as he drops another brimming ladle of food onto his plate. “If you think you’re getting out of kitchen duty after this,” he adds, “you’re sadly mistaken.”

“Just my luck,” Bucky says with a smirk. “I get out of one kitchen only to end up in a new one.”

“For someone who claims to hate cooking, you sure seemed happy while doing it,” Steve points out, and Bucky chuckles, stabbing a hot dog slice with his fork.

“I guess it’s different when you’re just cooking for two people, rather than half an army,” he says. “At the shelter, there’s usually not enough time, or even ingredients, to make something that feels genuinely worth the effort.”

“So you do like cooking?” Steve prods triumphantly.

“Here I do,” Bucky admits. He looks up at Steve, and then his eyes shift an inch to the right, going over Steve’s shoulder and out into the living room where the paper snowflakes are being illuminated by the christmas lights wrapped around the curtain rods. Then his gaze moves back to Steve’s face for a split second, before Bucky looks down at his plate, licking across his lips.

“Thank you, by the way” he says towards his food. “For today.” He swallows and glances up. “I know I act and sound like a complete bitch about it, but…it really means a lot that you wanna do these things for me.”

Steve looks at him, and smiles softly. “You’re welcome,” he says simply, and Bucky’s gaze dives back down to his plate as he bashfully begins to stir the food around with his fork. There are a few stray bits of glitter gleaming on his cheek, which in Steve’s humble opinion makes him look absolutely adorable.

“Your garland still looks like shit, though,” Bucky mumbles, before looking up, grinning widely as Steve gives a wildly exaggerated, affronted gasp at the comment. Next thing, Bucky lets out objective, “Hey!”, as Steve promptly leans across the table and steals the last hot dog slice off his plate out of pure vengeance.

Chapter End Notes
Thank you again for reading guys <3
I hope this chapter managed to cheer you up after yesterday's feels-attack.

If you want, you're more than welcome to follow me on tumblr, and for those of you who use it, I'm also on Twitter. Feel free to drop me a line about whatever you want! :)

Until tomorrow, my darlings! <3
*Beta by the wonderful and ever so glorious Nursedarry <3*

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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**Thursday, December 8th**

Two days after making their paper decorations, Steve goes out on a limb, and makes the decision to finish decorating his apartment for Christmas. And, since he’s already promised Bucky not to treat him or his feelings towards Christmas like some sort of fragile porcelain doll, he decides not to hide his intentions.

The first thing that goes up, is the Christmas wreath on the front door. Then, the evergreen garland around the doorframe to the kitchen, complete with bright red baubles and golden ribbons.

That’s when Bucky begins to realize what’s going on, and so, while Steve walks back and forth between the living room and kitchen, trying to decide which item goes where, Bucky stands in the decorated doorway with his arms folded in front of his chest, watching intently.

“What are you doing?” he asks calmly upon Steve's fifth return from the kitchen. Steve stops, feeling a stab of nervousness as he tries to look as innocent as he possibly can when he turns around to face his flat mate.

“Decorating,” he answers, holding the tinsel in his hands up as proof.

“I can see that,” Bucky responds, still calm. “But why?”

“Because it's Christmas?” Steve responds. “I haven't had the time to put everything up yet.”
“You mean there’s even more?” Bucky’s eyes widen as he turns his head to look at the big box of decorations sitting on the kitchen table.


“A few things?” Bucky repeats doubtfully. Steve can tell by the tone of his voice that Bucky probably doesn’t share Steve’s definition of the word ‘few’.

“It’s only a star for the window,” Steve assures him. “And a new bedspread.”

Bucky narrows his eyes at him, and Steve swallows nervously.

“You’re telling me,” Bucky says slowly while pointing at the living room, “that the rest of your place looks like this…” He makes a sweeping gesture towards the room in question, “…but all you keep in the office is one lousy star?”

“And a bedspread,” Steve reminds him.

“Not buying it,” Bucky declares firmly. “What else normally goes in there?”

“Nothing. Much…” Steve tries, but when he sees the look on Bucky’s face, he sighs, shoulders slumping in defeat. “One Christmas garland, three figurines, some lights, a rug, and one teddy bear Santa,” he mumbles, but even though Bucky arches an amused, pierced eyebrow at the mention of the teddy bear, he still keeps his arms firmly crossed when he asks, “And why aren’t you putting all that stuff in there now?”

Steve is not stupid. He knows when he's been caught. To be honest with himself, he had sort of hoped that even if Bucky did notice the way Steve was leaving the guest room out of his decoration routine, he would at least have been gracious enough not to mention it. This obviously isn’t the case, and Steve sighs, again, as he turns to look Bucky in the eye.

“Because,” he explains, “you should have at least one place to go in here that isn’t filled with tinsel and Santas and all that other Christmas crap.”

“It’s your apartment,” Bucky points out.

“Yes,” Steve answers, “And you’re living in it.”

Bucky straightens up, and slowly unfolds his arms from in front of his chest. He doesn't look angry, just…apologetic. “Steve,” he says, “they’re just decorations.”

“They’re reminders ,” Steve objects. “And I know you don’t want me to give you any special treatment, but I also don’t want you to feel uncomfortable while you’re here.”

“It’s not that bad,” Bucky promises. “I’m not allergic to Christmas, I just don’t feel like it’s cause for celebration.”

“But—”

“Steve, for fuck’s sake, decorate your goddamn home .”

Steve clamps his mouth shut, and Bucky shakes his head at him. “I’m not gonna go and lose my shit over some Christmas lights,” he says firmly. “As long as you don’t try to shove me into a Santa suit, I’m good. Got it?”
He gives Steve a long, penetrating look, and Steve knows that there's no use in arguing. Bucky isn't going to let him get away with this one.

“Got it,” Steve grumbles reluctantly. “But if there's anything I put up that you don't like,” he adds quickly, “tell me and I'll take it down right away. Agreed?”

“Don't test your luck, pal,” Bucky warns. “That's an awful lot of power you're offering me.”

“Then I guess I won't have to tell you that with great power—”

“Yeah, yeah,” Bucky groans, cutting Steve off before he has time to finish the quote. “Easy there, Cindy-Lou, I'm not gonna touch your precious tinsel.”

“Coming from a grinch like you, I don't know if I believe that,” Steve quips back, before smoothly ducking out of the way of the open palm that Bucky aims at the back of his head.

\\\\\\\\\\/
Steve does indeed end up decorating the office. Mostly because Bucky refuses to move from the doorway until it's done. He does, however, switch out two of the Santa figurines to the snowmen that he usually keeps on the windowsill in his own bedroom, thinking that they might at least be a bit less festive than two Santas.

When Steve declares the room done, Bucky finally steps away from the door. Slowly he walks in to stand in the middle of the room, looking around at the new components inside while Steve anxiously awaits the judgment.

He notices the way Bucky's eyes give the snowmen in the window a quick once over, and how his gaze then moves to the fairy lights decorating the shelf above the desk.

“Is it too much?” Steve asks nervously.

“Compared to the rest?” Bucky retorts, still looking around the room. “Not really.” He pauses. “The lights are nice,” he offers, and Steve slowly lets out the breath he hadn't even been aware he was holding. He looks on in silence as Bucky then walks up to the bed and picks up the teddy bear Santa from its spot on the bed, looking at it with a contemplative crease on his brow.

“This yours?” he asks.

“Yeah,” Steve says, smiling fondly at the bear. “My friend Sam and I went on a double date at a winter fair once. Turned out terrible, date-wise,” he adds with a grimace when Bucky gives him a curious glance. “The girls were nice, but…obviously expecting to be pampered. I don't mind pampering, but I'd like to make the decision to do so myself, you know?”

“Sounds like a reasonable argument,” Bucky agrees, before giving the teddy a little shake. “So this was a gift from your date?” he teases with a smirk.

“No, from Sam, actually,” Steve explains with a laugh. “I made him a bet that he couldn't hit all the targets at the shooting range, and I lost.”

“Doesn't that usually mean that he’s supposed to get the price?”
“Oh, no,” Steve says firmly. “Sam hates dolls, and stuffed toys in general. Can't stand the eyes, he says. You ask me, I think he’s watched one too many horror movies.”

Bucky chuckles while carefully wiggling one of the bear’s paws in a little wave.

“Well, I've never met a stuffed toy I didn't like,” he confesses, “so I think this guy and I are gonna get along just fine.” He flicks the little white ball at the end of the bear’s hat with his index finger. “Too bad he’s got such bad fashion sense, though, or I might have considered adopting him.”

Steve smiles, and then clears his throat as he feels the heat rise on the back of his neck. His subconscious had just conjured up the most adorable image of Bucky, asleep in bed with the teddy bear snuggled up tight against his chest, illuminated by the soft gleam from the fairy lights above. Then, that same subconscious had decided to make the sleeping Bucky shirtless as well, with the sheets draped dangerously low, and Steve tears his mind back to the present with a final discreet cough.

“Glad I won't have to send you guys to the naughty corner for time outs, then,” he jokes, cursing inwardly for using the word *naughty*. Bucky doesn't seem to notice, and Steve watches with a light flutter of combined amusement and fondness at how the other gently puts the toy back down onto the bed, and how Bucky then adjusts its hat before straightening back up.

“So?” he asks, throwing his arms out. “What's next? We're gonna go kidnap a group of carolers for you to keep in the shower? Or an entourage of reindeer for the balcony, maybe?”

“Cute,” Steve scoffs, “but no, nothing that fancy.”

“So you're done decorating?” Bucky asks, sounding genuinely surprised. “This is it?”

“Nah,” Steve admits. “There's just one more thing…”

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“You have *got* to be kidding me.”

Steve looks down from his spot on the kitchen chair, which is currently placed in the doorway between the hallway and kitchen, down at Bucky who's staring up at him with a look of utter disbelief on his face.

“What?” he asks, tying the final knot of the ribbon in his hands.

“Mistletoe?” Bucky says. “Really?”

“What's wrong with mistletoe?” Steve asks as he steps down from the chair, and Bucky huffs.

“I didn't say it was wrong, wise-ass,” he points out, “I'm just saying I don't get it.”

“Well,” Steve starts, carrying the chair back to the table, “according to tradition, when two people stand underneath mistletoe—”

“I know what the tradition says, wise-ass,” Bucky quips, “what I meant was that I don't get the point of having it in here.” He gestures to the branches dangling above his head. “In case you haven't noticed, we're the only two people living here at the moment. Which makes that thing
useless. Unless,” he says slowly, eyes narrowing, “this is some sort of elaborate ruse just to get me
to kiss you.”

Steve nearly stumbles over his own feet as the unexpected words leave Bucky's mouth, but he still
manages to keep a straight face as he turns back around to give the other a mocking look over his
shoulder.

“That's ridiculous,” he says.

“Is it?” Bucky counters, perching his left hand on his hip.

“Uh, yeah,” Steve retorts. “It is.”

“Are you saying that because you don't wanna kiss me, or because you're too shy to admit that you
do?”

“What kind of a question is that?” Steve scoffs. “If I were too shy to admit it in the first place, then
why would I do so just because you ask me about it?”

“You tell me,” Bucky says, shrugging.

Steve snorts, but on the inside, his heart is rapidly hammering a path right through his ribcage.

How did they end up having this conversation? Does Bucky even know what he's
saying?

“I—” Steve swallows, and Bucky smirks.

“What?” he asks. “Scared you're gonna fall in love with me, is that it?”

“No,” Steve answers sharply, watching with both dismay and excitement how Bucky's smile
widens. The smug look on the other's face sparks an indignant sense of self-preservation inside his
chest, and he quickly straightens up, raising his chin to look Bucky straight in the eye. “Fine,” he
says. “So let’s say, theoretically, that I went out and bought mistletoe, just to trick you into kissing
me. Does the fact that you're worried about it mean that it would actually work?”

Bucky blinks, and by now, Steve's heart is literally hurting with how hard it's pounding. He does
his best not to show it, though, and somehow he manages to keep a straight face when Bucky
proceeds to squint at him with a calculated look in his eyes.

“You’d never do that,” Bucky decides after a few seconds, sounding confident even as he smoothly
dodges Steve's question. “You're the guy who wouldn't even decorate my room because you
thought I might throw a royal hissy fit over a goddamn teddy bear. Even if you did
hatch a plan
like that, there's no way you'd ever go through with it.”

“What makes you so sure?” Steve counters.

“Because, you're such a decent fucking guy,” Bucky argues, rolling his eyes. “Always doing the
right thing, always so noble . You'd probably demand a written consent before you even hold
someone's hand. Actually,” he says, stepping forward “I bet you wouldn't have the nerve to kiss me
right now, even if I asked you to.”

“Oh, you bet?” Steve echoes mockingly. “Is that supposed to be a challenge?”

“Yeah,” Bucky dares. “As a matter of fact, it is.”

“So if I made an attempt to kiss you right now just to prove you wrong, you're saying you wouldn't
stop me?” Steve asks curiously, and Bucky snorts.

“That's pretty irrelevant,” he says, cocking his head to the side with a pointed glance at Steve's lips, “seeing as you don't have the balls to try.”

It's a game – a dare – and it sends the adrenaline rushing through Steve's veins with a speed that makes his hands tremble. He is fully aware of the fact that this isn't like any normal bet. Not like that time when Nat bet half a pizza that Clint wouldn't have the guts to pretend to be Thor’s boyfriend when they all went to the movies together. This is different, because Bucky is gay. Steve knows that he's gay, and Bucky simply cannot be anything but aware of how not-straight Steve himself is.

If they kiss, it's not under the same pretenses as two straight men would have had. It's different, and Bucky knows this, the bastard. Bucky is testing him, and Steve will be damned if he's gonna be the one to fold first.

Slowly, he forces himself to take a step closer, and Bucky's shoulders square when the action brings the two of them standing chest to chest underneath the mistletoe.

“It is a Christmas tradition,” Steve points out sweetly. “Are you really that certain my moral compass will trump that?”

“Well, guess there's only one way to find out, now, isn’t there?” Bucky counters cockily.

“You sure that's what you want?” Steve asks, and he barely dares to move when Bucky's response is to grin at him while chuckling under his breath.

“Oh, bring it on, pretty boy,” he dares. “You don't have the guts .”

Steve drags in a breath, and then he lets it out again in a shivering rush as he grasps Bucky's face with both hands, mashing their lips together.

The surprised sound of Bucky's gasp travels through Steve's body like an electric shock. Instantly, he feels Bucky clasp his fingers around both of Steve's wrists, as if he's about to shove the hands away. Only, he doesn't.

Steve takes that as a good sign, and deepens the kiss on instinct, moving his mouth against Bucky's own a bit more decisively. When Bucky responds by opening his mouth with a groan to push his tongue past Steve's lips, Steve's brain downright short circuits.

Bucky's lip piercings push against Steve's mouth, making his lips tingle, and when the stud in Bucky's tongue clicks against the back of Steve's teeth, Steve's breath hitches in his throat with a faint moan.

Steve doesn't want to stop, but he knows that he has to. He has to, but he can't for the life of him remember why. It's just too good, too much of everything , and eventually, Bucky's the one who decides to pull away first. He moves back with a light suckle to Steve's lower lip, ending the kiss with a nip of teeth before breaking the contact completely.

The moment the kiss ends, Steve realizes with growing insight that he has closed his eyes. For a moment, he can feel fear curl itself around his heart with icy fingers when he reaches the conclusion that he has absolutely no idea what's gonna happen now.

He opens his eyes, holding his breath, and the first thing he sees is the view of Bucky's parted lips. Moving the gaze up, he finds that Bucky has his eyes closed as well, and as Steve watches, Bucky
slowly tips his head forward to hang it down in between his shoulders with a deep sigh.

“Goddamn Christmas freak...” he breathes exasperatedly, but to Steve's relief, he doesn't sound the slightest upset. If anything, he sounds...pleasantly surprised, which makes the chill ease from around Steve's heart as had it just been blasted away by an industrial heat gun.

He still has absolutely no idea about what to do next, though. His body feels close to petrified where he stands, with Bucky's fingers still circling his wrists in an iron grip. He doesn't know what to say, what to do, or even if it would be okay for him to move yet.

His brain is still working through the endorphins of the kiss, and so, when he opens his mouth, the first dazed words that come over his lips just ends up being the current thing running through his head.

“I've never kissed anyone with a tongue piercing before.”

Hearing his voice, Bucky raises his head and sends Steve a smug glance from underneath his bangs.

“Any thoughts?” he asks, and Steve swallows. Bucky's still hasn't let him go yet, and it makes Steve feel as if they're holding hands for some reason.

“It was...strange,” he confesses. “In a good way, I mean.”

“So you liked it?” Bucky asks, and the smug, almost proud way he says it, threatens to make Steve blush in spite of himself.

“Yeah, it— It was nice,” Steve ends lamely, flustered beyond belief beneath Bucky's scrutinizing gaze. Bucky looks at him, and then cants his head a little to the side as he gives Steve a second glance, straightening up.

“Good to know,” he says calmly, and oh, dear god, Steve can't think. He can't think!

“I—” What should he even say? Should he say anything? Bucky just frenched him, for Christ's sake! His gay, hotter-than-hell flatmate just gave Steve what had to have been the best kiss he's experienced in his life, and Steve doesn't have a clue what the correct social protocols have to say about this.

Do they discuss it? Pretend that it never happened? Does it mean anything, or is Steve the only one currently freaking out over what they just did? What exactly did they do? What the hell just happened?

He swallows, licking his lips, and flicks his gaze upwards. The mistletoe is still hanging, innocent and green above their heads, dangling from its red string. When Steve looks back down, he sees that Bucky's eyeing the plant as well, and his heart immediately gives a nervous clench.

“You want me to take it down?” It's the only thing he can think of to ask, because asking for anything else right now might give him too much or too little of what he's prepared to hear.

Slowly, Bucky lowers his gaze, looking Steve in the eye.

“Nah,” he says while stepping back a little. “Leave it.” He raises a warning finger towards Steve’s face. “Just don't expect that to happen again, just because I let you keep that green junk in the house.”
“Okay,” Steve says, feeling his heart sink a little, at the same time as his body relaxes in relief. He finds that it's a horribly contradicting state of mind to be in.

“I mean, you're cute and all,” Bucky adds, stepping backwards into the living room, leaving the doorway, “but you're not that cute.”

“Was that a compliment or an insult?” Steve says with an offended huff that's only half-pretend.

“Take your pick,” Bucky suggests. “Whichever makes you feel better, I guess.”

“Sure,” Steve says. “I'll do that.”

Bucky's lip quirks up into a little smile, and then he turns his back to Steve as he heads over to flop down on top of the couch.

While his back is turned, Steve sends the mistletoe another long look, for a moment having trouble deciding whether he loves or hates the damn thing.

Oh, well, he decides. At least he can say he won the bet…

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading guys <3

You're more than welcome to follow me on tumblr if you want, and for those of you who use it, I'm also on Twitter. Feel free to drop me a line! :)

Until tomorrow! <3
Sunday, December 11th

Steve is torn. It's been three days since he and Bucky shared that single, competitive kiss underneath the mistletoe, and even though he's tried, Steve still can't make up his mind regarding his opinions on the aftermath.

Bucky seems a lot more relaxed around him now, as if the kiss tore down some sort of personal restriction about physical contact between the two of them. Now, Steve can be busy chopping vegetables for dinner, and suddenly, Bucky's just there, draping himself against his back with both arms slung around his neck like a giant toddler looking for a piggy back ride.

And when they're on the couch, watching TV, Steve can suddenly find himself with either Bucky's feet or head firmly placed upon his own lap, as if either of them being there is the most natural thing in the world.

Steve's not complaining, of course not. For him, having Bucky behaving with such familiarity and comfort around him is almost the same as when a feral cat suddenly decides to trust you after months of hissing and growling.

That said, it's still...unsettling. Not because of Bucky, oh no. It's Steve that's the problem. Steve, who's heart won't stop pounding whenever he feels the touch of Bucky's hands on his shoulders. Steve's stomach that won't stop twisting in on itself with all kind of emotions when Bucky gives a
loud laugh from his end of the couch at something they just saw on the TV. Steve's knees, which go weak and trembly whenever Bucky looks at him for just a second too long, or a fraction of a bit more intensely than usual.

That's the problem, and Steve doesn't know what to do about it.

Because they're all pleasant feelings. Addictively so. And Steve hates it.

He hates it, because this was not the way things were supposed to go. He was supposed to take Bucky home, offer him a place to stay, help him get a job and then that would be it. Sure, they'd stay in touch and maybe talk from time to time, but… Now, Steve finds himself sitting there on the couch with Bucky's head in his lap, daydreaming about a future where Bucky doesn't leave. Where maybe, he does find a job, and then continues to live in Steve's apartment. Only it would be their apartment.

And Bucky wouldn't be sleeping in the office anymore, oh no. He'd be sleeping next to Steve, in Steve's big bed, with his arms wrapped around Steve's body and his head resting against Steve's chest throughout the night. So close, closer than he is now, right up against Steve's very skin, and Steve loathes himself for even entertaining such a thought.

He can't help but think that maybe Bucky had been right. That he is too noble. Too righteous and miserably devoted to do the right thing to allow himself such fantasies – however innocent they might be.

He feels dirty, like a creep, because even if Bucky will deny it to the end of his days, the truth still is that Bucky is in a very vulnerable space right now. He's dependant on Steve. For food, clothes, and shelter, and no matter how much Steve would want it, he just can't bring himself to reciprocate Bucky's intimacy.

Because to him, resting his head in Bucky's lap wouldn't be platonic, just as wrapping his arms around the other man's body wouldn't just be a touch shared between friends. Truth is, Steve doesn't trust himself enough to do something like that. Because should his discipline falter, then suddenly their situation will undoubtedly end up a whole lot more complicated and awkward than anything Bucky might be able to create for Steve on his own.

Steve wants, of course he does, but as long as Bucky is there as his guest, under his protection, he can't allow himself the indulgence.

But it's hard, especially with the way Bucky keeps warming up towards him. In fact, Bucky appears to have warmed up to a lot of things since the moment Steve decided to decorate the rest of his apartment…

Just the other day, for instance, Steve caught Bucky humming along with a Christmas song playing on the radio while making breakfast, swaying along to the beat while putting butter on his morning toast.

Steve is also pretty sure he saw him smiling at a Christmas themed commercial on TV the other night. Not sarcastically, or even mockingly, but a genuine, amused smile. And as if that wasn't enough, Bucky has also begun to remind Steve about the fact that they've forgotten to light the Christmas lights in the living room window whenever Steve doesn't light them quick enough, once the sun goes down.

Steve doesn't say anything about any of it, though. If Bucky has actually begun to enjoy Christmas, then Steve is not gonna ruin it all by doing something as crass as to call him out on it.
At least, that's what he thinks, until he walks into the living room on Sunday afternoon, only to find Bucky stretched out in the middle of the couch with a carton of eggnog in front of him on the coffee table, an amused smile on his lips, and the second *Home Alone* movie playing on the TV.

The sight has Steve freezing, mid-step in the door to the hallway, staring at the scene before him with his mouth hanging open.

On the screen, one of Kevin’s traps sends a vicious electric shock through half of the burglar duo, and Bucky snickers to himself as he takes another sip out of the glass of eggnog in his hand.

“Having fun?” Steve asks sweetly, and dear Lord, Bucky nearly comes flying off his seat with how high he jumps from the sound of Steve's voice.

“Jesus *fuck*—!” Bucky slumps back against the armrest with a groan, glaring at Steve as Steve walks up to flop down on the seat next to him. “You're such a dick,” he accuses. “Damn, you scared me.”

“Yeah, I noticed,” Steve says with an amused smirk. “For a moment there, I thought you were gonna bust a hole in the ceiling.”

“Ha ha, very funny,” Bucky scoffs.

Steve looks at him, and then glanced down at the drink still in Bucky's hand.

“Treating yourself this early?” he asks.

“Nah, there’s no booze in it,” Bucky says, sloshing the liquid around. “I'm not much for getting drunk in the middle of the day.”

“I thought straight eggnog was too sweet for you?” Steve pries curiously.


“Just like the Christmas lights aren’t all that bad?”

“So?” Bucky defends himself. “They're pretty. Nothing wrong with a— Why are you looking at me like that?” he asks, frowning when Steve struggles to keep his facial expression under control. “Oh, shut up,” he then grumbles, setting his eggnog down on the table when he catches on to Steve's point.

“Just admit that you like it,” Steve coaxes, but when Bucky doesn't answer, he laughs, abandoning the subject while shoving himself further onto the couch. “Scoot, will ya,” he orders.

“Hn, you'd wish,” Bucky grunts.

“C’mon,” Steve pleads. “I was just teasing you. Besides, you've got plenty of room on your left.” Bucky groans, but moves nonetheless. He lies down, and Steve does the same on the other end, so that they end up lying head to foot. The peace, however, is temporary.

“God, you need to change your socks,” Bucky gruffs as he pushes at Steve's feet so that they drop off the end of the couch.

“They’re brand new. I just showered,” Steve objects, putting the feet back up.

“Then I guess it's just you that's smelly,” Bucky says with a grimace, and Steve takes revenge by
shoving his foot even closer to Bucky's face. He knows for a fact that his socks, feet, and general self don’t smell like anything but newly-washed clothes and towelied skin, and that Bucky's just looking for a way to get back at him for calling him out on his little moment of Christmas cheer. Still, he can't help the little stab of self-consciousness that hits his insides when Bucky gives a loud choking noise and shoves his feet away for a second time, grimacing as if he's gonna puke.

“Fine, whatever, you big baby,” Steve complains as he tucks his legs up against his body. His act of kindness is rewarded by the blunt stab of Bucky's toes, as Bucky immediately stretches out and tries to worm his naked – and very cold – feet in behind Steve's back to gain more space to lounge on.

“Oh, c'mon ,” Steve complains loudly, arching his back to get away from the icy digits curling against his lower back. He aims a shallow kick against Bucky's thigh with the heel of his foot, upon which Bucky retaliates by wiggling his feet in underneath Steve's butt in an attempt to make him squirm away.

“Stop it!” Steve snickers, pinching the muscle of Bucky's calf, and Bucky quickly retracts the leg with a short yelp and an offended glare.

“I was here first,” he argues, upon which Steve sits up with a wide eyed stare and slack jaw.

“I'm sorry, who do you think paid for this couch?” he counters.

“Give me a break,” Bucky grumbles while poking at the back of Steve's thigh with his foot. “You probably got it from a friend, or something ridiculously decent like that.”

“I still pay rent for the room it's in,” Steve points out while slapping the top of said foot with his hand.

“Oh, right , hit me with the rent card ,” Bucky mocks. “Sure, why not.” He angles his leg, and Steve has to grab around the cushion not to get promptly pushed off the couch when Bucky’s knee shoves against his butt.

“You deserve it for being such a jerk ,” he grunts, twisting his body around. He lands on top of Bucky's leg, and presses his weight down until Bucky retrieves the limb with a light glare.

“Fuck, you're such a whiny bitch,” Bucky groans, giving up the fight by standing up from the couch altogether. Steve looks on as he then stretches his arms up over his head with a yawn, but quickly averts his eyes when the action causes Bucky's shirt to ride up and reveal a large portion of the other man's hipbones.

“I'm gonna take a leak,” Bucky announces. “When I get back, my seat better not be taken.”

“No refunds,” Steve says flatly and promptly stretches his limbs out all over the couch.

“Punk,” Bucky mutters under his breath, and Steve grins widely as the other disappears down the hallway towards the bathroom. Upon hearing lock being turned, Steve reaches out and steals a mouthful out of Bucky's eggnog, smiling when he confirms that yup, it is indeed just eggnog in there.

On the TV, the burglars are still looking for a way to catch their adolescent nemesis, and Steve watches the movie while lying contently on his side with his feet dangling over the edge of the couch. He is still lying like that when Bucky returns from the bathroom, and Bucky stops next to Steve’s head to look down at him with his arms pointedly crossed over his chest.
He stands there for almost a full minute, just looking at him, but when Steve doesn't acknowledge his presence, he rolls his eyes to the ceiling with a sigh. “Could you move your legs up?” he asks flatly.

“No,” Steve responds without even looking away from the screen.


“Take the armchair.”

“I don't want the armchair, I want the couch.”

“Not gonna happen.”

"Fine."

Next thing, the air is squashed out of Steve's lungs with a wheeze as Bucky plants himself, butt first, right on top of his ribcage.

“Oh, god,” Steve groans, twisting around to lie on his back with a grunt, still with Bucky's weight on his chest. “You're getting fat, pal.”

“It's all muscle,” Bucky assures him, right before wedging himself down even further, undoubtedly just to make Steve more uncomfortable.

“Then how about you move your muscle-y ass away from my chest?” Steve groans while shoving pointedly at Bucky's hip.

“No,” Bucky grunts back while just as insistently not budging, and all right, if that's the game they're gonna play…!

Steve promptly bulldozes Bucky off his lap with both hands as he forcibly sits up, and Bucky lands on his side on the couch with a low oomph, with Steve kneeling behind the back of his thighs.

He doesn't stay down long, however, and Steve has to tilt his hips in towards the backrest of the couch, lest he wanna recieve a knee to the groin as Bucky flips around to sit back up. This, in turn, causes Steve to end up wedged in between Bucky and the couch, and as Bucky pushes in with his back, Steve pushes out with his, creating some sort of horizontal, side-by-side battle for leverage.

“Jesus Christ, you have the stabbiest ass this side of Brooklyn,” Bucky grunts while bracing his foot against the opposite armrest.

“Excuse you,” Steve huffs, “it's perky, not stabby.”

“Whatever, it's literally drilling a hole into my thigh,” Bucky groans. “Move over.”

“No, you move,” Steve argues.

“Fucking make me.”

At that, Steve shoves his elbow against the back of Bucky’s ribs, and Bucky responds by letting up on the resistance completely by sitting up, which sends Steve crashing down onto his back on top of the seat once more. Bucky quickly utilizes the situation, and straddles Steve across the waist with a victorious, “Hah!”, and when Steve tries to sit up, Bucky easily shoves him back down again.
Just like that, their pushes and shoves turn into wrestling, and Steve immediately finds himself in a less than favorable position, seeing as Bucky already has the higher ground.

“Get off me!” he demands, laughing as he aims another playful, yet still very hard, shove towards Bucky’s side. Bucky quickly grabs for his arms to stop him, and Steve actually manages to stay free long enough to get another good jab in on Bucky's abs before Bucky catches him by the wrists and pins them down on either side of Steve's head.

“Gotcha!” he triumphs with a snicker while Steve pulls against the restraints, without much success. Damn, Bucky’s stronger than he remembers.

“This is cheating,” Steve accuses.

“No, it’s not,” Bucky pants, grinning down at him. “You’re just a sore loser.”

Steve opens his mouth, the witty retort to help ease his wounded pride already at the tip of his tongue, when suddenly he freezes. Just like that, he feels as if the air has been squeezed out of his lungs all over again as he stares up at Bucky’s face. Bucky’s face, which is suddenly, so close.

Jesus, when did he get so close?

Steve can feel the warm puffs of the other’s breath beat against his mouth with every exhale Bucky makes, and Steve’s heart stutters inside his chest as his gaze drops to look at the black gleams of metal embedded in the other man’s lips.

He knows the taste of those lips, and right now, his entire soul is experiencing a violent craving for that taste once more. Inside his head, he sees himself break free from the other’s grip to reach up and grab around the back of Bucky’s head, pulling him down, and his stomach makes a violent twist inside his gut as he imagines the sound of Bucky’s moan shake its way down his lungs when their lips meet.

Somehow, he manages to tear his eyes away, bringing them back up, but it provides with little refuge. Instead of that intoxicating mouth, he finds himself staring into the gray depths of Bucky’s eyes, and he realizes with a start that Bucky’s gone quiet.

He is not laughing anymore, and he looks down at Steve as if he’s just realized where they are, and just like Steve, how close they’ve gotten. As Steve watches, Bucky’s eyes make a quick swoop across Steve’s face, down to where Bucky’s thighs are still pressed in tight against the sides of Steve’s chest.

Then, Bucky looks back up, locking onto Steve’s gaze, and slowly begins to lean down.

Steve panics. His heart clenches as the icy cold rush of dread overflows his system, locking his limbs up. They can’t. It’s the only consistent thought he can will forth. Bucky is his flatmate, his friend, they can’t!

The desire is still there, and Steve wants, he wants so badly, but he can’t allow himself to follow it. This is not the time. Not now, not here. Not while Bucky is still so dependant on Steve’s mercy to stay safe and sheltered – it wouldn’t be right.

And so, when Bucky moves down, his intentions laid bare and open, Steve flinches, and Bucky stops.

For a few, heart wrenchingly long seconds, they stay like that, frozen. Their faces are mere inches apart, and Steve swallows so hard it hurts his throat. He wants to say he’s sorry, that he would want
nothing more than to let Bucky do this, but he can’t make a sound. And so, he just watches as Bucky’s face drops, just a little, and then how the other sits back up again, his eyes never leaving Steve’s own.

Steve can barely bring himself to breathe as he waits for whatever’s about to happen next, and then Bucky sighs, breaking the tension by letting one of Steve’s hands go in favor of pushing the side of Steve’s face into the couch cushion below.

“You’re such a punkass bitch,” he mutters with a snorted laugh, and Steve lets out a breath held so tight the rush of it leaving his lungs feels downright euphoric. Bucky looks disappointed, but at least he doesn’t appear to be hurt, which is always something. Steve still mourns the moment lost, but at the same time he’s terribly relieved that Bucky seems to have decided not to call him out in it.

“Maybe I am,” he says cockily as he continues the conversation without missing a beat, “but at least I’m still lying on the couch.”

At that, Bucky pinches his lips together, and Steve ignores the excited flip his insides make when Bucky narrows his eyes at him.

“Not for long, you not,” he decides. Then, he dives down and digs his fingers into Steve's sides, and Steve chokes on his own breath with a panicked cry when the tickling sensation slams through his nerve endings. He tries to twist away, but he can’t. Bucky’s body still sits like a dead weight on top of his stomach, and god, it’s not fair, it’s so not fair!

Panting and choking on his own laughter, Steve tries to retaliate by tickling Bucky in the sides, but nothing happens.

“Sorry, Stevie,” Bucky says, grinning as his fingers wiggle their way up underneath Steve’s arm pits to provoke another fit of laughter, “not ticklish there.”

There. Steve latches onto the word, trying to focus his hysterical mind on its meaning. Not ticklish there. Which means that Bucky is ticklish – Steve just needs to find the right spot. Desperately, he begins to paw across Bucky’s chest, making an attempt to squeeze and dig his fingers in anywhere he can reach. Nothing works, and Jesus Christ, he can’t breathe!

“Stop it,” Bucky orders, grinning as Steve drops his hands down to grasp around Bucky’s hips. Steve, naturally, doesn’t listen – isn’t capable to, really – and in return, Bucky increases the intensity of the fingers pushing against Steve’s ribs.

Then, as by some miracle, Steve manages to get a hold around the back of Bucky's thighs, and the action is immediately rewarded by the glorious sound of Bucky dragging in a startled gasp.

“Gotcha...!” Steve pants through gritted teeth, and he just manages to catch the look of absolute dread on Bucky’s face before Steve digs his fingers into the thick muscle, sending Bucky howling.

“Stop!” he cries, and his fingers leave Steve’s body to tear at the hands moving to assault the back of his knees. Steve immediately uses the opening to sit back up. Gaining leverage, he manages to cast Bucky off of him and down onto the opposite end of the couch, still without letting up on the grip of his legs.

Bucky immediately begins to worm around, kicking wildly in his attempts to get away, but Steve has other plans. He lets go of Bucky’s right knee, giving the other a glimmer of hope before wrapping his entire arm around both the legs instead, holding them in place as the fingers of his other hand scribbles over the soles of Bucky’s naked, defenseless feet.
Bucky downright shrieks, and Steve really has to fight in order to keep the struggling man in place as Bucky begins to kick and flail in his urgency to escape.

“Stop it!” he chokes. “Ste— No! No, not the— Stop!”

“Not until you give!” Steve shouts back.

“I give!” Bucky blubbers, “I give, fuck, I give!”

“Who’s couch is this?” Steve demands, grinning as Bucky lets out a wailing laugh when Steve digs his thumb into the space right beneath the other’s big toe.

“Yours!” Bucky howls, “It’s yours, goddamnit!”

Grinning victoriously, Steve lets up on the grip around the other’s legs, and Bucky pulls himself free with a gasp for air. The end of his dogtag necklace is dangling from one of the rings in his lip, and Steve grins as he watches the other try to unhook it while sitting up at the same time.

“And don’t you forget it,” he reprimands, pointing a warning finger in Bucky’s disheveled direction, before flopping down onto his back against the armrest with an exhausted sigh. He has barely had time to catch his breath before Bucky turns around to face him, free from the metal chain which is now back at its normal spot hanging around his neck, and Steve immediately tenses in preparation for another attack. Sensing his suspicion, Bucky sits back on his heels, holding both hands up, palms out while kneeling on the couch.


Steve lets out a slow, discreet breath, and Bucky leans down on all fours to crawl up the length of the couch. Steve sits up against the armrest and is already halfway through the motion of creating more space for Bucky’s body when, instead of lying down next to him, Bucky simply drapes himself over Steve’s chest with a throaty groan.

For a moment, Steve freezes while his brain goes off to at least a hundred inappropriate places all at once. When Bucky’s only further action is to fold his arms over Steve’s chest, however, he relaxes, sinking down into the cushions once more.

“Jerk,” he mumbles under his breath.

“Punk,” Bucky shoots back. Raising his head, he props himself up on one arm in order to snatch the controller to the TV off the coffee table with the other. Lowering the volume of the movie to a murmur, he then tosses the device back before returning to his original position on top of Steve chest, snuggling closer and burying his face against the fabric of Steve’s shirt with a content sigh.

Steve swallows as he looks down at the top of Bucky’s head, and slowly, he reaches out to play with a few of the dark strands while letting the silk of them slide between his fingers. He knows that he probably shouldn’t do it, but when Bucky’s response to the touch is to hum against Steve’s chest, he makes the selfish decision that a little intimacy can’t hurt.

“You’ve got split ends,” he murmurs. “You should get it cut.”

“No way,” Bucky shoots back drowsily. The corners of his mouth then twitch up into a smirk as he adds, “I might end up looking like you.”

“You don’t have to cut it off,” Steve objects with a smile. “Just trim it. It’s healthy.”
“Whatever you say,” Bucky murmurs, and Steve chuckles and tips his head back against the armrest with another deep exhale of air.

The weight of Bucky’s body is warm, the steady pace of his breathing calming, and without even noticing it happen, with his fingers still tangled in the strands of the other man’s hair, Steve falls asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you again for reading guys, you are all so lovely <3
If you feel like it, you're more than welcome to follow me on tumblr, or on Twitter. My inbox is always open, and you're more then free to message me if you want! :)

Until tomorrow! Love you! <3
Monday, December 12th

Steve hoists the grocery bag up higher against his shoulder while he fiddles with the keys to the apartment door. He knows that technically he hadn’t needed to lock it when he left since Bucky’s still home, but old habits die hard, and the locking part had just happened on reflex when Steve left the apartment.

Somehow, he manages to get the door unlocked and open without dropping his bag on the floor. Once he gets inside, he kicks the door closed with his foot, and then carefully sets the bag down to untie his boots.

“I’m back!” he calls out. He doesn’t expect an answer, and so he’s actually a bit surprised by the grunted out, “Hey,” that he gets in return. Steve can hear Bucky move around inside the living room, and he wonders to himself if the other is cleaning again. Bucky’s been doing that a lot lately. Steve suspects that it’s some sort of domestic nesting ritual, and he’s really tried not to read too much into that, even though his fluttering heart goes near ballistic every single time it occurs.

He hangs up his jacket and scarf while toeing his boots off, and then he picks up the bag, heading around the corner. There, he stops, unable to move as much as an inch.

He knows that his jaw drops, and he’s fully aware of the fact that he probably made some sort of noise just now, but it doesn’t matter.
It doesn't matter, because Bucky is standing in the middle of the living room, shirtless with his hair tied back, and with two dumbbell weights raised over his head, pumping them up and down, and Steve. Can't. Look. Away.

It's mesmerizing, the way the muscles of the other's arms and chest tenses and bulges from the effort of lowering and lifting the weights, over and over. A fine trail of sweat has found its way down the side of Bucky’s neck, forming a little stream that runs along the span of his clavicle, down across the tattoo on his chest. Steve can only pray that the sight of it doesn't make him look as parched as he currently feels.

Steve watches as Bucky lifts the weights one more time with a low grunt, and then bends over to set them down on the floor next to the couch.

“Home already?” Bucky asks, and Steve makes damn sure to swallow down the croak threatening to tear his voice in half before he answers.

“Yeah,” he says, struggling to keep his eyes where they belong. “The line at the store wasn't that long.”

“Huh,” Bucky huffs. “Well, that's always good.”

“Yeah,” Steve agrees. He wants to say something else, wants to keep the conversation going, but as Bucky turns away with a lazy stretch of his arms over his head, he finds himself at a loss for words.

The ink on Bucky's skin nearly comes alive from the sheen of sweat covering his body, and Steve can feel his fingers twitch around the paper bag in his hand when Bucky leans down to grab a glass of water and a towel from the coffee table. Bucky drags a hand up across his forehead to brush away some of the loose strands of his bangs that have fallen into his eyes, and then he tips his head back and drinks, slinging the towel around his neck.

Steve swears, he has never felt so thirsty in his entire life.

“I see you found my weights,” he manages, quickly setting the bag of groceries down on the table before he ends up dropping them.

“Yeah,” Bucky confesses cheerfully. “They were in the office closet. I found them when I went to put my clothes in from the laundry. I hope you don't mind?”

“No,” Steve assures him, because oh, does he not mind. “Not at all. Nice to know someone's using them.”

Bucky takes a final swig out of the glass, and then uses the towel to wipe himself down. Steve struggles not to follow the route of the fabric as it swipes over two well shaped pecs, down defined abs to eventually flutter against the ridge of an absolutely gorgeous hip bone, but it's hard. Oh, it's so hard.

“You know, I've been meaning to ask,” Steve says, masking his stare by nodding towards the tattoos on Bucky’s body when Bucky turns around to look at him. “Do the rest of them mean anything? I know the sleeve does, but I'm curious about the others.”

Bucky lowers the towel, and Steve gestures to the tattoo on his chest. “Like that one,” he says. “Why a quote? What does it say?”

Turning his head down, Bucky drags his fingers over the letters on his chest. “It's no use going
“back to yesterday, because I was a different person then,” he recites. “It’s a Lewis Carrol quote.”

“Lewis—” Steve smiles. “Wait, as in an Alice quote?”

“Yeah.”

“Alice in Wonderland?” Steve clarifies with a grin.

“No, yeah, I’m not questioning that,” Steve defends himself. “I just didn’t think you were into… classics.”

“You mean children’s stories?” Bucky smiles, and Steve shrugs.

“Yeah, all right,” he admits, “children’s stories.”

Bucky looks amused, and Steve needs to stop and think for a moment in order to decide which is the most nerve wracking; to look at Bucky’s face or his naked chest.

“I picked it because it felt relevant to me at the time,” Bucky explains fondly, still smoothing his fingertips over the quote. God, Steve thinks, why does he have to touch himself so much? “I wanted to leave my old life behind in a way, and…well, this sort stuck with me. Like a chant, if you will.”

“That sounds sad,” Steve murmurs, glancing towards the exploding grenade-heart next to the cursive text.

“Yeah, it kinda was,” Bucky admits. “Good thing times change. Hence this one,” he continues, pointing to the inside of his right arm, and the heart rate monitor line scribbled there, “I got it sometime later.”

“What does that one say?” Steve asks, canting his head to read the words

"Til the end of the line", Bucky quotes.

“Meaning?” Steve prompts.

“Don’t give up,” Bucky says simply. “No matter how hard things get. Don’t make compromises, and never forget who you are or where you come from.”

Steve nods. He looks at the quote again, and just like that, he realises what kind of line the tattoo is talking about. A flatline. He has to admit, as simple as the quote is, the depth of it surely is something else entirely.

“The phoenix is the most recent,” Bucky says with a nonchalant gesture towards his back. “Paid for it with the money I got from working at the factory. At the time, I thought I had found myself a brand new starting point. I had a job, and more money than I’d owned in years. A phoenix seemed fitting, but when the factory closed, I— Well, let’s just say I got a bit disappointed.”

“I can imagine,” Steve answers truthfully. He looks up, meeting Bucky’s gaze. He smiles. “Good thing times change, huh?” he echoes with a gesture towards the apartment, and Bucky’s lip twitches up into a smirk.

Without answering, he turns around, stretching his arms over his head once again with an intoxicating groan. “I’m gonna head into the shower,” he announces before nodding towards the
weights sitting on the floor. “I was thinking I could keep those out here by the couch, if that's okay? I sort of wanna get a routine started.”

“Sure,” Steve says. He tries to sound as indifferent to the suggestion as he can, but the very thought about Bucky making a routine of walking around shirtless in Steve's apartment is almost more than his poor brain can handle right now.

Bucky doesn't react to his one word answer. He just takes the glass out into the kitchen and puts it in the sink, and then heads towards the bathroom, passing Steve with the groceries in the doorway.

Steve tries not to think about how close the surface of Bucky’s naked skin gets to his own arm as the other walks past him. It's a stupid thing to think about, and an even dumber thing to linger on. He is relieved when the sound of the bathroom door closing reaches his ears, and the cool air flowing over him while he sorts the groceries into the fridge feels like a soothing blessing on his skin.

When Bucky returns from the shower – once again fully clothed, to Steve combined disappointment and relief – Steve's sitting in the armchair, zapping through the channels of the TV. He doesn't notice the little plastic bag in Bucky's hand until Bucky sets it down with a metallic little jingle on the surface of the coffee table, pulling at Steve's attention.

“Whatcha got there?” Steve asks as he turns away from the TV to look on as Bucky digs his hand into the bag, rustling the content around.

“My piercings,” Bucky informs him.

“You've got that many?” Steve asks, craning his neck to see better.

“A few. They're not that expensive, and it feels nice to switch them out every once in awhile.”

“Are those for your ears or your lips?” Steve asks, pointing towards a set of plain, black studs.

“Lips,” Bucky answers. “You can tell, because they're flat on the back.”

“Doesn't it feel weird?” Steve asks carefully. “To have holes there? I mean, aren't you afraid you're gonna...leak?”

“What, like mouth incontinence?” Bucky asks with an amused chuckle as he plays with the jewelry on the table. “Not really. Even if I take them out, the holes more or less seal themselves shut.” He looks up at Steve, grinning. “But if I want to, I can use them to make two pretty impressive water squirts.”

“For real?” Steve asks.

“Oh, yeah,” Bucky insists. “At least one and a half feet.”

Steve hangs his head down and shakes it slowly with an amused chuckle, but when he straightens up again he suddenly frowns as his gaze drifts back up to Bucky's face.

“What the hell did you do to your ears?” he asks, staring at the big, rounded holes in Bucky’s earlobes.

“What are you talking about?” Bucky huffs. “I haven't done anything?”

Bucky frowns, but then he seems to catch onto what Steve's talking about and reaches up to touch the left lobe with a smile.

“These?” he asks. “They look like this when I take the stretchers out.” When Steve makes a squicked-out face, he lets out another offended snort. “Don't look so freaked out, they're only zero gauge. It's practically nothing.”

“Doesn't it hurt?” Steve asks, leaning around the armrest to look at the closest ear better, and in return, Bucky raises an eyebrow at him.

“Have you been living underneath a rock or something for the past years?” he asks. “It's not like it's a new thing.”

“No, I just—I've never actually seen it before.” He peers at Bucky's ears. “What does it feel like?” he asks.

“You can touch if you want,” Bucky offers and Steve shudders, leaning back into his chair.

“No, thank you,” he says. “It looks too weird.”

“C'mon, it's just an ear,” Bucky prompts. Without waiting for an answer, he leans forward, canting his head towards Steve. “Go on, touch it.”

Steve hesitates, and then he reaches out and slides the pad of his index finger against the slightly furled edges of the hole.

“Oh, god, that feels so weird,” he whimpers, and Bucky chuckles.

“If you put some effort into it, you can fit the tip of your pinkie in there,” he informs Steve with a grin, and Steve immediately pulls his hand back with another grossed-out noise in the back of his throat.

“I didn't even know you had stretchers,” he says, and Bucky sits up to stare at him.

“I've been living here for nearly a month,” he gapes, “how can you not have noticed?”

“I thought they were normal studs, okay?” Steve defends himself. “Just… you know, really large ones. I don't walk around inspecting what kind of earrings you have.”

At that, Bucky laughs, and Steve looks on as he reaches into the bag to pull out what looks like two rings, which are both flared at the ends. They're black, but just like the rings in Bucky's lip, obviously made out of some sort of metal.

“These are tunnels,” Bucky explains, holding one of them up. The ones I wore before are called plugs. See the difference?”

Steve nods as Bucky takes the tunnel in his hand and firmly threads it into the hole in his ear.

“How do you get those in there in the first place?” Steve asks, looking on as Bucky moves on to repeat the process on the other ear.

“Cooking oil,” Bucky says, shrugging. “Conditioner. Lube. Anything with a good glide works just fine.”

“You put lube in your ears?” Steve says, grinning shamelessly, and Bucky rolls his eyes to the ceiling with a superior huff.
“Well, obviously not anymore,” he points out. “That shit’s just for when they’re new and you need to get them in there for the first time. You should use proper ointment, really, just in case the skin tears, but I couldn't afford that, so I took what I had. And for your information,” he adds, “I used olive oil.

“Really?” Steve asks with a snicker. “I thought you were more of a KY kind of guy rather than extra virgin.”

“Well, at least I know I'm gonna lock up the olive oil from now on,” Steve mutters under his breath. Bucky laughs at him, and then they both fall silent as they turn their attention back to the TV.

Inside Steve’s head, however, the unobstructed view of Bucky's naked torso is still playing in a bittersweet loop before his inner eye. Even though he tries to focus, he can honestly say that he's never had such trouble paying attention to television before in his life.

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It's nearly midnight when Steve finally decides to give up. He can't sleep. He's been awake for hours, and the blissful unconsciousness of slumber still eludes him.

His mind is filled with so many thoughts, he can nearly feel his skull expand from the pressure, and at the very centre of all his troubles, is one James Buchanan “Bucky” Barnes…

Seriously, out of all the things he had been afraid might happen when he opened up his home to that man, this so hadn't been on the cards! For some reason he feels both stupid and ignorant for not having considered the risk sooner. Bucky isn't exactly ugly, nor afraid to flaunt his physique, obviously. And Steve's always been a sucker for a pair of pretty eyes. Especially when they're paired up with a nice set of biceps to go with them.

God, how could he have let this happen? He wasn't supposed to get smitten with the guy, he was supposed to help him! And yet here he is, unable to get the thought of Bucky out of his goddamn head.

Bucky. Bucky, Bucky, Bucky…

How can such a cute, innocent nickname belong to such a sinfully handsome man? And why did that sinfully handsome man have to be someone Steve can't allow himself the luxury to indulge in?

Because Bucky is already at a disadvantage here. Living in Steve's house, eating his food, wearing clothes that Steve paid for… For Steve to initiate anything – even something as innocent as a kiss – would undoubtedly send out the wrong kind of signals.

He already screwed up with the mistletoe, and he can already see the change in Bucky's behaviour. Suddenly, Bucky acts as if Steve is expecting something more from him, and sure, Bucky has yet to show that he dislikes that expectancy, but that doesn't mean that he actually wants to do
anything.

If there's one thing Steve absolutely doesn't want, it is to make Bucky think that he owes Steve something in order to be allowed to stay.

And yet, he can't stop thinking about it.

He can't stop thinking about Bucky crowding him against the kitchen counter with that devilish smirk on his lips. Of Bucky, sliding his fingers down the front of Steve's pants, palming him through his jeans while purring sadistic, wonderful, dangerous promises into his ear. Just like he can't stop thinking about long, lazy days on the couch in front of the TV. Of Bucky, curled up tight against Steve's front while Steve gets to breathe in the calming scent of the other's hair in his sleep. Safe. Sound.

Domestic.

Jesus, Steve's so in love with him, it hurts his heart just thinking about it.

Three weeks. That's all it took. Three lousy weeks to render Steve a bumbling, rambling, lovesick idiot. There's still two more weeks left until Christmas, and with the way things are developing at the moment, Steve's not even sure if he'll be able to last another day.

The thought alone makes him groan, and he buries his face in the pillow with a frustrated whimper.

He has to talk to Bucky about it. He'd rather risk the humiliation of exposing his own feelings rather than have things go straight to hell, once his self restraint decides to snap.

He'll have to time it, though. Bucky has to be in a good mood, which, funnily enough, is pretty much all the time, nowadays. But he also has to be in the mood for that kind of serious talk. If Steve picks a bad moment, Bucky will just laugh it off and make some flirty remark about it all, which, consequently, will most likely only make Steve's situation even worse.

The problem?

A part of Steve doesn't really want to talk to Bucky about it. A part of Steve really, really, really just wants to grab Bucky by the shoulders and push him up against the nearest wall while hoping for the best. It's the same part that wants to lean in and kiss Bucky on the lips whenever the guy laughs at something silly on the TV, or wrap his arms around him whenever Bucky just happens to walk by.

Fuck, Steve is so screwed. He is pretty sure he's never been this screwed in his miserable life.

Groaning, he turns over onto his back to stare up at the ceiling. He's never been this awake in his entire life either. His body is tense, his head is pounding, and there's an insistent ache lodged right in the space in between his shoulder blades and ribs, as if he's been holding his breath for too long.

“I'm never gonna be able to fall asleep like this…” he mutters to himself. Decisively, he sits up and swings his legs over the edge of the bed, reaching down onto the floor to pull his discarded sweatpants back on.

A glass of water, he decides. That might help. And if that fails to cool him down, that's nothing a cold shower can't fix…

Carefully, he pushes the handle of his bedroom door down, and opens it. He knows how easily sound travels through the walls of his apartment, and he doesn't want to risk waking Bucky up by
rattling the door too loudly. As he takes his first step out into the hallway, however, it soon becomes evidently clear that he needn't have bothered.

He has barely gotten past the threshold of his own room before he stops dead, mid-step in the dark, as the sound of Bucky's voice reaches his ears.

It's soft, and barely audible, but the tone of it the leaves no doubt about what it is.

Moaning.

Steve doesn't get enough time. Not to think, to reason, or to even act, before the noise is heard again, just slightly louder. The resonance if it sends a ripple of sensations traveling down Steve's spine, and the heat that follows in its wake shoots straight southwards to pool in Steve's groin with an insistent throb.

Bucky is in his room, moaning in the middle of the night, and Steve doesn't have to be a fucking rocket scientist to realize what that means. He feels feverish, a cold sweat breaking out all over his body as Bucky's voice comes floating through the door from across the hallway for a third time, and then a fourth, followed closely by a fifth. He can't move, can barely breathe, and yet his pulse is thrumming through his veins with such force, he feels as if he's sprinting.

He clasps his hand in front of his mouth when the sixth moan stutters, and then he hears something that could have been a choked out curse just before a loud gasp cuts through the silence. Steve's stomach clenches hard as he listens to the sound of Bucky's climax, the drawn out groan coming from the other room making his head spin as he bites back the sound of his own moan behind his teeth.

The silence that follows is deafening. It smothers Steve’s brain, making him feel as if he's lost all his senses at once. Then he hears bedsprings creak, and the paralysis ends.

Staggering backwards, Steve flees back into his own bedroom. His hand shakes as he hurriedly shuts the door behind him, and as he feels the click through the handle telling him that the door is now closed, he quickly steps away from it, pulling at the hair at the top of his head with both hands.

Jesus Christ. He can't believe— Oh, dear god, what did he just—?!

He desperately tries to will his racing heartbeat down, but he can't. He just listened in on his flatmate *masturbating*. That's not right, that's… creepy!

Oh, no, was he creeping? Is that what he was doing? No, it couldn't have been, he hadn't done it on purpose. He hadn't even known Bucky was doing something like that at the time. He’d been taken by surprise, that's all!

Steve’s knees wobble as he sinks down on the edge of his bed, and he buries his face in his hands with a whimper.

He knows that he's got an erection, but he stubbornly refuses to acknowledge the hard on pressing up against the inside of his sweatpants. He can't. Bucky is his friend, he can't—

*It would just be a fantasy.*

He swallows hard as the unbidden thought enters his mind, feeling his resolve falter just slightly.

*A fantasy never hurt anybody. Bucky doesn't even have to find out. And what he doesn't know won't*
bother him. Right?

The stiff member in his pants gives an interested twitch as the concept takes hold, and Steve closes his eyes, falling back onto the mattress with a groan.

It's just a thought, he tells himself. It's not gonna change anything.

It's not gonna change the fact that Steve's still gonna wake up tomorrow and be hopelessly in love with the jerk sleeping across the hall. It's not gonna change the fact that Steve's heart is still gonna do a somersault inside his chest whenever Bucky as much as glances his way, and it's certainly not gonna do anything about the fact that Steve's still gonna want the other man so badly he'd gladly sell his soul for a single touch.

It's just a fantasy…

Steve surrenders. Whatever resistance he had left before is all gone now, washed away by the sound of Bucky's pleasure. Jesus, those sounds… Steve's not gonna be able to hear the other speak without sporting a semi in his pants ever again.

He crawls higher onto the bed, breath hitching when his cocks rubs up against the fabric of his clothes, and as Steve reaches down to palm himself through his pants, he closes his eyes, and thinks.

He thinks about Bucky's hair. His eyes. About the cruel, taunting lure of his lips and the way they curl up at the corners when he smiles. He thinks about the way Bucky's hair smells after he comes out of the shower. Still wet, and so good. Isn't it strange, he thinks, that even though they both use Steve's shampoo, the two of them still end up smelling nothing alike?

He pictures the way Bucky runs his fingers through those wet strands, about the way he fists the hair at the back of his head when he tries to solve a particularly tricky problem. He also recalls the way Bucky pulls at his lip piercings with his teeth whenever he's nervous or flustered. Or when he's being suggestive…

Steve gasps as he grips around himself through his sweats, recalling all the times Bucky has looked at him like that. With a sly gleam in his eyes and a telltale smirk on his lips.

And his hands… Oh, dear god, those hands…

So strong, yet so soft. With blunt nails and slender fingers, so capable of being both rough or tender, depending on the situation.

He can remember the way they had held him down just the other day. Digits clasped around his wrists while the weight of Bucky's body on top of his sent Steve’s blood pumping wildly. Bucky's body, so firm, so hot where it pushed against his… What if Steve had let Bucky kiss him then? What if he had just let it happen…?

He already knows what a kiss like that would have been like, but that doesn't stop the thought from being any less exciting. Just the feel of those metal hoops sliding against his lips while the stud of Bucky's tongue piercing clicks against the back of his teeth… The way Bucky would moan into the kiss, gasping and clutching around Steve's shoulders when Steve pushes his tongue into Bucky's mouth.

The memory of Bucky's voice from the hallway outside makes itself known, and Steve moans as he imagines what it would sound like in here inside his own bedroom. Imagines it vibrating against his lips, against his throat and neck as Bucky works his mouth down his chest, further down his
Steve's free hand comes up to fist in his hair as he groans under his breath, relishing in the fantasy. Bucky, on top of him, with his mouth inching further and further towards the bulge beneath Steve's hand.

It's more than he can handle – way past the point he thought he'd be able to get to, even – and as he imagines Bucky smirking up at him, he shoves his hand down the front of his pants.

Oh, he's not gonna last. This will be over in no time at all, but he doesn't want to hold back. He's been putting restraints on himself for so long, stopping now would be impossible anyway.

He can feel the white noise come rushing up his spine like a speeding train, and he clenches his eyes shut with a breathless gasp, jaw slack when the high hits his brain.

Bucky's name leaves his lips in a stuttered sigh, torn in half by his own ragged breathing as he feels himself spill over the fingers of his hand. He knows that he's making a mess out of his clothes, but he doesn't care – can't care – not with the mental image of Bucky's face, rapt with pleasure inside his head.

Afterwards, while his chest is still heaving and the world around him has yet to come to a standstill, Steve opens his eyes with a dazed sigh, glancing towards the door.

Twelve steps, he thinks.

That's the distance between Bucky's bed and his. Twelve steps, and he could be right there by Bucky's side.

*And yet, he thinks bitterly, here I am…*

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! <3

You're more than welcome to follow me on tumblr if you want, and for those of you who use it, I'm also on Twitter. Feel free to drop me a line! :)

Until tomorrow, sweeties! <3
Wednesday, December 14th

Staten Island Mall is indeed more crowded when they visit it this time around. There are people everywhere, and Steve can’t describe how relieved he is to have finished all of his Christmas shopping already. Well, except for one gift, as it turns out.

“It’s just so fucking annoying,” Bucky grumbles as they enter the mall. “We already wrapped it up and everything.”

“I know,” Steve soothes. “But the store can’t help that the factory screwed up. It’s been recalled, and I’m not giving Nat a faulty MP3 player for Christmas.”

“Yeah, I get it,” Bucky mutters with a sour glance at the bag in Steve’s hand. “It’s just that I put a lot of effort into that wrapping.”

“You can always do it again?” Steve suggests cheerfully.

“Fuck no,” Bucky snorts. “If those jerks are gonna open it, they better fucking hand me the new one wrapped up and ready to go. Or someone in this mall is going to end up having a very bad day at work.”

Steve laughs at Bucky’s threat. He very much doubts that Bucky would be impolite towards an innocent person on purpose. Yelling at store personnel would be one of those things that Bucky
would never stoop as low as to do. He wasn’t raised that way, and knowing exactly how much Bucky cares about his family values, Steve truly believes that he would rather cut off his left arm, rather than dishonor his parent’s memory.

Turns out that he’s absolutely right. The girl working the register when they get to the store is an absolute sweetheart, and when Steve hands over the already wrapped gift, she makes no attempt to hide her sympathy for them.

“Oh, and you already gift wrapped it and everything,” she says with a sympathetic wince, and Steve immediately sends Bucky a triumphant little smirk.

They browse the store for a new gift, but even though they both start off in the portable music department, Bucky is soon – slowly, but surely – hovering towards the smartphone shelf. Steve lets him. He doesn’t really need help finding a new mp3-player for Nat, anyway.

He glances over the shelves at Bucky, who is looking at a brand new iPhone through the protective glass casing of the display case. It’s close to surreal, to encounter a person in this age of technology, who doesn’t own a phone. Should be an impossibility, really… For a moment, Steve entertains the thought of actually buying Bucky one for Christmas, but he abandons the idea just as quickly as it arrives. A phone is too expensive, and would without a doubt only cause Bucky to freak out with worry over Steve’s personal economy rather than joy.

Instead, Steve goes back to his original quest, and he’s just about to look closer at an iPod when his own phone goes off with a chime inside his pocket. He pulls the phone out, and smiles when he sees the name that’s lighting up the screen.

Speak of the devil.

“Hey, Nat,” he greets as he answers the call.


“Nothing,” Steve retorts with a smile. “Just picking up your Christmas present. Nothing important.”

“Oh,” Natasha says, intrigued. “Where are you?”

“At a mall. Somewhere in the vicinity of New York,” Steve answers calmly. “C’mon, you’ve gotta work harder than that.”

“It was worth a try,” Nat defends herself, before continuing, “So, are you there by yourself? Wherever there is?”

“Hey, Steve, check this out.”

Steve looks up and over at Bucky, who is holding up what Steve registers to be a pair of silver and white headphones a few aisles over, decorated with big, LED-lighted cat ears up top.

“Put those things back immediately,” he orders with an appalled grimace, and Bucky grins as he does as he’s told.

“Who was that?” Nat asks through the phone. “Sam?”

“Not really,” Steve says, trying to avoid answering, but Nat just lets out an amused sound from the other end of the line. “Steve Rogers, are you on a date?” she gloats loudly, and Steve
automatically lowers his voice into a whisper.

“It’s not like that,” he tells her firmly.

“Sure it isn’t,” Nat agrees. “What’s his name?”

“None of your business.”

“Really?” Nat asks dryly. “You’re gonna go all secretive on me?”

“Yes, I am,” Steve answers, looking up as Bucky comes sauntering back down the aisle towards him. “Listen, I’ve gotta go.”

“Lame, Rogers,” Nat accuses. “You’ve gotta come up with more elaborate excuses.”

“Whatever you say,” Steve says with a chuckle, before adding, “Tell Clint I said hi.”

“Will do. Have fun on your date.”

Steve huffs out an offended snort when Nat hangs up the call without waiting for him to respond, and Bucky raises a pierced eyebrow at him when he stops by Steve’s side.

“Who was that?” he asks curiously, and Steve sighs as he tucks the phone back into his pocket.

“Nat,” he explains. “She tried to trick me into telling her what I was getting her for Christmas, but failed.”

“She’s that curious?” Bucky asks with a surprised chuckle, and Steve laughs.

“She’s the nosiest person on the planet,” he responds cynically. “I swear, the FBI has got nothing on her.”

At that, Bucky laughs, and Steve turns back to the shelf to grab one of the MP3-players he looked at the first time he was there. He’ll save the receipt and Nat can always change it later, should she want to.

The switch goes faster than expected. The girl at the register helps them giftwrap Nat’s new present, and less than twenty minutes later, they walk out the store with a brand new, fully functioning MP3-player dangling from the plastic bag in Steve’s hand.

“There, you feel better now?” Steve asks sweetly, and Bucky answers by aiming a shallow kick towards Steve’s calf.

“Not really,” he says with a poorly held back grin while Steve dances out of the way for his foot. “I still worked really hard on that gift wrapping and now it’s in a trashcan. I’m personally offended.”

“Poor thing,” Steve mocks. “You wanna go get some ice cream on the way home to cry your heart out into?”

“Too sweet,” Bucky declines politely. “I’d rather have a beer or two, if you don’t mind?”

“A beer or two it is, then,” Steve agrees wholeheartedly while silently ordering his heart to stop fluttering when Bucky smiles back at him.

Steve had been right about the other night, of course. His moment of weakness had not soothed his
emotional attachment to the other man the slightest. He is still madly in love with this gorgeous jackass, and it’s a feeling of heavenly torture and hellish pleasure, all mixed into one.

Still, walking here, like this, with Bucky by his side feels…nice. Perhaps nicer than he should allow it to feel, but at the moment Steve doesn’t care. It’s almost Christmas, and he’s walking through a mall filled to the brim with Santas, angels and mechanical snowmen, with the one person on earth he’d rather be with the most, and everything is just good. Why shouldn’t he be allowed that brief luxury? It’s not like it’s hurting anyone.

Bucky doesn’t seem to mind either, and when they pass the little kiddy train running at the centre of the mall square, Steve even catches him smiling at the children riding it. The sight makes Steve feels all kind of fuzzy inside, and without even considering if he should, he nudges Bucky in the side, pointing towards the escalators a few paces away.

“Look, it's where we first met,” he says cheekily, and Bucky huffs out a laugh.

“Yeah, real fucking nostalgic.”

“Aw, c’mon, don’t make it sound so bad,” Steve coaxes. “After all, you’re the one who came onto me first.”

“Says the guy who literally followed my ass,” Bucky counters, catching on to the flirtatious theme of the joke.

“Don't give yourself so much credit,” Steve scoffs, “your ass ain't that nice.”

“Are you kidding?” Bucky asks in disbelief. “I've got the best ass.”

“It’s not bad, I’ll give you that,” Steve agrees, before daringly adding, “But your upper body is better.”

“Really?” Bucky asks curiously. “Which part?”

Oh.

Oh, Steve didn’t think this would turn into one of those conversations.

“Uh…” He glances to the side, but quickly turns his gaze back ahead when he sees the expectant way Bucky is looking at him. “Your arms?” he says, not wanting to go into too much details.

“My arms?” Bucky chuckles.

“Yeah,” Steve decides. “You know.” He gestures vaguely towards the area beneath his own shoulder. “This part here.”

“My biceps?” Bucky says with a smirk. “You’re into those?”

“Well, I— They’re not…ugly.” Oh, sweet heaven, what is he even saying? Bucky, on the other hand, just laughs at Steve’s answer, tipping his head back.

“That’s good to know,” he says simply, smiling widely. Steve has a faint idea why Bucky thinks Steve’s preferences about his body would be regarded as useful information, but Steve sure as hell isn’t going to make sure by asking about it.

He is, however, extremely tempted to ask Bucky what he thinks of Steve’s body, but just as he opens his mouth, another voice rings out across the square, cutting him off.
“Hey! Barnes!”

Both Steve and Bucky stop and turn around in surprise, searching for the owner of the voice.

“Oh, no…”

Steve glances towards Bucky’s face when the whisper leaves the other man’s mouth, only to see Bucky wearing an expression of both annoyance and grim horror. Instantly, Steve can tell that something is about to go terribly, terribly wrong.

Following Bucky’s gaze into the crowd, he spots a group of people heading their way, and realizes that whoever they are, they’re obviously not in the mall to shop. Normally, Steve isn’t one to judge people based off of their appearance, but these guys aren’t being subtle about anything. Their torn jeans, leather jackets, metal studs and spikes, all paired up together with the nasty expressions on their faces… It gives off a pretty aggressive vibe, and Steve doesn't like it one bit.

The man walking in the lead of the group is wearing a pair of dark green cargo pants, and a black military jacket that’s been matched with a set of rather intimidating combat boots. His dark hair is short, his shoulders wide, and he’s got a posture that says he’s the kind of guy who's used to getting his way.

The crowd of the mall is obviously of the same opinion, as it makes sure to part in front of the group like the Red Sea before Moses. The man in the lead throws his arms out to his sides with a grin as he keeps his eyes intently fixed on Bucky, blatantly ignoring the way he nearly knocks a passing woman in the face as he does so. “What the fuck, man!” he says loudly. “Where the hell have you been?”

“Friends of yours?” Steve mumbles under his breath, and Bucky’s lips pinch together tightly. “Not really,” he grates without taking his gaze off the approaching group. Steve can nearly see the tension coil in the muscles of Bucky’s shoulders, and he finds himself involuntarily bracing his body for a fight.

“Hey, Brock,” Bucky greets shortly when the man gets close enough to hear him. Brock responds by grinning even wider as he plants a curled fist against the top of Bucky's left arm in a punch that even Steve can tell is way harder than your average greeting.

If it hurts, then at least Bucky isn't showing it. His face is blank when Brock pulls the fist back, and Steve can see a hint of disappointment flash across the stranger's face before Brock grins up once again.

“Wow,” he says, looking Bucky up and down while nonchalantly flipping the zipper tag of Bucky's new jacket with his index finger. “Don't you look fancy. What's with the outfit? You trying to pass as a regular civilian all of a sudden?”

“It's cold,” Bucky responds flatly, and Brock sends hims another look with a contemplative purse of his lips.

“It looks good on you,” he comments, before adding, “Who’d you steal it from?”

“No one,” Steve says grimly, and Brock’s attention immediately shifts from Bucky to him.

“And who’s this?” he asks in what Steve decides must be feigned curiosity. “You got yourself a guard dog, Buckster?” He gives Steve an evaluating glance. “Does he bite on command?”
The rest of his gang snickers at the comment, but they stop when Bucky sends them a cold, hard stare over their leader's shoulder.

“What do you want?” Bucky asks grimly, turning back to look at Brock with a disinterested glower. He is clearly not amused by the conversation, nor the other man's attempt to make small talk. Not that Steve is either; Brock seems the type he'd prefer not to come within half a mile's radius.


“I think I can manage just fine without you,” Bucky retorts, voice low, and Brock immediately hinges a skeptic eyebrow at him.

“Yeah, I can tell,” he says with a nod towards Steve. “Why else would you be whoring yourself out to this frat boy here?”

“Hey, what the hell's your problem?” Steve demands, taking a step forward at the same time as Bucky mumbles out a cautionary, “Steve,” as he grasps around Steve's arm.

The group behind Brock immediately goes alert, but Brock holds up his hand, halting them.

“No, no,” he says, “by all means, let the man speak. He obviously thinks this little klepto here is worth defending.” He turns towards Steve, shoulders squaring. “So what's up, big guy? You've got something to say?”

“Heading the bullshit, Brock,” Bucky snaps. “Do what you came over to do, or get the fuck out.”

“Going by the look on your friend here, I'm not gonna do anything,” Brock shoots back. “Unless he wants in on the action, of course?” Without waiting for an answer, he cocks his head to the side, looking Steve in the eye. “Waddaya say — Steve, was it?” he asks sweetly. “Wanna help me take your boy toy here for a ride? I bet he wouldn’t mind. I mean, he’s such a pretty little pushover, wouldn’t you agree?”

He pauses to send an amused grin over his shoulder, and his posse giggles and grins back in encouragement while smirking at Steve, who clenches his jaw in silence. He doesn’t move, even though the only thing he can think of at the moment is how amazing it would feel to plant his fist square in this bastard’s face.

“We could plug him up good, Stevie, you and I,” Brock continues, ignoring Steve’s silence as he leans in towards his face. “Bet that little cocksucker wouldn’t be much of a match for the two of us. That is,” he adds, lowering his voice into a hiss, “unless you’re the kind who prefers to watch?”

It's a good thing Bucky still has his fingers clamped around the span of Steve's bicep, because otherwise, Steve's pretty damn sure he would have ended up knocking this asshole’s jaw clean off. Instead, all he gets to make is a threatening throw forwards with his body while baring his teeth in a low snarl, before Bucky’s grip stops him.

“Oh, apparently not,” Brock muses, and Bucky quickly steps in between them, before Steve gets a chance to respond.

“Go fuck yourself, Brock,” he says frigidly. His face is cold, and his eyes are hard as ice as he stares the other man down. Brock doesn’t look particularly upset by the insult, but Steve can tell
from the way the eyes of his henchmen widen, that the people who’ve told Brock to go fuck himself in the past certainly haven’t been allowed to go unpunished for their insolence.

Brock looks at Bucky, with a smug, arrogant smile stretched across his lips that Steve is literally itching to wipe off with his knuckles. “You were always such a prissy little fuck, Barnes,” he says calmly. “Should have figured you’d go running back to that slaughterhouse you call a life, sooner or later.”

Steve goes rigid. He has no idea if this jerk knows anything about Bucky’s past, but if he does, then that’s a really low blow. Why else would he use such a word? Bucky, on the other hand, doesn’t move. He doesn’t speak either, and the silence makes Steve feel as if he’s standing in the centre of a brewing thunderstorm.

“Oh, sore spot, huh?” Brock drawls, obviously pleased with himself.

“Go to hell,” Bucky growls. “You come near me again, I’ll rip your goddamn face off.”

Brock snorts out a laugh and takes a nonchalant step back. “So much rage,” he mocks. “You better clean out that mouth of yours if you wanna blend in amongst the other snobs. Unless Stevie here prefers you filthy, that is.”

“How about you give it a rest?” Steve suggests sternly. “We're done here.”

“Whatever you say, Fido ,” Brock shoots back, but he turns away nonetheless. “I'll see you around, Barnes,” he offers with a careless wave over his shoulder.

“For your sake, I hope not,” Bucky bites back, and Brock sends him another conceited smirk, before rejoining his group of followers to head for the exit.

Steve watches the studded backs of their jackets until they've completely disappeared amongst the crowd. Then, he exhales; letting out a long, drawn out breath through his mouth before looking over at Bucky. “You okay?” he asks softly.

“Yeah,” Bucky says hoarsely. “I'm fine.”

“Are you sure?” He raises a hand to put it on Bucky's shoulder, but the moment his palm makes contact with Bucky's jacket, Bucky shakes it off and takes a step away from him.

“I said, I'm fine,” he mutters sharply, but then he brings his hand up to his face, pinching hard across the ridge of his nose. “Can we just go back to your place?” he asks. “Please?”

“Sure,” Steve agrees, but as Bucky heads for the exit, he can feel the panic begin to rise inside his chest. For the past week, Bucky hasn’t referred to Steve's apartment as anything but home , and his sudden choice to omit the word from his request lights up a warning sign in the back of Steve's head.

“Bucky, wait.” He reaches out and manages to get a hold around Bucky's shoulder, stopping him.

“Don't touch me,” Bucky hisses, trying to shrug him off, but Steve doesn't let him.

“Buck, stop it,” Steve pleads.

“Let go!”

“James!”
Bucky freezes, staring up at Steve's face in shock. There is a wet shimmer of shame in his eyes, however faint, and Steve can tell that the actual tears are only another outburst away. Steve looks at him, and Bucky swallows, still standing on an arm’s length distance with Steve's fingers tightly curled into the fabric of his jacket.

“You don't have to run away from me, Buck,” Steve says softly. He slowly eases up on the grip around Bucky's clothes, stepping closer. “Ever,” he adds, and something in Bucky's eyes shifts as his shoulders drop, body slumping as he looks down at his own boots.

“I'm sorry,” he grates. “I wasn't prepared, I—I didn't think— For us to run into them here, of all places…”

“It's okay,” Steve assures him. “I get it, you were surprised. We were having a good time, and that asshole more-or-less jumped us without warning. Getting upset is only natural.”

“I'm not upset,” Bucky grumbles. “I'm so pissed off, I nearly—” He cuts himself off by biting down at his own lip, as if he'd rather not end the sentence at all. “He knew he wouldn't be able to get to me directly, so he went after you to rile me up,” he explains apologetically. “Fucker almost got me… I'm glad you stepped in the way you did, or we'd both be in a lot of trouble right about now.”

“Likewise,” Steve says firmly. “I would’ve punch that dick’s teeth out if you hadn't stopped me.” He pauses as he gives Bucky a hesitant glance. “Does he know about you?” he asks carefully. “I mean, the way he said that last thing, about the slaughterhouse, that was—”

“He knows a little,” Bucky murmurs. “No details – not like you do – but…enough to make it hurt, apparently.”

Steve cannot in words describe how terribly grateful he is over the fact that Bucky decided to share more about his background with him than he had with that asshat. It makes him feel proud, and perhaps, also a tiny bit smug.

“So, basically, he just wanted to upset you?” he asks, and Bucky snorts.

“Yeah, basically. I guess he's still pretty bitter about the fact that I left. I was a good source of income, and when I ditched the group, he probably felt it deeper in his wallet than he expected to.”

Steve smirks.

“That, and the fact that you didn't wanna do the dirty with him, huh?”

“Something like that,” Bucky agrees. “Brock is used to getting his way. To be told no for a second time, in front of his little gremlins no less, probably hurt his pride more than he wanted anyone to see.”

“Which means we won,” Steve points out. “He turned away first. That counts as giving up in my book.”

Bucky chuckles, licking his lips with a faint nod of his head. Seeing him smile makes Steve feel a bit better, but he knows that Bucky's still shook up and more than just a little bit embarrassed about what had happened. It had been a close call, and Steve's pretty sure that even though he knows how to handle himself in a fight, that Brock guy probably knows a few dirty tricks that Steve doesn't.

He really wouldn't have minded taking a swing at that asshole's face, but looking back, not doing so seems to have been the best decision.
“Don’t think too hard about it,” Steve says softly. For a moment, he considers putting his hand back on Bucky's shoulder, but he doesn't. “It's a past life. You're not that guy anymore, and I'm gonna make sure I do everything I can to help you stay that way.”

“I still haven't gotten a single job interview,” Bucky mumbles. “Nowadays you need a fucking master's degree just to work at McDonald's, and I've got nothing like that.”


“But no money,” Bucky counters.

“You, I repeat, firmer. “Like I said, don't think too hard about it. We'll get you there, don't worry.” This time, as he ends his sentence, he does bring his hand up to clasp around the top of Bucky's shoulder, squeezing it tightly. “I'm with you til the end of that line, pal,” he promises, pointing to the inside of Bucky's right arm. “You're not getting rid of me that easily.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading guys, you're so sweet <3
You're all welcome to follow me on tumblr, or on Twitter if you happen to use it. Twitter is still new and I sometimes forget that I have it, but I'm on tumblr everyday if you wanna get a hold of me :)

Until tomorrow! <3
Winter Things

Chapter Notes

Beta by the wonderful and ever so glorious
Nursedarry <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Friday, December 16th

Steve spends all the ride home thinking about how to best help Bucky out with his job situation. It’s obvious that the lack of interviews has left the guy feeling pretty low, and so, Steve hatches a plan.

When they get home from Staten Island, Steve orders Bucky into the office, and together they make sure to polish up Bucky’s résumé and application letter. It doesn’t need much – Bucky’s pretty damn articulate both in speech and writing – even though Steve can agree that a few more items in the education section wouldn’t have hurt.

Still, they manage to piece together a rather agreeable result, and Steve makes sure to let Bucky know it. Bucky does indeed seem grateful for the support, even more so when Steve suggests that they should go out the next day to hand a few of the applications out.

In the end, they spend more-or-less all of Thursday walking around town, handing out resumés to every single place that might consider hiring Bucky for a job. And a few that might not. Either way, they soon run out of letters to hand out, and Steve thinks that Bucky looks at least a little bit more hopeful on their way home than he had that same morning.

Bucky has been in a low key bad mood ever since the confrontation at the mall. Not the snarly, testy kind if bad, but the quiet, less-than-motivated one. Seeing how the process of actually getting out there and doing something makes Bucky appear happier about himself, Steve makes the suggestion that they should repeat the process on Friday as well, which Bucky agrees to.
So, said and done, come Friday morning, they head over to Manhattan to get a little bit of work done.

Steve convinces Bucky not to dress a bit more conservatively, seeing as his more casual look might not work in his favor. Bucky argues, of course, but in the end, even he has to admit that acquiring a job is of more importance than him flaunting his style, at least temporarily. He still gets to wear his own clothes, of course, and so he picks out the black jeans Steve bought him, along with his dark t-shirt and sweatshirt. Paired up with his black jacket, black fingerless gloves and black boots, it all makes up a sort of clean-cut Gothic theme that Steve has to admit looks pretty nice. If not sexy. Bucky looks good in black, Steve’s not going to argue with that.

They hand out a bunch of letters, but it's pretty obvious that people are not as enthusiastic about hiring someone off the street here. It's Manhattan, after all, and the fact that there are a lot more shops and customer-related services here, rather than industrial work, makes Bucky a less attractive candidate in the long run. Not only due to his lack of education and professional experience, but also regarding the way he looks.

It’s a bit of a letdown, compared to the other day, and Steve can tell that Bucky feels bad about it. He’s quiet where he walks next to Steve as they exit the south corner of Central Park, heading back home. His head is down, and he has his hands shoved deep into the pockets of his jacket, trudging along with his nose yet again buried in one of Steve’s old scarves.

There aren’t that many people out. It’s only around two in the afternoon, and most are still stuck in their offices, working. Somehow, it adds to the melancholy feel of the situation, seeing the streets so… not buzzing with life. New York in general is always busy, of course, but right now, even the normal pace of everyday life feels inadequate somehow.

“Hey,” Steve says as they pass by the big LOVE sculpture at the corner of fifty-fifth and sixth. “You wanna stop by the Museum of Modern Art before we head back?”

“A museum?” Bucky asks skeptically from inside his scarf muzzle.

“Don’t give me that, there’s nothing wrong with museums,” Steve berates softly. “They’re nice. I go there all the time.”

“They’re also boring,” Bucky points out. “If I want to stare at paintings, I’ll rather go for the street art over at Bushwick’s.”

“You’ve been there?” Steve asks, and Bucky gives him a frown and a sideway glance from the corner of his eye.

“I know how to appreciate art,” he defends himself. “No need to sound so surprised.”

“Sorry,” Steve says quickly, “I just didn’t think—”

“That I’d be into that sort of thing?” Bucky asks, and Steve’s relieved to hear a smile in his voice, even though he can’t see his mouth.

“Not really, no,” Steve admits, feeling a bit stupid. “Though, I guess I should have realized by now that there’s more to you than meets the eye.”

“Glad I’m able to surprise you for a change…” Bucky mutters, but before Steve has a chance to ask what he means by that, Bucky’s gone back to staring at the ground again.

They keep on walking, heading steadily down Sixth Avenue towards Radio City Music Hall.
Earlier, Steve had managed to convince Bucky that they should stop to look at the Christmas Tree at Rockefeller Center before getting on the subway home. Normally, Steve would have gone to see the lighting of the tree himself along with his friends, but this year he had, needless to say, been occupied elsewhere when that took place. Grocery shopping with Bucky, as a matter of fact.

It is only a fifteen minute walk from Central Park to Rockefeller Center, and once they get there, Steve more-or-less drags Bucky along the row of flags to head down the stairs, looking out over the rink below.

The Christmas tree stands tall and enormous, towering over the rink behind the golden Prometheus statue decorating the far end wall. The multi-colored bulbs of light look amazing, as always, with the golden star shining up top like a beacon. Currently, there aren’t any people on the rink, except for a guy in a red jacket driving a Zamboni around the ice, preparing it for the next session.

Steve looks over at Bucky to see what he thinks of the view, but Bucky isn’t looking at the Christmas tree, or the rink. He’s staring down at his own shoes, scraping the left one lightly against the snow-covered ground. He looks miserable.

Steve bites down on his lip, and then glances out over the empty rink. It’s a long shot, but...he figures it might be worth a try.

“You wanna skate?” he asks casually, upon which Bucky pauses in his broodings to look up at him, blinking owlishly. “What?” he asks. “Right now?”

“Why not?” Steve says with a shrug. “We could use a break after today. You know, relax a little.”

Bucky frowns, shaking his head. “I don’t know if I feel like it,” he mumbles.

“You sure?” Steve prompts. “Looks like the line ain’t that long. It would be a great opportunity.”

“We don’t have any skates,” Bucky points out flatly.

“We’ll rent some,” Steve counters.

“It costs money.”

“And that’s been a problem since when, exactly?” Steve argues, making Bucky give an exasperated groan as he glares up at the sky.

“You mean except the problem it’s always been?” he asks sternly. “I don’t want you to waste all that money just to watch me stand around the rink like some idiot.”

“Well, good thing you won’t be standing around, then,” Steve says, “cause we’ll be skating.”

Bucky sighs, sounding a mix between frustrated and desperate. Then his posture slumps as he sends a hesitant glance towards the ice rink below. “Actually, I—”

“What?” Steve asks, and Bucky sighs, turning to look Steve in the eye with a challenging glare.

“I can’t skate,” he confesses. He both sounds and looks prepared for Steve to make some sort of cruel joke at his expense, and as tempting as that might be, it still makes Steve’s heart ache with all kinds of sympathy for him.

“I’ll teach you,” he promises, and Bucky’s eyes immediately widen in disbelief.

“No, you’re not,” he scoffs, shaking his head in refusal.
“Sure I am,” Steve insists, and Bucky’s face drops a little.

“But… I can’t skate,” he repeats, as if that’s somehow going to make Steve change his mind. Steve laughs, hooking his arm around Bucky’s elbow and pulling him along as he heads towards the line leading to the Skate House.

Bucky spends the entire line trying to convince Steve that it’s not worth the money, and Steve just as enthusiastically assures him that it is. They get to the front in less than half an hour – which is pretty darn fast considering it’s Rockefeller Center – and Steve pays for their session tickets and skates. Once the skates are on (Bucky has to re-tie his twice to get laced up tight enough) they head to the rink, which is already beginning to fill up with people.

Steve steps out on the ice and gives his skates a few experimental strokes, gliding in a big circle before stopping to wait for Bucky to join him. Bucky grips around the railing with both hands as he staggers through the little gateway, every muscle in his body looking tense like a steel spring ready to snap.

“C’mon, relax,” Steve encourages with a chuckle, skating backwards to make a little twirl. “Bend your knees.”

“Show off,” Bucky grunts, gasping with terror as he temporarily loses his balance as he makes an attempt to let go of the railing. He grapples for the metal beam, clutching around it with a glare towards Steve, who continues to skate around in slow, lazy figure eights in front of him. “Stop smiling,” he orders sternly.

“Can’t,” Steve says apologetically. “You look too cute.”

“Shut up.” Bucky makes another attempt to stand up, but this time he ends up stumbling long before he even lets go of the railing. Steve watches for a few seconds as Bucky tries to keep himself upright, before skating up to him and gripping him gently around the shoulders.

“Let go of the railing,” he instructs gently.

“No fucking way,” Bucky grumbles.

“No, I’m serious,” Steve says. “Let go. Trust me.”

Bucky hesitates, and then, he slowly lets go of the rail. Steve helps him keep his balance while slowly pushing them both into the stream of skating people, keeping Bucky well within an arm’s reach of the edge the entire time.

“Just relax,” he guides. “Let me do the skating, and you can just glide along. I’ve got you.”

“I’m not a child,” Bucky mutters.

“We can argue about that part later,” Steve says with a smirk. “For now, let’s just agree on the fact that I’m the only one of us who knows how to skate.”

Bucky grumbles out something that Steve suspects is a less than subtle insult, and Steve snorts out an amused laugh. He kicks away with his foot a little bit harder, increasing the speed, and immediately feels Bucky tense up against him.

“Relax,” he reminds him soothingly, and Bucky slowly lets his body loosen up as he leans a little more of his weight against Steve’s side. Steve could pretend not to enjoy it, but it does feel pretty damn nice to have the other man that close. A selfish part of him wishes that Bucky’s gonna turn
out to be an absolutely lousy skater, because the more insecure he is, the longer Steve gets to hold him while they’re on the ice.

It takes a little while, but eventually Bucky begins to kick away with his skates in time with Steve’s strokes. He’s still wobbly, yet slowly but surely, Steve is able to ease up on his grip around Bucky’s arm and shoulder. In less than fifteen minutes, he’s barely even touching him anymore.

“You ready?” he asks after a while, and Bucky flickers his eyes nervously in his direction.

“For what?” he asks.

“I’m gonna let you go now,” Steve informs him.

“What?” Bucky says sharply. “No. No, no, Steve, wait.” Flailing his arms to keep his balance, which immediately turns worse than ever, Bucky continues forward across the ice when Steve lets him go, eyes wide with impending doom.

“Relax,” Steve reminds him. He’s still got his hands hovering a few inches behind Bucky’s back, but Bucky is obviously freaking out too hard to notice. “I’m right here,” Steve tries again. “You’re doing great.”

Just as he says it, Bucky sways dangerously to the left, and Steve decides that it might be wise to keep the figurative training wheels on for a little while longer. When he offers his hands out for the second time, Bucky clings onto them eagerly, gripping so tight that Steve for a moment fears he’s going to end up cutting off the blood circulation to his entire arm. He still lets him, though, and soon enough, Bucky’s punishing grip eases up again, even if just slightly.

They make another two laps, and Bucky slowly begins to skate more and more on his own. It is a bittersweet moment when he lets go of Steve completely, on his own accord. Steve still makes sure to keep a watchful eye on him, however, while Bucky bumbles around the rink like a loose, yet extremely adorable canon.

“See?” he says, smiling encouragingly. “Told you, you were doing great.”

In return, Bucky flashes him a hesitant smile, and Steve laughs as he casually floats past Bucky to skate backwards a few feet in front of him. Bucky is doing well for a first timer, and going by the rosy enthusiasm glowing on his cheeks, Steve would say that he appears to be having a pretty good time. The sight is enough to make Steve feel downright giddy.

“Hey, Buck,” he says, picking for attention. “Catch.” Without waiting for an answer, he stops skating and holds his arms out wide, causing Bucky to barrel straight into him with a startled yelp. Steve, who knows perfectly well that Bucky isn’t capable of braking yet, catches him in a wide hug, laughing heartily as Bucky clutches fearfully around the fabric of his jacket. He’s still chuckling when he helps Bucky get back into motion, and even though Bucky tries to make his glare look grim, he still can’t keep a complete straight face when all Steve does is grin back at him.

Eventually, Steve decides to teach Bucky how to stop, with varying results. Bucky basically just ends up skating around in a circle until his propulsion wears off, which theoretically works, but doesn’t look particularly dignified.

“You look like a crooked old lady,” Steve points out as he graciously skates past when Bucky, once again, fails to stop right away. “If you don’t get a grip soon, I’m gonna start calling you Bambi.”

“Why, because Bambi’s an orphan too?” Bucky shoots back, and Steve nearly stumbles over his
own skates as he stares back at the other in shock. “What?” Bucky says, “I’m not allowed to make jokes about myself now?”

Steve continues to stare. He has no idea what kind of etiquette this kind of situation cares for. If a friend (and crush) makes a joke about the tragic loss of their family, does one laugh? Bucky seems to notice Steve’s hesitation, and gives him a, *Really?* kind of look while cocking his head to the side.

“C’mon, you can’t blame me for being considerate,” Steve says defensively, and Bucky shakes his head at him with an annoyed sigh.

“You’re too nice,” he says. “I swear, you’d be absolutely devastated if you so much as sneezed at the movies.”

“So you’re saying you think I should be more mean?” Steve asks slyly, circling back around.

“Yes. No.” Bucky quickly changes his mind, picking up on the tone of Steve’s voice. “No, that’s *not* what I said.”

“Oh, I think heard you,” Steve insists, grinning widely. “Ready or not, here I come.”

“What are you gonna do?” Bucky demands, but Steve doesn’t answer. The ice crystals spray from underneath his skates as he takes off towards Bucky, picking up the pace, heading straight for the other man as if he’s gonna ram him into the railing. Bucky curls up, bracing himself for impact, but at the very last second, Steve swerves out of the way with a gleeful snicker.

“Don’t *do* that!” Bucky snaps, reaching out to slap his hand hard against Steve’s back while struggling to keep his balance at the same time. “Goddamn asshole!”

“All right, all right,” Steve offers, catching Bucky’s hand by the wrist as he turns back around. “Then how about this?”

“No,” Bucky orders sternly when Steve begins to pull at his arm. “No, don’t you *dare* spin me. Don’t you—! Oh, *fuck off!*”

Steve laughs when Bucky hunches down to keep himself from toppling over when Steve lets him go, arms flailing. Still laughing, Steve then skates backwards to keep himself well out of Bucky’s vengeful reach, only to bump into someone coming from behind him, which sends him near crashing to the ground in surprise.

“Woah, sorry!” he says, turning around. “I didn’t see—”

“Steve?”

“Nat?” Steve frowns down at the cute, red haired woman standing in front of him. She’s got a black jacket on, and jeans, along with a white pompom-adorned hat, a scarf, and matching mittens.

“How long have you been here?” Steve asks in surprise, and Natasha grins.

“Not long,” she answers. “A few minutes. You?”

“Longer than that,” Steve admits. He glances around the rink. “You here alone, or is Clint with you?”

“No,” Natasha answers with a laugh. “He had to work. I’m here with Bruce.” She gestures over
towards the gateway of the rink, where a man with curly, dark hair and a black wool coat had just stumbled out onto the ice.

“I can’t believe you actually got him into a pair of skates,” Steve says, marvelling at the sight.

“Yes,” Natasha laughs, “it took some nagging, but I got there.” She turns back around and slowly raises her eyebrow at Steve. “So, what about you? You here all by your lonely self?”

“Uh, no, actually…” Steve looks over at Bucky, who’s once again standing upright, and gestures for him to come closer. “I’m here with a friend.”

Nat throws a glance at the approaching man and then looks back at Steve, eyes widening with excitement.

“Is that—?” she starts.

“Not a word,” Steve hisses, knowing exactly what his devious little minx of a friend is thinking. Natasha smirks, but when she turns towards Bucky, she’s all friendly smiles and polite greetings as she extends her hands towards him.

“Bucky, this is Natasha, also known as Nat,” Steve explains. “And this gentleman right here,” he adds when Bruce comes staggering up behind her, “is our friend Bruce. Bruce and Nat, this is Bucky.”

“Pleasure,” Natasha says when Bucky takes her hand, and Steve gives her a warning glare over Bucky’s shoulder. He loves Natasha to the moon and back, but she’s a wild card. If she already suspects that Steve might look at Bucky as more than just a friend, she might get some funny ideas inside her head. Ideas that involve her helping out.

“Nice to meet you,” Bucky greets, shaking both Natasha’s and Bruce’s hands politely, and once again, Steve’s so taken aback by the other’s so-sudden social skills. Bucky is smooth; a social chameleon capable of adapting to any situation, and Steve always forgets about that. Probably because all Bucky does is insult him whenever they get into a conversation that lasts more than four sentences…

“Bucky is staying at my place,” Steve explains, once the greetings are done, more to get it out of the way rather than anything else.

“Oh, for how long?” Nat asks, and Steve can tell that she's literally dying to ask a bunch of far more interesting questions than that.

“We don’t know yet,” Steve replies, before Bucky has a chance to open his mouth. “Depends on how his job-hunt turns out.”

“You’re looking for a job?” Bruce asks.

“Yeah,” Bucky answers. “I’m…in between jobs at the moment.”

“Well, what kind of work are you looking for?” Natasha files in. “I might know some places looking to hire.”

“I don’t know.” Bucky shrugs with a smile. “The kind that gets me paid, I guess?”

“That’s a good priority,” Bruce agrees.
“I’ll ask around,” Nat promises. “Social contacts are the Alpha and Omega of getting hired.”

“And you’re the spider in the centre of the web,” Steve comments. “We’re aware, there’s no need to flaunt it.”

Natasha sends Steve a sarcastic glare, but then she shines up and moves on to hit across his chest with the back of her hand. “Speaking of social contacts,” she declares, “you guys have to come to our Christmas party next Thursday!”

“Thursday?” Steve asks skeptically. “Is that a party day?”

“You know how it works,” Nat says with a sigh. “Someone is always leaving to spend Christmas with their family early, while another has to work late, blablabla. Getting everyone together for a party this time of year is a nightmare.”

“But let me guess,” Steve says, smiling, “you’ve succeeded?”

“Of course I have,” Nat muses. “You were the last person on the list. You’ve been downright impossible to get hold of lately.”

“Yeah, I’ve been sort of busy,” Steve apologizes.

“I can see that,” Nat murmurs, and Steve just barely remembers that he’s literally wearing a pair of boots with razors at the bottom before he has time to kick her in the shin.

“Last one?” Bruce says suddenly. “You’re telling me you’ve got Tony to come too?”


“I do,” Bruce sighs, “all too well.”

“So you guys are coming too,” Natasha decides, giving both Steve and Bucky simultaneous slaps on the shoulders. “No excuses. Oh, and before I forget,” she says, already pulling Bruce away towards the circle of skating people around them, “it’s an Ugly Christmas Sweater Party, so dress nicely! Or, you know, ugly.”

She waves at them before turning away, and Bruce gives them both a friendly little nod as he stumbles after her. Steve watches them go, and then lets out a discreetly held breath, relieved that Nat hadn't actually gone ahead and said anything stupid. Like calling Bucky Steve's date or something… Smiling, he turns back towards Bucky, only you find the other man looking after the disappearing pair with a concerned frown on his brow.

“What’s wrong?” Steve asks, and Bucky’s gaze flickers toward him.

“I was just…thinking, I guess.”

“About?”

Bucky sighs, looking up at him. “I’m not sure if I should go,” he says. “I mean, they’re your friends, and I’m just… a friend. It’ll probably be awkward, and I’m— I’m just no good with parties.”

Steve’s brain immediately does a flashback to Bucky, sitting on Steve’s couch and talking about how his sisters snuck out to attend a party, only to end up dead in the process. He can see where Bucky is coming from, but at the same time, he cannot agree with his reasoning.
“Trust me, pal,” he says sympathetically, “this will not be like any other party you’ve ever been to.”

“That doesn’t sound very reassuring,” Bucky points out, and Steve shrugs.

“It’s the truth,” he says. When Bucky still looks hesitant, he takes a slow stroke with his skate to glide up next to him, giving him a gentle nudge in the side. “Trust me, it’ll be fun.”

Bucky sighs, and then he glances up at Steve from the corner of his eye. “Well,” he says, “You’ve been right about fun so far… Guess I get this one last shot to prove you wrong.”

“That’s the spirit.” Steve grins as he gives Bucky’s upper arm a shallow punch, which is more than enough to send Bucky wobbling. “Sorry!” Steve gasps, quickly reaching out to steady him again. “Sorry, that one wasn’t on purpose, I swear.”

“You’re such a dick,” Bucky retorts, half-laughing, half-muttering, and Steve’s lips quirk up in a smile.

“Well,” he says, “this dick is about to buy you a big ass cup of hot chocolate, so we better make sure you get off the ice without accidentally cracking your skull open first.” He grabs around Bucky’s arm, and then, as an afterthought, slides his other hand around the puffy back of Bucky’s jacket to help keep him upright.

He knows that by now, Bucky’s more than capable of getting across the ice by himself, but he doesn’t care. Bucky doesn’t say anything about it, and Steve tries to keep his heart from pounding too hard inside his chest when Bucky then proceeds to put his hand around Steve’s waist as well to balance his weight.

“Let’s go, Bambi,” Steve mumbles under his breath, hearing Bucky snort out an amused laugh through his nose in response.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you again for reading guys <3
If you feel like it, you’re more than welcome to follow me on tumblr, or on Twitter. My inbox is always open, and you’re more then free to message me if you want! :)

Until tomorrow! <3 <3
Sunday, December 18th

“Ow!”

“I told you to keep your head down.”

“If I keep it further down, my face will merge with the fucking floor.”

“We’re almost done, just keep twisting.”

“Did you have to pick out the prickliest damn tree in the entire square?”

“It’s spruce,” Steve points out soberly, “they’re all prickly.”

“Whatever, smartass,” Bucky groans, “just keep it steady while I do this. If I have to spend all Christmas looking at a leaning tree, I’m gonna fucking off myself.”

Steve bites his lip, trying not to laugh as he thinks of the dismay that would surely occur if he happened to shift the tree just a little bit to the left. Luckily for Bucky, Steve doesn’t enjoy the prospects of a leaning Christmas tree either, so he keeps it were it is until Bucky’s done fastening the bolts of the tree stand beneath.

“There, let it go,” Bucky says as he comes crawling back out from underneath the lower branches.
“Slowly.”

Steve does as he’s told, and lo and behold, the tree remains upright. The branches fan out from the slim trunk in thick, billowing swoops, and they actually had to move the TV bench a little in order to fit it all in the corner by the balcony door. The tree turned out to be slightly bigger than what Steve had anticipated. Not that he minds.

“That looks pretty good doesn’t it?” Steve asks, leaning back to look the tree up and down.

“It better,” Bucky grunts, shaking the last remaining needles out of his shirt, “because I’m not doing that again.”

“Agreed,” Steve chuckles. He turned towards the coffee table, which is currently crowned by a big cardboard box, brimming with ornaments. “Let’s get this party started then, shall we?”

Bucky smirks, and follows Steve up to the box. Reaching out, he plucks out a little one with the tinsel sticking out at the top, before letting his hand fall down to his side.

“Where, exactly, are we supposed to start?” he asks. “There’s enough stuff in here to fill up half of Time Square.”

“Well,” Steve drawls, “usually, I start with the lights and then work my way from there, but this year…” he continues, leaning down to pick up another, considerably smaller box from the table. “This year, I thought we’d start with this.”

He holds the little box out towards Bucky, prompting him to take it, and Bucky does so with a quizzical frown.

“Open it,” Steve urges.

“What did you do?” Bucky asks suspiciously. He doesn’t make a single move to touch the box.

“You’ll see,” Steve answers secretively, unable to keep himself from grinning. “C’mon, open it up.”

Slowly, as if he’s expecting something to jump out and bite him in the face, Bucky pries the flaps of the lid apart, and looks inside. Then, he goes quiet for a moment as his eyes widen in both surprise and awe once he registers what he’s looking at. “Are you serious?” he asks, and Steve nods. Reaching into the box, Bucky carefully pulls out a glass ornamental ball and holds it up in front of his face by the silver string attached at the top.

It’s pitch black, with delicate silver tendrils of frost drawn around it’s glossy surface, except for the front, where the frosted pattern comes together to frame a single anatomical skull, painted in silver.

“Do you like it?” Steve asks, and Bucky’s eyes shift from staring at the ball to staring at Steve’s face. He opens his mouth, and then he looks back at the ornament again, lips moving but without any sound coming out.

“At first, I thought I’d give the skull a little mohawk,” Steve confesses while nodding at the ball. “A red one, of course, because Christmas. But then I decided that it looked better this way. More classy.”

“You made this?” Bucky breathes while looking down at the ornament in his hand, making Steve’s ears heat up.
“Yeah,” he admits. “I don’t paint that often, nowadays,” he then excuses himself. “It’s mostly sketches. And little projects like this.” He looks at Bucky, smiling at the still stunned expression he finds on the other man’s face. “So, he asks shyly, “do you like it?”

“Oh course I like it,” Bucky says, sounding close to offended as he makes a move as if he wants to clutch the ball against his chest. He doesn’t, however, and when he looks back up at Steve again, his face turns near rueful with gratitude. “Steve—” he starts, but Steve doesn’t let him finish.

“Where do you wanna hang it?” he asks cheerfully, gesturing towards the tree behind them. “Take your pick.”

Bucky looks as if he's about to object, but then he turns around, looking at the tree in the corner of the room. Slowly, he walks up to it, and Steve can see the bob in his throat as he swallows. First, he holds the ball out, as if he's gonna put it right at the centre of the tree, but then he changes his mind. After that, he moves the decoration up, almost to the very top, but this time he changes his mind even faster, taking a step back. He looks torn, as if he's trying to pick out a new wallpaper rather than the placement of an ornamental orb, but then he finally reaches a conclusion and puts the ball in the middle of the tree, slightly to the right.

“There,” he decides.

“Looks good,” Steve agrees, and the little twitch at the corner of Bucky's mouth that he gets in response is the best reward he could have ever hoped for.

The lights go up next, once Steve finishes checking the bulbs to make sure they all work. He is still using the same single-circuit ones they used back home when he was younger, for nostalgic reasons, and he made the mistake of skipping the bulb-check one year. He is not about to recreate that fiasco again, especially not front of Bucky. For safety, they put Bucky’s ornament back into the box while placing the lights around the tree, and once the lights are up, they put on the ribbons. They don't have to tie them onto the branches, because Steve has these nifty little clip things at the back of each pre-tied bow which makes putting them on a hundred times easier. After that, the Christmas baubles come on, and Steve makes sure Bucky’s bauble is put back exactly on the same branch they took it from earlier.

When it comes to Christmas tree decorations, Steve is a pretty simple guy. He never liked those trees with a million different items stuck amongst the branches until the tree itself nearly becomes invisible. That's why he only has silver colored ball ornaments, while the ribbons are all bright, velvet red. It’s sleek, neat, with a few odd items in either red, white, or silver thrown into the mix to liven things up – Bucky’s ornament being the newest, albeit slightly deviating, addition.

This year, for example, Steve has bought a big box of candy canes to accompany the silver and red theme of the other ornaments. Both because of the fact that candy canes are Christmas-y and comes in matching colors, but also because he's always been a sucker for peppermint flavored treats.

As he returns from the kitchen with the box in his hand, Bucky gives the lid one quick glance, and then lets out a loud, astonished chuckle at the sight. “Oh, my god,” he says. “Man, I haven't had one of these things since I was a kid.”

“How is that even possible?” Steve asks in utter disbelief. “Who in their right mind would give up candy canes? They're delicious!”

“I don't know,” Bucky defends himself as he watches Steve pry the lid off the container. “I just never went looking.”
“Then I say it’s about time you have one,” Steve says, holding the box out. “Here, stock up. There's plenty to go around.”

Bucky chuckles again while he picks out a cane from the box to peel the transparent plastic off. Then he puts the cane in his mouth, straight end first, grinning widely.

“Let me guess,” Steve says ironically. “We’re gonna need another box?”

“Probably,” Bucky agrees at the same time as he snatches a second cane from the carton in Steve’s arms, and Steve yanks the box away with an objecting, “Hey!”

Not paying attention to him, Bucky just continues to look overwhelmingly pleased with himself and his accomplishment, laughing at Steve’s scandalized expression. Steve can hear the soft clack when Bucky’s tongue piercing moves around the cane in his mouth, and he has to force himself to look away in order not to get lost in the alluring curve of Bucky’s lips.

It’s simply not fair that a grown man gets to look that adorable, just because he shoves a piece of candy into his mouth. To make the situation even worse, Bucky then also spends the rest of their time decorating the tree with the candy cane hook dangling from the corner of his lips. The smacking and suckling noises he makes while sucking on it are nothing but a cruel taunt to Steve’s libido.

There’s more than enough candy canes in the box to fill up the entire tree, and once Steve’s satisfied with his side of it, he joins Bucky who’s sitting cross legged on the floor to add a few more to his side.

“There’s a gap right there,” Bucky mutters around the candy that’s still sticking out of his mouth as he points towards a branch a few inches above his head. Steve nods and fills the space with one of the remaining canes in his hand. Then he looks down at the candy stick dangling from Bucky’s lip and hooks a second one onto it with a smug grin.

“Very funny,” Bucky mumbles around his candy without even looking away from the branch he’s currently trying to tame enough to decorate. Steve’s a little disappointed at the lacking reaction, but his enthusiasm quickly perks back up again as his gaze drifts to the black tunnel in Bucky’s left earlobe.

Without saying anything, he studiously raises a new piece of candy and aims the long end of it towards Bucky’s ear. Bucky sends him an annoyed glance from the corner of his eye, and Steve can nearly hear the oh, my god, you’re such a child! play inside his head in Bucky’s voice when Bucky rolls his eyes at him.

He doesn’t move or say anything when Steve doesn’t stop, but when Steve grazes the candy cane against the skin of his ear, his apathetic act falls apart as he swats Steve’s hand away with a huff.

“Stop it,” he mutters.


“It’ll look super-dumb,” Bucky counters, swatting at the candy cane again when Steve makes a second advancement towards his ear. “Knock it off.”

“Just let me try it,” Steve argues. This time, he catches Bucky’s hand by the wrist when the other tries to slap it away. “C’mon, just once.”

“Like hell you are,” Bucky says, pushing against Steve’s chest with his free hand. “Keep that thing
away from me.”

“Stop being so boring. Hold still.”

“No fucking way,” Bucky scoffs. “Cut it out. Steve, stop it. Let go of me, you— Steve, I’m not fooling around, don’t you—! All right, that’s it!”

With a snarled out snicker, Bucky shoves both his hands against Steve’s chest, sending him falling backwards onto the floor. He also tries to pin Steve’s hands down by his sides, but Steve’s already fallen for that trap once. So, instead of bringing his arms up to fight Bucky off, he veers up and more or less tackles Bucky by wrapping both arms around his waist.

Bucky lets out a surprised umph as he lands on his back, and Steve immediately crawls on top of him, catching the hand that comes up to push him off.

“Stop fighting it, Buck,” Steve grunts, grinning as he uses the full weight of his body to pin Bucky down, “Just give in, and this will all be over soon.”

“Go fuck yourself,” Bucky pants, trying to sound grim. He’s not serious though. He’s grinning, even as the candy cane in Steve’s hand comes closer and closer to the side of his head. Steve chokes out a laugh when Bucky brings his free hand up and clutches it around Steve’s fist, halting it. Then, with a vicious pull, he manages to send the candy cane in Steve’s hand flying, and it lands on the floor next to the coffee table with a lightweight clatter.

Steve makes a dive for it, but Bucky still has a firm grip around his wrist, which makes moving downright impossible. When Steve lets go of Bucky’s other hand in order to brace himself against the floor, Bucky immediately curls his liberated fingers into the front of Steve’s shirt, pulling him back down.

Steve is laughing, far too caught up in their playful game of wrestling to realize that Bucky’s no longer fighting to get the upper hand. When he turns his face down, he’s still expecting to see Bucky grin up at him with that same, mischievous smile as before, but that’s not what he gets.

Bucky is looking at him, and he is smiling, but it’s not the kind of smile one would expect from a friend in the middle of a scuffle. It’s the kind of smile that makes Steve’s breath catch in the back of his throat, and causes goosebumps to rise on the skin at the back of his neck.

Bucky is panting, and Steve realizes that he can feel the steady rise and fall of the other’s chest move against his own in time with Bucky’s breathing. Steve swallows and unconsciously shifts his hips, and Bucky’s breath hitches. Oh, that’s bad. That’s really, really bad.

Steve knows that he’s been caught. Bucky’s hands – one in his clothes and one around his wrist – keeps him from moving, but it’s not just that. He’s been caught, because Bucky’s eyes are telling him so. Bucky knows, and the way he looks up at Steve from his position on the floor makes Steve feel as if he’s been both mentally and physically petrified.

The piercings in Bucky’s lips makes another one of those clicking noises when Bucky shifts the candy cane still in his mouth around with his tongue, and the sound travels down Steve’s spine like a bolt of lightning. His eyes goes to Bucky’s lips, he can’t help it. To the soft, plump lower lip where the gleaming sight of slickened candy against skin makes Steve’s mouth go dry.

The hand which he had planned to use in order to get up off the floor is still splayed out next to Bucky’s head, and without really thinking about what he’s doing, Steve brings it up to slowly brush his thumb over the ridge of Bucky’s cheek bone.
Bucky’s breath smells like peppermint – fresh and sweet – and dear God, Steve wants to kiss him so badly.

It’s like the battle over the couch, all over again, and just like that, Steve remembers why he shouldn’t be doing this. The guilt floods his system faster than he can handle it, and he pulls back with a loud gasp, sitting up.

“What’s wrong?” Bucky asks, sitting up as well, but Steve doesn’t know how to answer. Everything, he wants to say. Everything is wrong, because it all feels so goddamn right. He had never planned for this to happen, truly he hadn’t, and he’s completely unprepared for whatever this might end up becoming. He’s scared senseless, and his heart is beating so, so hard.

When Steve doesn’t answer him, Bucky’s eyebrows pull together into a frown of confusion. He looks at Steve, and Steve really tries, but he can’t bring himself to face the blunt force of the question in Bucky’s eyes. He looks away, swallowing hard.

Neither of them says anything. Steve can feel Bucky’s eyes on him, can feel them move over his body like a physical touch to his skin. It makes him shiver, and he curls his hands into silent fists against the carpeted floor.

After what feels like ages, he finds the courage to look up at the man kneeling by his side.

Bucky still looks worried, but when he meets the pleading look out of Steve’s eye, he seems to make a decision. Slowly, he takes the half-eaten candy cane out of his mouth and carefully places it on the coffee table before turning back towards Steve once more.

He moves forward to gently place his hands on Steve’s shoulders, turning Steve’s upper body to face his. When he leans in, Steve drags down a sharp breath into his lungs with a heartbeat so vicious it makes his teeth clatter, and Bucky hesitates.

His gaze darts to the floor in between their bodies, before coming back up again to look Steve straight in the eye. “Don’t freak out,” is all he says.

Then he moves.

Steve goes rigid when Bucky’s lips press in against his, but then he lets out a muffled moan as brings both his hands up to clutch around the thick muscles of Bucky’s biceps. Bucky responds by moaning back, pushing closer, and suddenly Steve’s gets nearly knocked off his balance when Bucky climbs onto his lap, straddling him with a ravenous groan.

They kiss, and Bucky smells so good, and is so warm, Steve wishes he could burrow his way beneath his very skin. The feeling of metal against his tongue and lips sends his gut curling in on itself with excitement, and the intoxicating scent of peppermint that fills up his nostrils every time Bucky makes a noise makes him feel downright lightheaded.

“How long have you known?” he breathes out against Bucky’s lips, trying to keep kissing him even as he speaks. Bucky just shakes his head and places both hands against the sides of Steve’s face, keeping him from pulling away.

“Don’t know,” he whispers. “Don’t care.”

“All right,” Steve hears himself answer through the daze filling up his head, and when Bucky leans down to kiss him again, Steve wraps both his arms around the small of Bucky’s back to pull him closer.
He never wants to let go. He wants to stay right here on the floor where he can keep kissing Bucky forever. Kiss him until his lungs give out, or his heart explodes through his chest – at the moment he can’t tell which is gonna happen first.

Bucky is breathing hard, and when Steve lets his tongue lick into the other man’s mouth, Bucky rocks his body down with an impatient groan as his fingers slip from Steve’s face, down to his shoulder.

The sound of his voice makes Steve’s blood boil, and he can feel the heat of it rush south so fast it leaves the rest of his body feeling chilly. It’s getting dangerous. Far too dangerous, and the feeling of having Bucky grind against him like this is stirring things to life that Steve decides is definitely too soon to indulge in.

He doesn’t want to stop, of course not. Balancing on the edge like this is sweet, sweet torture that Steve’s been longing to experience for weeks now, and he wants to keep it going for as long as he can. However, when Bucky moves his mouth down to kiss and nip has way down Steve’s jaw and neck, Steve realizes with a start that the situation might become more than his self control can handle, a lot faster than he had been anticipating.

“Bucky…” he moans, fingers twitching against Bucky’s back when Bucky begins to suck over his pulse in response. Fuck, why did Steve let him go for the neck? “Bucky, wait,” he tries again, pulling back before Bucky’s ministrations render him unable to speak altogether. “Wait.”

Bucky complies with a reluctant groan, and tips his head back with an exasperated noise towards the ceiling. “Steve Rogers,” he begins firmly, “if you’re gonna tell me we can't do this, for whatever stupid, noble reason—!”

“No, no, no, I'm not,” Steve promises. “I'm not,” he repeats, more earnestly when Bucky glowers down at him. “I'm just saying— Listen, I just… I just wanna make sure that we do this for the right reasons.”

“No, no, no, I'm not,” Steve promises. “I'm not,” he repeats, more earnestly when Bucky glowers down at him. “I’m just saying— Listen, I just… I just wanna make sure that we do this for the right reasons.”

“Which are?” Bucky asks, somehow managing to sound curious and totally disinterested at the same time. His fingers have already begun to spider their way back up the side of Steve’s neck, and Steve suppresses a violent shiver as he reaches up and gently pries them away.

“All right,” he says, closing his eyes for a moment. “So… this is probably gonna sound a lot like an accusation, but I promise, that’s not what I mean.”

“Go on,” Bucky says slowly, and Steve swallows hard.

“I just— I don't want you to think that you have to… provide me with anything, you know? In return for staying here, I mean. I want you to do this because you want to.”

“You mean you won't throw me out, even if I blue ball you?” Bucky concludes flatly and Steve makes a strangled noise in the back of his throat.

“Yeah, that’s… not as blunt as I would have put it,” he admits hesitantly, “but yeah, I guess that’s what I mean.”

“So,” Bucky says, and suddenly his voice sounds a lot harsher, “what you're really saying is that you thought I’d whore myself out to you first chance I got, just so that I could keep sleeping in your dusty old office?”

Seve snaps his mouth shut, feeling the ice of Bucky’s voice slowly freeze his insides over.
“No,” he says dumbly. “No, I don’t— No, no, that's not what I—” He cuts himself off halfway through his frantic explanation when he notices the way Bucky's lip keep twitching at the corners, and then Bucky leans down, chuckling as he gives Steve's lip a teasing little nip.

“I'm just fucking with you,” he murmurs, grinning widely. “At least figuratively speaking.” Smoothing his hands up and down the front of Steve’s chest with his fingers spreading wide, he lets out another throaty chuckle that puffs against Steve's lips. “Hopefully, we’ll be able turn it into more of a literal statement later…”

“Ohay,” Steve breathes, too busy focusing on Bucky’s hands on his body to come up with a more intelligent answer. “Sure thing.”

The moment the words leave his mouth, Bucky lets out a low moan, and then Steve finds himself yet again with Bucky’s lips smothering his. He allows it, for just a few seconds, and then he pulls away again with an amused groan.

“Hey,” he chuckles, pushing against Bucky’s shoulders. “Hold on a minute,” and Bucky pulls back again with a frustrated whine.

“What now?” he asks, annoyed. “In case you haven't noticed, I'm trying to initiate something here.”

“Trust me, I’ve noticed” Steve says with a smile. “But my lips are getting sort of raw, and…to be honest, I sort of wanna savor this a little, you know?” Slowly, he smoothes his hands up and down Bucky’s back, and Bucky’s breath stutters slightly when Steve gives the other man’s shoulder blades a soothing press with his thumbs in passing. “I don't wanna rush into this,” he continues softly. “And I really don’t want our first time to be on the floor in front of a Christmas tree that’s only half-done.”

“Funny,” Bucky scoffs, “I thought the tree part would have been a dream come true for you.”

“Be nice,” Steve scolds softly. Bucky looks down at him, pursing his lips, and then he rolls his eyes.

“Fucking sap…” he grumbles, but Steve knows that he gets the point. Insults are the closest thing to a ‘you’re probably right’ that Bucky’s ever given him, after all.

“So waddaya say?” Steve asks with a light throw of his head towards the tree. “Wanna wrap this up?” He smiles when Bucky sends a silent glower at the tree while chewing on the inside of his cheek. “I’ll make it up to you,” Steve coaxes, rubbing his thumb promisingly against the shirt still covering Bucky’s lower back. Bucky’s gaze slowly shifts from the tree to glance down at Steve, who’s still very much aware of how warm and solid the weight of Bucky’s body is against the top of his thighs. Then Bucky smiles.

“All right,” he agrees, and Steve receives another teasing kiss before Bucky moves to get up and off of his lap. “But if you try to shove a candy cane into my ear again, I'mma make you sleep on the goddamn balcony.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading guys, I hope you enjoyed it ;) <3
You're more than welcome to follow me on tumblr if you want, and for those of you who use it, I'm also on Twitter. Feel free to drop me a line whenever you want! :) 

Until tomorrow, sweeties! <3
Sunday, December 18th

The Christmas tree turns out, in Steve’s humble opinion, to be the best-looking tree he’s ever owned. Now, if that’s because of what happened while they decorated it or not, he’s gonna leave unsaid.

The rest of the day feels as if it’s spent floating around in a dreamlike haze, and Steve just can’t seem to stop himself from reaching out to touch Bucky whenever he gets the chance, simply because he can. And everytime he does, Bucky smiles back and gives him a soft peck on the lips as a reward, which only makes Steve come back to repeat the process in just a matter of minutes.

He can’t believe that he is being allowed to feel this, finally. To have the warmth of Bucky’s skin seep through the fabric of his clothes, or the taste of his kisses lingering on his lips. It’s amazing, in every possible way. Even the way they touch is perfect, even though he knows that they’re both still testing the waters on that part.

At first, they’re just lingering touches to a shoulder, or the sweeping brush of fingers against the back of a hand, but as the hours passes, the touches grow fonder, more secure. Soon enough, arms move to wrap around waists while hands knead soft reassurance against the sharp angle of shoulder blades or hip bones, and even though they’re keeping it on the tame side, it all still feels so ridiculously nice.
They’re too busy just… being, they don’t even realize that they haven’t eaten anything since lunch until it’s almost seven PM. It’s a quick fix, though, as Steve calls for pizza, and twenty minutes later, they’re both lounging on the couch with a beer each, poured into glasses, and a family sized pizza splayed out on the table in front of them.

There’s a Christmas movie marathon playing on the TV, much to Steve’s enjoyment and Bucky’s (more than likely) feigned annoyance, and while they eat, they both spend their time arguing back and forth about the things in the current movie which does or doesn’t make sense.

“See what I mean?” Bucky says loudly, pointing at the screen with his slice of pizza. “I mean, why would a skeleton even want to celebrate Christmas in the first place?”

“You’re really gonna ask that question about an animated film?” Steve asks skeptically.

“Why shouldn’t I?” Bucky asks. “It’s ridiculous.”

“In case you haven’t noticed, that’s sort of the entire plot of the movie.”

“Well, movie plots suck,” Bucky grumbles as he shoves the pizza into his mouth, chewing it sullenly.

“Oh, c’mon,” Steve argues. “You like movies.”

“Of course I like movies, I’m human,” Bucky counters around his food. “That doesn’t mean I think they’re reasonable.”

“That’s pretty funny coming from you,” Steve says with a chuckle.

“How so?”

“Really?” Steve asks. When Bucky still looks confused, Steve puts the remaining half of his pizza slice back down and turns towards him with a grin. “Just look at you,” he says with a sweeping gesture of his hand towards Bucky’s body. “A month ago you were living on the streets, and now you’re having pizza on my couch. Don’t tell me that’s not like something plucked straight from the movies.”

“Ugh, Christ, don't say that,” Bucky groans with a disgusted grimace. “Knowing Hollywood, they'd probably cast me as some blonde Mary Sue and have me cry in every other scene.”

“Why would you get to be the girl?” Steve scoffs amusedly.

“Well,” Bucky says, already preparing to bite around another slice of pizza, “for starters, I'm obviously the pretty one.”

“And what does that make me, exactly?” Steve counters with a slightly offended huff.

“You're handsome,” Bucky explains patiently. “There's a difference.”

“So?” Steve says pointedly. “You're hot. Hot trumps handsome.”

“You think I'm hot?” Bucky asks with a chuckle.

“Seriously?” Steve raises a skeptical eyebrow at him. “Haven't you used any of the mirrors around here?”

At that, Bucky swallows down the last bite of the food in his mouth and grabs for the remote of the
TV. Muting the movie, he then turns around to look at Steve with a smug smirk on his lips.

“You think I'm sexy,” he states slyly. It’s not a question.

“Yeah,” Steve says slowly. “You are sexy. And hot. You expect me to argue with that? I’m the one who brought it up.” He waits for Bucky to say something in return, but instead, all Bucky does is grin back at him, pulling at his left lip piercing with his teeth.

“Is that even a bad habit of yours?” Steve asks with a groan. “Or are you just biting that thing to turn me on?”

“Depends,” Bucky muses. He gives the black ring a little flick with his tongue. “Does it work?”

“Keep it up and and you’ll find out,” Steve shoots back calmly.

“Is that a threat?” Bucky asks coyly, smiling as he leans in closer and lowers his voice into a purr. “Or a promise?”

“Maybe it's both?”

“Oh, yeah?” Bucky challenges. “Just bring it, handsome. Think I can't handle you?”

At that, Steve narrows his eyes into a squint and sits up higher in his seat. He sees Bucky reel back a little in surprise at the sudden movement, but then he too straightens up, squaring his shoulders.

There is a moment of complete silence as they stare each other down. Bucky’s chest rises and falls, and he looks a little bit like a soldier trying to think of which strategy to use for an upcoming attack. Steve waits, but when Bucky doesn’t move, he then reaches up to tenderly cup Bucky’s jaw with both hands, and goes in for a kiss.

Bucky is expecting raw competition, Steve's already figured as much. He expects fierce kissing, rapid breathing, and hands that are barely capable of staying where they belong, but what Steve gives him is something of the exact opposite.

Steve’s kiss is soft, his breathing steady as he sucks at the other’s lower lip for a few seconds before deepening it further. There’s nearly no tongue in there at all as Steve keeps the kiss deliberately chaste, and it doesn’t take long before Bucky melts into it with a breathy sigh, lips already pleading for more. Steve lets one of his hands move from Bucky’s jaw line to slowly slide his fingers up the back of Bucky’s neck, up through his hair. Bucky’s breath immediately picks up pace, turning shallow and shaky as he lets out a low moan against Steve’s lips in return.

Steve chuckles and pulls back a little, opening his mouth to inform Bucky exactly how easy to defeat he is. He doesn’t get to say anything, however, because the moment he pulls away, Bucky grabs hold around the back of his head to keep him in place. As he chases after Steve’s lips with a greedy groan, Steve decides that, yeah, that conversation can totally wait.

For the second time that day, Steve somehow ends up with both of Bucky’s legs wrapped around his waist as the other man moves in to straddle his hips, and Steve eagerly lets it happen. He hands control over, and when Bucky pushes against his shoulders, Steve obediently leans back against the backrest of the couch, moaning his appreciation into Bucky’s mouth.

Bucky’s fingers leave Steve’s shoulders to rake down the front of his chest, and Steve arches into the touch with a hiss as he feels the blunt force of nails bite into his flesh through the thin fabric of his shirt.
It’s been brewing for weeks now. The banter, the teasing, the flirting. It's all boiled down to this, and after what happened that very same morning, Steve is well aware of the fact that they’re not gonna be able to stop this time. Not that he wants to.

Once again, he brings his hand up to drag it through the long strands of Bucky’s hair, pulling at it slightly. When Bucky’s response is to let out a ragged groan and tip his head back, Steve makes good use of the opening and moves his lips down to flutter kisses all over Bucky’s throat.

Bucky whines, and Steve can feel the vibrations of it travel through his lips when he brings his hands down to push at the hem of Bucky’s t-shirt, pulling it up. Bucky takes the hint, and quickly drags the garment up over his head to toss it over the edge of the couch.

Jesus, Steve feels as if the air has been stolen right out of his lungs as he lets the tip of his fingers trace the delicate lines of ink on Bucky’s chest. The dog tags jingle when Steve brushes against them, and the cool metal leaves goosebumps rising across the other man’s skin. The little bumps spread even further as Steve moves to splay his palm over both Bucky’s tattooed and actual heart, and knowing that Bucky is watching him, he then leans in and flattens his tongue against the left side of the other man's tattoo. A part of his brain is a bit disappointed that the inked sections of Bucky's skin doesn’t taste or feel any different than the rest, but Steve's not about to linger on that. Moving his mouth, he instead aims his focus on licking a wet trail across Bucky’s chest, circling lower and lower, all the way down to Bucky's left nipple.

He hears Bucky’s breath hitch when he flicks the nub with his tongue, and when he closes his lips around it, he feels the firm grip of Bucky’s fingers tangle in the hair at the top of his head.

“Fuck…” Bucky breathes, rolling his hips in time with the movement of Steve’s mouth, and Steve quickly decides that he really enjoys that reaction. He slides his hands up Bucky’s sides, over his ribs, squeezing and holding him in place as he continues to lick and tease at the nub in between his lips, and god, Bucky nearly goes crazy for it. He rolls his hips, grinding against the planes of Steve’s stomach, and the feeling of having Bucky’s erection press in against his body in such a blatantly intentional way makes Steve’s feel as if he’s suddenly wearing jeans that are two sizes too small.

When Steve abandons the left side of Bucky’s chest to move onto the right, however, the hand in his hair stops him with a desperate tug before he even gets to feel the metallic taste of Bucky’s nipple piercing against his tongue.

“Wait…!” Bucky pants, “Jesus Christ, wait…” Then he shoves at Steve’s shoulders, urging him to move. “Lie down,” he orders.

“Why?” Steve asks.

“Just do it,” Bucky argues, and Steve does as he’s told. He lies back, propped up against the armrest of the couch, and once he’s gotten comfortable, Bucky wedges himself in between the vee of Steve’s parted legs, his back to Steve’s chest.

“This is a bit of an odd position, don’t you think?” Steve murmurs, underlining the question with a soft kiss against the nape of Bucky’s neck. “Don’t you wanna look at me?”

“I do,” Bucky grates, “but you… do things that I can’t—” He groans, pushing his head back against Steve’s shoulder while closing his eyes. “If I had to watch you do that to my chest, I would have made a mess of myself within a minute,” he confesses. “There, I said it, are you happy?”

Steve laughs, and moves his hands around to rub soothingly across Bucky’s stomach, tracing along
the lines of his abs with his fingertips. Bucky sighs, melting back against Steve’s chest, and Steve slowly lowers his left hand even further to knead at Bucky’s hips while continuing to press slow, loving kisses against the sides of his neck. Sliding his right hand up, he feels the bumps of Bucky’s ribs move underneath his palm as Bucky’s breath catches from the touch. It’s an intriguing sensation, and Steve slowly splays his fingers out along the tattooed feather that reaches around Bucky’s back towards the right side of his torso, just to feel it again.

“You know,” he mumbles as he slowly begins to circle his fingers in narrowing, teasing little spirals across the side of Bucky’s chest, “I think I’ve read somewhere that piercings make you more sensitive. Is that true?” Making another turn with his fingers, he skates his index fingers dangerously close to one of the silver balls decorating Bucky’s right nipple, and Bucky’s breath hitches once again.

“How about you go ahead and find out…?” Bucky breathes stubbornly, and Steve chuckles. He brings his hand closer, and places the very tip of his index finger against the upper bulb of the barbell. Bucky holds his breath, but when Steve gently begins to wiggle the piercing back and forth, he lets out a gasp and bites down on his lower lip with a throaty whine.

“It’s not really that bad, is it?” Steve asks with a smile, but Bucky just nods, pressing his face against the side of Steve’s neck.

Now, isn’t that an interesting piece of information?

Deciding to explore this further, Steve gives the piercing an experimental flick, and oh, yes, going by the way Bucky’s back arches up from Steve’s body, Steve would say that Bucky’s really got that piercing working in his favor. He keeps going, and Bucky groans, grinding his hips back against Steve’s crotch, causing Steve’s own breath to stutter.

Not wanting to be outdone, Steve reaches down with his left hand to push his fingers past the hem of Bucky’s sweatpants, and the sound Bucky makes when Steve wraps his fingers around him is nothing short of glorious.

He strokes slowly, and when Bucky rocks his hips up with the movement of Steve’s hand, Steve wraps his legs over the top of Bucky’s thighs to keep him in place.

“Easy,” he whispers softly, and in turn, Bucky lets out a low groan of frustration. Steve nudges his nose against Bucky’s temple and slowly drags his lips down the outer shell of Bucky’s left ear to nip at the lobe with his teeth. The action makes Bucky’s breathing halt, provoking a shudder, and Steve takes that as a good sign.

“You’re so beautiful, Buck,” he breathes, flicking his tongue over Bucky’s ear while gently twisting his nipple between his fingers. “You’re hot, and sexy…and you’re without a doubt the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen.”

Next to his throat, Bucky lets out a soft, keening moan, and Steve smiles. He rewards the noise by rubbing the pad of his thumb against the glans of Bucky’s cock, and Bucky gasps as he makes an attempt to thrust into the touch.

“Your eyes are so pretty,” Steve continues softly. “And your lips are so soft. Your body drives me crazy, and your voice…” he pauses, dragging down a shaky breath, rubbing his own erection up against the small of Bucky’s back. “Your voice is absolutely amazing.” He nuzzles his face closer against Bucky’s temple. Then he hesitates.
He’s not sure if he should, but for some reason, the moment seems right. Slowly, he lowers his lips towards Bucky’s ear, thrusting his hips up again. “You know…” he whispers. “I heard you. The other night.”

Bucky’s body gives a violent twitch, limbs trembling, and Steve continues, “I was just going to get some water, but when I opened my door— I only heard like, ten seconds of it, but oh, if you knew what those ten seconds did to me, Buck… God…”

A soft gasp leaves Bucky’s mouth when Steve moans at the memory, and Steve feels the erection in his hand twitch.

“I touched myself thinking of you,” Steve confesses with a hiss, and Bucky groans, nodding as if he can see the scene play out before his inner vision. “I tried to hold back, I really did, but I couldn’t. I came, gasping your name to the ceiling, and it felt so good, Buck, you can’t even imagine.”

By now, the movements of Bucky’s hips has begun to grow increasingly desperate. He writhes in Steve’s grip, attempting to buck into his fist with needy little whimpers while his fingers curl into the fabric covering Steve’s knees.

Steve abandons Bucky’s chest to brush his fingers up the length of his neck and throat, combing them through Bucky’s hair to pull it back from the other man’s face.

“So beautiful,” he whispers, brushing away the hair from Bucky’s forehead. “So good and gentle… So good, James.”

Bucky whines, and Steve watches as Bucky reaches up to grasp around Steve’s fingers. He can feel the way Bucky’s hand shakes when he guides Steve’s hand back down, wrapping his fingers around the side of his throat.

“Here,” he breathes while tipping his head back against Steve’s shoulder to give him more access. “Just— Please…”

Steve pauses. He’s not entirely sure what exactly Bucky is asking of him, but when Bucky lets out another impatient groan, he decides to just go with it. Slowly, he begins to massage Bucky’s throat, pushing down over the feathers tattooed on his neck with the palm of his hand, while swiping his thumb against his jaw line.

He is rewarded with a breathless noise from the back of Bucky’s throat, and when Bucky breathes out a ragged, “Don’t stop…” the desperation in his voice chases the last of Steve’s hesitation away. Increasing the pressure of his hand, he leans in and places a gentle kiss to the top of Bucky’s head while glancing down along the span of their bodies.

Slowly, he eases Bucky’s sweatpants down, angling his wrist to avoid getting caught on the elastic band when he pulls Bucky out of his clothes. Even here, Bucky is so pretty, so warm and flushed, and Steve picks up the speed of his hand, groaning at the moist sheen spreading over the tip of Bucky’s cock when he does.

“You’re doing so well,” he whispers. “So good, James, you’re doing so good.”

Bucky nods, mouth falling open as his jaw goes slack. “If only you could see how gorgeous you are,” Steve continues, rocking up, setting a rhythm against Bucky’s body. “God, I’ve thought about drawing you so many times, but a drawing would never do you justice. You take my breath away, don’t you see?” He pushes his face against Bucky’s temple, growling against his ear. “Don’t you
want me to take your breath away too?”

As he says it, he slowly begins to press the pad of his thumb down against Bucky’s throat, gradually increasing the pressure on the other’s windpipe, and the question has barely had enough time to leave his mouth when Bucky suddenly goes rigid. Back arching, he hears Bucky lets out a strangled, drawn out, “Fuck…!” against the side of Steve’s neck a split second before he spills, hot and messy all over his abs and the fingers of Steve’s left hand.

Steve lets up the pressure of Bucky’s neck, but he continues to massage the skin in slow, tender movements while pressing kiss after kiss against the top of the other’s head, waiting while Bucky slowly comes back down. Once Bucky’s breathing has settled into a steady pace again, he nuzzles his nose against Bucky’s neck, pressing his forehead down against his temple.

“Was that okay?” he murmurs. “Did I do it right?”

“Jesus Christ…” Bucky groans. “I can’t believe you have to ask…” He pauses. “You used my name,” he says slowly.

“I did,” Steve admits. “Was that okay?”

“Yeah,” Bucky says. He sounds close to surprised when he continues, “Actually it was. I— I guess I kinda like it.”

Steve smiles. Then he looks down at Bucky’s chest, at the mess Steve caused. “Do you like that other thing too?” he asks softly. “Being choked?”

Bucky lets out a huff, and then he sighs. “It’s not…being choked,” he murmurs. “It’s more… knowing that you could, I guess?” He pauses. “I wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t think you’d stop if I told you to.”

Steve nods. He can definitely understand that.

“That means a lot, you know,” he mumbles. “That you trust me enough to let me do that.”

Bucky’s chest rises in a sharp intake of breath, and then he untangles himself from Steve’s arms as he sits up with an embarrassed, “Shut up,” from under his breath.

“No, I mean it,” Steve insists, upon which Bucky turns around, looking down at him with cheeks glowing red.

“I’m not having this conversation with you right now,” he says firmly as he tucks himself back into his sweatpants. “Not while there’s still jizz all over my goddamn stomach.”

Steve blinks, and then lowers his gaze, shifting his hips at the sight of Bucky’s sullied abs. Bucky looks thoroughly disheveled, with his hair all messy and a faint flush still covering the upper part of his chest. The fact that he’s still blushing does nothing to help the situation, and Steve feels himself twitch against the seam of his jeans with a groan.

“You, uh…want help cleaning that up?” he offers hoarsely. At first, Bucky just frowns at him in confusion, but then his eyes drops down to Steve’s crotch, realization hitting home. Steve’s insides give an excited jump when the tip of Bucky’s tongue darts out to lick across his lips, and then Bucky raises his gaze, looking Steve in the eye.

“Don’t move,” he orders sternly, and then he disappears around the corner of the living room wall, heading down the hallway towards the bathroom. Steve hears it when Bucky turns the faucet on,
and the noise is quickly followed by the soft rustle of pulling tissues from the box sitting next to the bathroom sink.

Less than thirty seconds later, Bucky returns, clean once more. Tossing Steve a bunch of crumpled tissues, he climbs onto the couch again to sit in between Steve’s still-spread legs, facing him.

“Get these off,” he orders, pulling at Steve's jeans, and Steve does as he's told. As he unbuttons the fly, Bucky pulls the garment down to hang low on Steve’s hips. Then, he slowly kneads his palm over the hard curve of Steve’s erection through his underwear, before leaning down to mouth his lips over it with a sigh. Steve’s breath stalls at the contact, and he digs his fingers into the top of the backrest with a groan.

“You—” He gulps down another groan when Bucky begins to pull the underwear down. “You don't have to do that.” It’s an honest offer, because Steve’s still not sure whether or not Bucky’s just trying to repay a favor, but Bucky just nods. “I know,” he whispers, and Steve licks his lips.

“I thought you said—” He cuts himself off with a gasp when his cock comes springing out from the confinement of his underwear when Bucky pulls them off. “You said this wasn’t ever gonna happen,” he finishes with a slight shiver to his voice when Bucky grips around the base of him.

“So?” Bucky says with a snort. “A guy can’t change his mind?” He doesn't wait for Steve to argue as he simply sinks his mouth down, and Steve lolls his head back against the armrest with a moan and a thud when the heat of Bucky’s lips wraps around him. Bucky's mouth is hot, and he slowly lets his right hand move up to rub across the planes of Steve's stomach and thighs while he sucks him off, taking him deep into his throat with an eager hum.

Steve watches, mesmerized by the sight of those plump lips moving over him in slow, lazy slides. His fingers twitch against the couch, fingernails scraping over the fabric, and Bucky’s so pretty, and his mouth feels so, so good.

The slow drag of metal against his skin doesn't feel as overwhelming as he thought it would, but the piercings are still very much there. Just watching them press against his cock every time Bucky moves to suckle at the head does things to the rhythm of Steve’s heart that he can’t even describe, and feeling the metal rod in Bucky's mouth move against his glans is downright maddening.

God, he can’t believe this is happening. He can’t believe—

Steve raises the hand that's not currently trying to dig a hole into his furniture, and slowly reaches out to push the hair away from Bucky's face. Fingers trembling, he brushes his thumb against the corner of the other's mouth, and the pleased hum that Bucky gives in return nearly sets Steve's whole brain on fire.

“Shit…” he breathes, and Bucky pulls off with a loud pop, smirking victoriously at him as he begins to jerk him off, keeping the same steady pace.


Steve groans, fingers digging into the cushions and Bucky grins.

“Oh, so you liked that one, huh?” he muses. “I knew you were a kinky bastard. All neat blue jeans and knitted sweaters… Figures you're into some real nasty shit.”
Steve bites back another groan, tipping his head back against the armrest when Bucky picks up the pace. “Does it paint a pretty picture?” Bucky asks. “Your come on my face? Trickling down my lips, into my mouth…”

Steve digs his heels into the couch as his back arches, as if of its own accord, when the heat of Bucky's words travel up his spine. “Bucky, for Christ's sake,” he pants, squeezing his eyes shut. “Stop talking, I can't—”

“Look at me.”

Not really knowing how he succeeds, Steve opens his eyes and looks down the length of his own body, down at Bucky who meets his gaze head-on.

“You know I think about you when I touch myself too, right?” he asks bluntly, and Steve gasps, eyelids fluttering. “Yeah, I do,” Bucky says, nodding. “Every single night. I spread myself out on your guest bed and jerk myself off, imagining it's your hand around my cock instead of my own.”

Dammit, Steve can't take it. There's no possible way he can look at Bucky when he tells him that. He closes his eyes, whimpering low in his throat when Bucky's voice comes floating up towards him again.

“You wanna know what else I do?” Bucky prompts, and Steve nods, nearly sobbing.

“I put my fingers in my mouth,” Bucky says, and his voice lowers into a throaty whisper as Steve feels the touch of lips and metal press in against the curve of his hip bone. “Make sure I get them real nice and wet… Then, I push them right up against my hole and tell myself that it's your tongue, licking me open.”

Steve's breath catches in his throat, and, oh, that's too much, that's too much…!

“It always makes me come so fucking hard, Steve,” Bucky moans. “Thinking about your tongue up my ass. About your fingers curling inside of me while you rim me so good.”

“Oh, god…” Steve whines. “Oh, fuck—”

The mental image shoves him over the edge, and the muscles in his stomach clench so hard, he nearly sits straight up when Bucky lowers his mouth down on top of him once more. The heat is glorious, and Steve groans as his fingers tangle in Bucky's hair when Bucky lets him shoot down his throat with a greedy moan.

Bucky swallows, once, twice, and then Steve collapses back against the armrest. His chest heaves with the gulping breaths he manages to perform, his body running on autopilot while his brain tries to remember how to breathe properly.

When he finally comes down, he eases his eyes open just in time to catch the sight of Bucky as the other licks Steve’s come off of his thumb with a smirk in his direction. Steve groans, dragging both his hands down over his face.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Buck…”

Bucky chuckles, and Steve feels the cushions beneath his body dip as Bucky climbs on top of him again. Then, Bucky's mouth latches onto his, and Steve sucks down a shocked breath into his lungs. He can taste himself on Bucky's tongue when Bucky pushes it past his lips: salty and bitter, and Steve can’t help the thrill of exhilaration that shoots through him when Bucky delves into his mouth.
“Now that,” Steve says slowly, once Bucky’s pulled back again, “was nasty.”

“No,” Bucky corrects, grinning, “that was hot.”

“You were talking about having my tongue up your ass,” Steve points out.

“I did,” Bucky agrees smugly. “And look who got off on that.”

Steve huffs out a laugh, and then he glances up at the other man. “Did you mean it?” he asks softly. “Do you really think about those things? About me?”

At that, Bucky send him a wary look from underneath his lashes, but then he just shrugs. “It happens,” he admits. He looks away for a moment, fixing his eyes on the muted TV before looking back at Steve again. “Does it make you uncomfortable?”

“No,” Steve says truthfully. “Quite the opposite, actually.”

“Then what about you?” Bucky counters. “Do you really think about me?”

“It happens,” Steve says, mimicking Bucky’s own words. Bucky purses his lips, looking as if he’s taking his time mulling the thought over, before he nods soberly.

“Good,” he decides.

“Good,” Steve echoes.

Bucky gazes down at him from above, and Steve smiles. He can’t help himself, and Bucky’s lip twitches up in an amused little smirk just as he climbs off of Steve again to stand up with a languid stretch next to the couch.

“I’m gonna go grab a shower,” he announces calmly, sending Steve a hooded glance from the corner of his eye, arms still raised high over his head. “Wanna share?”

Steve looks at the toned muscles of Bucky’s chest, following the curve of tattooed feathers as they curl around the other man’s ribs and down the hem of his sweatpants. Then he smiles.

“Sure.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you again for reading guys <3
Wow, that was a ride and a half, now, wasn't it? ;)

If you feel like it, you're more than welcome to follow me on tumblr, or on Twitter. I'm all up for casual conversations so feel free to write me! :) 

Until tomorrow! <3 <3
Thursday, December 22nd

The following days feel as if they have been plucked out of a dream as Steve and Bucky spend most of them lazing around the apartment. They also fool around. A lot. In bed, on the couch, in the shower. On the kitchen counter…

They take things slow, but Steve still feels drunk more than half the time. High on Bucky and his smile, his kisses and his body; a wicked cocktail that brings out the inner love-crazed teenager Steve thought he had buried in favor of becoming an adult many years ago.

With Buck he feels younger, sillier, more free. He finds himself constantly smiling, constantly happy. Like, genuinely, ridiculously, childishy happy. And Bucky… Oh, Bucky’s smiling so, so much more too. More than before, more than ever, and seeing him smile and hearing him laugh with such carefree amusement is a balm to his heart that Steve didn’t even know he needed.

It’s a whole new world of possibilities, emotions, and pleasures, and Steve savours every single one of them, along with every new discovery he makes.

For example, Bucky, Steve notices pretty much immediately, is a cuddler. A proper snuggle-squid. At night, he burrows in as close to Steve as he can possibly get, and then wraps all available limbs around Steve before he even attempts to go to sleep. Going by the habit, it’s a wonder the man hasn’t died from sleeping alone inside that spare room for all this time.
However, as cute and adorable as it is during the first five or ten minutes, the remaining ones are anything but. Steve is not a cold person by default, and the extra warmth of Bucky's body makes his skin feel sticky and humid to the point where Steve just ends up lying there, wishing for a shower.

Luckily for him, Bucky – even if he is a light sleeper – also turns out to be a natural when it comes to actually falling asleep. This makes escaping the snuggle-grip much easier, since Steve can just sort of tuck-and-roll the other man off of him to regain his freedom.

Still, how someone can crash into unconsciousness that fast is something Steve honestly can't wrap his head around. Come Thursday, he’s already promised himself to actually time it one day, but that part is gonna have to wait another night or two. Tonight, Steve has a different challenge ahead of himself, and Bucky is not cooperating.

“No,” Bucky says, for the twentieth time in the past ten minutes. “Never in my life.”

“Please, Buck?” Steve begs, because yes, that's where they’re at right now. “You can't show up at the party without one.”

“I'd rather freeze to death first,” Bucky grumbles.

“Will you at least look at it?” Steve pleads, holding out the bag again. “I promise, it's not as bad as you think it is.”

“Oh, I think it's exactly as bad as I think it is,” Bucky counters. He waves his hand towards Steve's torso with a wince. “I mean, look at that thing,” he says. “It's hideous.”

“Do I have to remind you of the fact that this is an Ugly Christmas Sweater Party?” Steve groans, ignoring Bucky's jibe towards his clothing. “It's supposed to be hideous.”

“Yes, but that one has antlers on it!” Bucky whimpers. “Surely the ugly must have a limit?”

Steve looks down at his knitted sweater. It's ice blue, with white, Scandinavian winter-themed details, mixed in with bright red Christmas baubles aligned in neat, vertical rows along the waistline. On the front, covering most of his chest and stomach, is the big, brown, cartoon head of a reindeer. It is adorned with an equally eye-catching, crocheted red pom-pom sticking out where the nose should be, right by the belly button. The antlers Bucky mentioned, are also crocheted and sewn onto the shirt, and they run from the reindeer’s head all the way up to Steve's shoulders.

It's ugly, as prescribed, but at the same time, Steve can't help but also think it looks sort of cute. Bucky, on the other hand, obviously doesn't share his opinion. He is looking at the sweater with a mix of disdain and horror, and Steve closes his eyes for a moment in preparation for one final, desperate attempt to make the other participate.

“Will you just look in the damn bag already?” he asks with an exasperated sigh, shaking said bag again for Bucky to take.

Bucky glares at the bag, and echoing Steve's sigh, he snatches it out of Steve's grip to dig his hand into it with an annoyed frown. He is still frowning when he pulls out the knitted sweater inside, but as he shakes it out and holds it up to look at the front of it, his frown slowly morphs into an amused smile.

The sweater is pitch black, and on the front, there are two lines of white snowflakes adorning the chest, three in each row. In between the two rows, are the glowering red words “Merry Fucking Christmas” stitched across the chest with big, bolded, capital letters.
“You’re smiling,” Steve points out with a teasing jab of his index finger against Bucky’s upper arm. In response, Bucky slowly lets his gaze slide from the shirt in his hand to Steve’s pleased grin.

“If I find out that you sat down and knitted this goddamn thing for me, Steve Rogers,” he says accusingly, “then I’m gonna tie your sexy-ass self to the bed for a week and a half.”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” Steve says with a chuckle. Leaning in, he plants a quick kiss on Bucky’s cheek. “I got it off Ebay. But you’re still welcome to tie me up, if that’s what you want,” he adds with a cheeky grin. Bucky simply responds by wrapping his arm around the back of Steve’s neck to pull him into a smouldering kiss. Steve chuckles against Bucky’s lips, and then pulls away slightly.

“You’re squishing my pom-pom,” he says, and Bucky immediately lets out an appalled snort of laughter.

“Oh, my god,” he whines, “that sounds like the most horrible innuendo in the history of mankind.”

“Would you prefer ‘crinkle my horn’ better?” Steve asks slyly, upon which Bucky gives his shoulder a reprimanding shove.

“You’re so fucking vulgar,” he accuses, still grinning, and with that mischievous twinkle in his eyes that Steve has come to love so much.

“Says you,” he retorts. “If I were to put up a swear jar in here, you’d better get very creative with how you’re gonna pay me back, buddy.”

“Oh, I’ll think of something,” Bucky promises lewdly, pulling Steve back in to give a light tug at his lower lip with his teeth. “In fact,” he purrs, “I’ll squish your pom-pom’s goddamn brains out.”

“Well, I definitely like the sound of that,” Steve says, grinning against Bucky’s mouth before shutting up long enough to let Bucky kiss him. Once he’s decided that enough is enough, however, he pulls back again and gives the sweater still in Bucky’s hand a little tug.

“Put it on,” he says. “Gotta make sure it fits.”

Bucky grumbles, but he obediently lets go of Steve to drag the garment over his head. The shirt fits him, thank God. It’s a little tight over the chest, yes, but given Steve’s personal interests, he makes the decision to consider that as an added bonus.

“Nice,” he drawls. He lets the palm of his hand rub a path up across the centre of the stitched letters on Bucky’s chest, then up towards his jawline. “You look hot.”

“Hotter than you, Rudolph,” Bucky teases back, and Steve gives a light pinch to the lobe of Bucky’s ear as punishment for his insolence, before stepping away. If they keep standing so close to each other, they’ll never get to that party.

“Let’s go,” he says with a throw of his head towards the front door. “We’re already late, thanks to you.”

Bucky snorts and rolls his eyes to the ceiling, but follows Steve to the front door nonetheless, where he pulls on his jacket and shoes without any further objections.

“By the way,” Steve says once they’re finally out of the apartment and heading towards the subway station. “I’ve been thinking… How do you want me to introduce you to the others when we get there?”
“What do you mean?” Bucky asks, peeking out at him from inside the fur trim of his hoodie.

“Well, you know… When we met Nat and Bruce the other day, I told them that we were just friends. Because, well, at the time, we were.”

“Uhu?” Bucky prompts.

“But,” Steve continues, “since there’s been a few…developments since then, I was thinking… you know, should we mention that, or…?” He trails off, hoping that Bucky will get what he’s asking about. Bucky is quiet, and as they continue to trudge along the sidewalk, he kicks away a lump of snow lying in their path.

“You don’t wanna tell them?” he asks after a while.

“No, it’s not that,” Steve explains quickly. “I just wanna make sure I don’t say anything to them about us that you don’t want me to.”

“Like what?” Bucky asks with a confused frown.

“Well… I mean, like the fact that the reason you’re living with me is because you’re homeless,” Steve suggests. “And currently unemployed. That we met when you tried to swipe my wallet?”

“Oh…” Bucky kicks away another lump of snow. “Those things…”

“Yeah,” Steve says. He swallows. “Like… they’re gonna wanna know about you, regardless,” he points out. “And if you don’t want them to know about any of that, then I won’t tell them. I don’t want to embarrass you or anything.”

Bucky snorts out a laugh, shaking his head. “Thanks,” he mumbles towards the ground. “That’s considerate of you.”

“So?” Steve prompts gently. “What do you want to tell them? About you? And us?”

Bucky shrugs, worrying his lower lip, and Steve waits.

“I don’t really care,” Bucky decides after a while, “tell them whatever you want.”

“They’re gonna tease us about it,” Steve warns softly. “Or, me, at least. You know how friends are.”

“Yeah,” Bucky says, “I do. And I don’t mind it,” he says firmly. “I mean, they probably think we’ve been fooling around all this time anyway, right?”

“There’s probably been a lot of speculations, yeah,” Steve agrees. “Especially since I haven’t really told them anything.”

“Nothing?” Bucky asks in surprise.

“No,” Steve says earnestly. “I figured that was our business.”

“Ah.” Bucky kicks away another snow lump. “So, what are we telling them, then?” he asks after a few more steps. “That I’m your roommate?”

“If that’s what you want?” Steve offers, before adding, quickly. “Or, you know, you could be my boyfriend? If you’re okay with that, that is.”
“Yeah,” Bucky agrees. He licks his lip. “I guess I could be.”

“So…” Steve swallows down a nervous croak, before continuing, “are we…like, together, then?”

“I think so,” Bucky murmurs. He clears his throat with a slight flicker of his eyes towards Steve. “If that’s all right with you?”

“Yeah,” Steve says, nodding. “Yeah, I’m cool with it.”

“All right.”

“All right.”

Wow, Steve suddenly has a bit of trouble breathing.

Boyfriend.

He has a boyfriend.

Bucky is his boyfriend.

He lets out a short, astonished laugh, and when Bucky turns his head to look at him with a quizzical frown, Steve just stops, pulls him in by the arm, and presses a soft, happy kiss against his lips. Bucky is surprised by the sudden attack, but he gets with the program soon enough. The tip of his nose is cold against Steve’s cheek, but his lips are warm, and oh, Steve is so in love he feel as if he could just explode right there on the spot.

Nat opens the door only half a second after Steve takes his finger off the doorbell.

“Hey!” she greets cheerfully. “I saw you from the window, come on in!” She holds her arm out in invitation for them to step inside, but Steve’s too busy staring at her shirt to even notice.

“Wow,” he says with a reverent gape. “That is the most horrible thing I’ve ever seen.”

“I know, right?” Nat says, and her face lights up like a sun as she holds the shirt out by the hemline, looking down on it. “I found it in a second hand store yesterday!”

The shirt in question, is light gray, and on its center there’s a big, chubby cat who, from the looks of it, has just finished the task of annihilating a Christmas tree. It has a string of Christmas lights in it’s mouth which in turn continues around and circles the entire sweater, including the arms, and are as of now currently blinking in multicolored delight towards Steve and Bucky’s wide-eyed faces.

“What are you guys doing?” comes another voice floating from somewhere inside the apartment. “Either get in or get out, it’s freezing!”

“Come on,” Nat says with an eye roll, “or Mr. Freeze-a-Lot in there will throw a fit.”

“So Tony’s already here, huh?” Steve says as he steps over the threshold with Bucky following close behind.
“Are you kidding?” Nat says with a smile, “he got here first. You’re the last ones in. Hey!” she continues, switching her attention towards Bucky and nearly making the man choke with surprise as she grabs him around the neck in a bone crushing hug. “Welcome!”

“Thanks,” Bucky groans, smiling, even though he looks a bit shocked from the enthusiastic welcome when Nat lets him go.

“Here,” Steve says, offering her the plastic bag he had brought with him.

“Please tell me these are your Christmas cookies,” Nat begs as she takes the bag, looking inside.

“What’s left of them,” Steve confesses. “Your gifts are in there too, as usual, but you don’t get to open them today.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Nat sighs. “Clint’s still gonna open his the moment you leave, though,” she points out.

“As if you won’t?” Steve counters.

“Haven’t you heard of peer pressure?” Nat asks innocently. “It’s not that easy to resist.”

Steve laughs and shrugs out of his jacket, upon which Nat gives a delighted little shriek as she grabs him by the shoulder to turn his body around to face her.

“Oh, that is glorious,” she says, flicking the pom-pom on Steve’s stomach with a huge grin. “Sam is gonna love that.”

“I bet,” Steve agrees. “Where is he?”

“In the living room. He and Tony were talking about drinking games when I left them. I don’t know if they’ve decided which one to go with yet.”

“Are we gonna have to go through another one of Tony's drunken stupors?” Steve says with a grin. He hangs his jacket up amongst the collection of discarded jackets already on the coat rack. “Last time he ended up falling asleep in a potted plant.”

“Yeah,” Nat says slowly, walking backwards down the hallway leading into the apartment, “turns out Mr. Stark doesn't remember that. We’ve already asked.”

“Well, as long as he promises not to sing this time,” Steve says with a smirk. He takes a step, ready to follow Natasha down the hallway, when he feels Bucky grab him by the arm and pull him back.

“Hold on,” Bucky says, lowering his voice into a whisper. “Stark? As in Stark Technologies?”

“Yeah,” Steve answers dumbly, because, yeah, he might have forgotten to mention that part, and Bucky lets out a meek whimper.

“Oh, my god,” he whines. “Oh, god... Do you— Steve, Stark Tech is the one of the biggest companies in the world. They’re right up there with Microsoft, and Apple, and—and— Jesus...!”
“Bucky, it’s okay,” Steve says, stepping in closer when Bucky begins to nervously card his fingers through his hair. “Tony’s a great guy, there’s no need to be nervous.”

“Can you even hear yourself?” Bucky hisses. “Tony Stark is a god. A literal genius.”

“He also sucks at Mario Kart, if that helps.” Steve points out, but when Bucky just stares at him, he sighs and puts his hand on Bucky’s shoulder. “Listen, tough guy,” he says firmly. “I’ve known Tony since he got his first set of building blocks, okay? He’s a total softie on the inside, which he tries to hide by being a snarky bastard, just like you,” he adds with a smirk. “You’re gonna get along just fine, so stop freaking out.”

“Do you have any idea how many times I’ve stood outside a Stark Tech store, staring at their stuff through the window?” Bucky asks seriously. “I mean, their new smartphone alone—”

“Oh,” Steve says with a grimace, “please, don’t bring that thing up in front of Tony, or we’ll never get him to shut up. He’s so ridiculously smug about how it beat Apple’s new model in the last test round, it’s starting to become creepy.”

Bucky lets out a snorted laughter, and Steve smiles at him.

“Hey, did you guys get stuck in the door, or what?” Nat calls out, poking her head around the corner of the hallway, and Steve gives Bucky’s shoulder an encouraging squeeze.

“It’s gonna be fine,” he promises.

As they walk into the living room, they’re immediately greeted by Sam, who’s dressed in a bright purple Angry Birds Christmas sweater. Upon spotting them, Sam immediately thrusts two pre-poured drinks into their hands while grinning widely.

“Glad to see you’re still alive,” he says with a pointed look at Steve, and Steve snorts, rolling his eyes as he steps in to give the other man a hug.

“You mean about your sticky-fingered friend there?” Sam mumbles back. “Nah. Figured you wanted to keep the lid on that for a while longer.”

“Thanks,” Steve says, relaxing a bit, and Sam pulls out of the hug with a friendly slap against his shoulder.

“Hey, you can pay me back later,” he says, but before Steve has time to retort, Sam has already turned towards Bucky, hand outstretched. “Name’s Sam,” he greets. “Welcome to the team.”

“Bucky,” Bucky replies, grabbing Sam’s hand. “And thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” Sam says as he sends Bucky’s shirt a quick evaluating glance. “Nice sweater,” he says before turning back towards Steve. “Yours too, Rudolph.”

“Oh, knock it off,” Steve grumbles when both Bucky and Sam proceed to grin at him, and he turns away from the duo in favor of approaching the three men sitting on the couch.

“Hey, Tony,” he says loudly, and Bucky’s smug smile immediately falters when Tony looks up from the conversation he’s currently having with Bruce. Bruce is wearing a green sweater depicting Santa getting stuck upside down in a chimney. Tony himself is dressed in a red shirt and a black bowtie, topped with an absolutely ghastly multi colored button-up cardigan, featuring
every single Christmas motif known to man.

“Hello, Rogers,” he salutes, “nice of you to finally join us.”

“I know,” Steve says with an apologetic wave of his hand. “We got delayed. Hey, Clint.”

“Hey,” says the third man sitting on the couch. He is blond, with sharp, attentive eyes, and he is dressed in a red and white sweater vest covered in candy canes and bow ties.

“And you’re one to talk,” Steve continues, turning back to Tony once more, “you’re always late.”

“Fashionably late,” Tony corrects with a reprimanding finger. “It’s expected of me.” His gaze shifts, moving over Steve’s shoulder towards Bucky. “So this is the mystery man we’ve never heard so much about?” he asks curiously as he stands up from his seat. “Tony,” he says, reaching his hand over the coffee table. “Nice to finally meet you.”

Behind Steve, Bucky looks as if he’s just been confronted with a man-eating tiger, and when he takes Tony’s outstretched hand, he sends Steve a helpless glance from the corner of his eye.

“Pleasure,” he mumbles under his breath, and when Tony raises a brow in Steve’s direction, Steve responds by just winking at him and smiling knowingly. Tony gets the hint, and quickly turns back towards Bucky with a wide smile.

“So, Bucky,” he says, sitting back down. “I have one very serious question for you.”

“You do?” Bucky croaks.

“Yes,” Tony says, leaning forward as he braces his elbows on his knees, looking Bucky in the eye. “Exactly what is your opinion on drinking games?”

Bucky blinks, licking his lips. “I…don’t know,” he says slowly. “I guess they’re all right?”

“Ha!” Tony exclaims as he turns towards Bruce with a triumphant grin. “See! He’s on my side too.”

Bruce groans, slumping back against the couch. “That’s not fair,” he complains. “Steve, help me out here.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Steve says sweetly. “I think a little drinking game might be a good way to get this party started.”

Bruce sighs, looking up at the ceiling. “I’m not good with alcohol…” he whines, but Tony just gives him an encouraging pat on the shoulder.

“Oh, cheer up, big guy,” he says, “we’ll give you a free pass every third drink, and you’ll be just fine.” He turns back around, looking at Bucky. “How about you, newbie? You think you can handle the percentage?”

“Pretty sure,” Bucky says with a confident smirk.

“Sounds like you’ve got some competition there, Stark,” Clint muses from his corner of the couch, and Tony smirks.

“Are you guys still talking about that drinking game?” Nat asks, reappearing in the doorway. “You’re all gonna end up passed out on the floor before it’s even ten o’clock.”
“Oh, drop the act, missy,” Sam says with a snort. “I saw the bottle out there in the kitchen, and if that’s not intended for shots, then I’m a goddamn ostrich.”

Nat ignores him, and instead goes straight for Bucky. “By the way, Buck,” she says, slapping his arm for attention, “I asked around about jobs for you. If you’re still interested, I could get you a phone number for a hardware store down in South Manhattan?”

“You're unemployed?” Tony asks, perking up in his seat, and Bucky shifts his eyes between them nervously.

“I’m…in between jobs, at the moment,” he says, glancing at Steve, and Steve smiles back at him encouragingly.

“Really?” Tony asks. “What did you do before?”

“I— Uh—”

“So what’s the story with you two?” Clint suddenly asks, bulldozing over Tony's question while gesturing in between Steve and Bucky with his eyes narrowed into a squint. “Nat said you were living together now?”

Next to Steve, Bucky immediately goes rigid. “Uh—” he says, hesitating, and Steve quickly decides that Bucky shouldn’t have to face this kind of interrogation alone.

“We are,” he says firmly, ignoring the way Sam’s eyebrows shoot up, and the way Nat smirks victoriously as Steve reaches out and takes Bucky’s hand.

“Oh,” Clint says slowly, eyes glinting as he looks up at Steve’s face. “Like that, huh?”

“Yeah,” Steve replies calmly. “Exactly like that.”

Clint immediately sends Bruce a confident little smirk, and by Steve’s side, Nat gives Sam a shallow jab with her elbow, holding out her hand. Sam digs his hand into his back pocket with an eye roll to the ceiling, before begrudgingly slapping a five dollar bill into her palm.

“Five dollars?” Steve asks sarcastically. “That’s all we were worth?”

Natasha just smirks, and folds the bill with a zip of her fingers before tucking it into her own pocket with a final, triumphant glance in Sam’s direction.

“All right then!” Tony announces, standing up again. “Now when that’s been taken care of, how about we get this party started?”

Steve immediately slaps his hands together, rubbing them enthusiastically as he sinks down on the couch next to Tony, Bucky following suit.

“So, what are we playing this time?” he asks cheerfully. Tony glances at him, and then down at the pom-pom sticking out from Steve's abdomen.

“Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer.”
Thank you for reading! <3

You're more than welcome to follow me on tumblr if you want, and for those of you who use it, I'm also on Twitter. Feel free to drop me a line! :)

Until tomorrow, sweeties! <3
Thursday, December 22nd

Steve discovers two more things about Bucky that night.

The first, is that Bucky is *extremely* competitive.

During their game of Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer, he really, *really* puts effort into getting all the gestures right, seemingly completely oblivious to the fact that the intention of the game is basically to *lose*.

It's endearing to watch, even more so when the alcohol begins to get to him and he messes up even *more*, laughing through the whole thing. To see him fit in with the group of Steve's friends so easily makes Steve feel downright emotional where he sits, repeatedly failing to do the correct gestures for the right reindeer, simply because he's too busy staring at Bucky to pay attention.

After a few rounds, the game slowly dies down in favor of conversation. Steve strategically changes his seat to go sit next to Clint, so that Bucky gets to talk to Tony, who immediately takes the opportunity to do so.

The alcohol must have done its job right, because when Steve looks over ten minutes later, they're both sitting comfortably relaxed and hunched over the screen of Tony's (new) smartphone. Tony is pointing at the screen, talking excitedly, and Bucky nods while eagerly tracing the movement of
The corner of Steve's mouth quirks up into a pleased little smirk at the sight. Mission accomplished.

Nat and Bruce – of whom the latter actually got through the drinking game surprisingly well – are engaged in a lively discussion regarding exactly how strong one would have to be in order to toss an actual reindeer, while Clint, Sam, and Steve do more party related things. Such as discussing drink recipes and comparing them to famous song titles.

Sam is in the middle of arguing against Steve’s suggestion to rename the classic Whiskey on the Rocks to Smoke on the Water, when suddenly Clint turns towards Steve with a curious look on his face.

“So what kind of music does Bucky listen too?” he asks, and Sam cuts himself off. For a moment, he seems to contemplate what he’d be more interested in; winning the ongoing argument, or being nosy. Steve doesn’t have to guess in order to know which option that’s gonna win out.

“He doesn't really look like he's the mainstream music sort of guy,” Sam agrees, and Clint immediately leans forward in his seat with a triumphant smirk on his face. They both look expectantly at Steve, and Steve slowly turns to throw a glance over his shoulder towards the couch. By now, Tony has put the phone down, and is instead watching while Bucky tries to explain something while gesturing animatedly in the air in front of Tony's face.

“I don't know,” he admits, and it cuts into his heart a little to realize that he's telling the god honest truth. He has absolutely no idea what kind of music Bucky enjoys. He just knows that it's not Christmas music, and even though Bucky's fashion sense surely suggests that punk might be an assumable genre, it might also not be.

“You’ve never talked about it?” Sam asks, sounding surprised, and Steve shrugs.

“We never brought it up,” he says simply.

“What about his hobbies?” Clint asks. “His favorite color?”

Steve opens his mouth, but then he closes it again. He wants to say exercising and black, but the moment the words enter his head, he's suddenly not so sure. They never really discussed these things. Never saw the need to. Now, whilst sitting there beneath Sam’s and Clint’s scrutinizing gaze, that feels like a mistake.

“Really?” Sam asks, raising his brow. “Do you at least know what kind of food the dude likes?”

“Italian,” Steve answers immediately, relieved to finally have been asked a question he can answer. “He likes Italian food.”

Sam gives him another long look, and then he picks up his glass from the coffee table with a light throw of his head towards the kitchen. “Can I talk to you for a moment?” he asks, already moving to stand. Steve gives Clint a quizzical look, but when Clint simply waves him away with an uncaring shrug, Steve gets up and silently follows Sam into the kitchen.

“What?” he asks, once they're alone, and Sam turns around to look at him with a heavy sigh.

“Steve, man,” he says softly. “What are you doing?”

“I'm sorry?” Steve says, and Sam puts his glass down on the counter with another exasperated
breath before looking back at him.

“Listen,” he says, “I get it. You're in love, and that's great, really.”

“But…?” Steve prompts slowly.

“But, I'm worried,” Sam admits. “I'm worried that you're getting in too deep with this guy. I mean…what do you know about him, really?”

“I know enough,” Steve answers simply.

“And what does that mean?” Sam asks. “Enough?”

“Exactly what it sounds like,” Steve counters with a frown. Then he sighs, shaking his head. “Sam, I know you only mean well, but there's really no need to worry. Bucky and I, we— We've already been through this. Like, maybe not exactly this, but...he is who he says he is. He hasn't lied to me, not once, and he has never asked me for anything. Not even food.”

“Nah, he just stole your wallet,” Sam points out soberly.

“That was before,” Steve argues. “Things have changed since then. In more ways than one,” he adds under his breath.

“So this is the real deal?” Sam asks. “You're actually dating this guy? For real?”

“Yeah,” Steve answers simply. “For real.”

Sam looks at him, and Steve braces himself for another onslaught of questions. Then Sam's lips curl up into a smug smile. “Told ya you were gonna end up hitting on him, didn't I?” he says, grinning, and Steve lets out an embarrassed chuckle.

“Yeah, you did,” he admits.

“You damn right I did,” Sam replies cheekily, punching Steve on the arm. “Your boy Sam is never wrong. I know you, man. I can tell when you're about to fall head over heels for somebody.”

“Don't flatter yourself, Wilson,” Nat cuts in as she walks into the kitchen, heading for the fridge. “He's not very good at hiding it in the first place.”

“Who asked for your opinion?” Sam throws back. “I'm the best friend here, not you.”

“You don't have to ask,” Nat says sweetly, turning back around with a freshly poured drink in her glass. “My opinions come for free.” She takes a sip out of her drink, and nods towards Steve. “I mean, look at him,” she says. “He's practically glowing. Poor boy’s so smitten, he's gonna start sprouting little heart shaped clouds out of his ears at any given moment.”

“Yeah, yeah, laugh it up,” Steve says while ducking his head with a smile. “You're just smug because you won the bet.”

“Which reminds me,” Nat says with a snap of her fingers, “Clint owes me another twenty. He bet you guys would never admit to being together without being drunk first,” she explains when she sees the confused look on Steve's face.

“Wow, you guys really discussed this, didn't you?” Steve says, arching his eyebrows in surprise.

“Are you kidding?” Sam asks. “This is the biggest bet we've had since we found out Nat got a
“You bet on my tattoo?” Natasha says sharply. Then she narrows her eyes. “Who won?”

“We still don't know, because you haven't told us what you got yet,” Sam shoots back. “And Clint refuses to tell us. I even threatened to steal his hearing aids, but he didn’t bat an eyelash.”

“He reads lips,” Nat informs him soberly. “Most of the time, he doesn’t even bother to turn the things on.”

“Figures…” Sam mutters. “So what did you get?” he asks, nodding towards her body. “I think it’s time we’re allowed to know.”

“It's a spider,” Steve says calmly, looking down at his drink. “With a body shaped like a heart.”

“Hold on, you know?” Sam asks, gaping. “Since when?”

Steve just sends him a knowing little smirk, before glancing over at Nat. “It's on her left hip,” he says, “right beneath the bikini line. Right?” he adds, and Sam turns to stare at Natasha in disbelief.

“Really?” he asks pleadingly, and when she only smiles back, he lets out a disappointed sigh to the ceiling. “Man, a brother just can't seem to catch a break today.”

“Why, what did you bet?” Steve asks curiously.

“A quote, on the ribs,” Sam admits sullenly. “Dammit, I knew I should have gone for the hip…”

“What about your bad boy out there?” Nat asks, turning towards Steve. “I mean, he's pretty covered up at the moment, but most guys who have tattoos all the way up their neck usually have more than one.”

“Oh, he's got them,” Steve admits, smirking when Nat’s face lights up. “And they're big,” he adds smugly.

“Steve Rogers, you lucky bastard,” Nat says with a dramatic sigh, and Steve takes a nonchalant sip out of his glass.

“So that's it?” Sam asks. “You're gonna be living with that guy from here on out?”

“I sure hope so,” Steve replies with a chuckle. “I mean, at first we decided that he was just gonna stay for the holidays, but... Well, let's just say he's not leaving anytime soon.”

“So he knew that it was just gonna be for the holidays?” Sam asks slowly.


“Nothing,” Sam defends himself quickly. “Just that—I mean, hasn't it occurred to you that...you know, Bucky might be using you?”

“Sam!” Nat gasps, giving him a reprimanding slap across the chest.

“What?” Sam throws his hands out to the side. “I'm just saying it could be a possibility!”

“You seriously don't have a single romantic bone in your body, do you?” Nat accuses with a glare.
“On the contrary, I'm very much a romantic,” Sam objects, “I just don't want my boy here to end up with a broken heart, there's nothing wrong with that.”

“Bucky is not using me,” Steve says calmly. “I've literally had to nag him on a daily basis, just so that he'll let me buy him food. Him taking advantage of me is the last thing I'm worried about.”

“Wow…” Nat murmurs, smiling at him fondly. “You really do like him, don't you?”


A soft knock from behind startles all three of them, and when Steve turns around, he sees that Bucky’s standing in the doorway, smiling shyly at them.

“Hey,” Bucky says towards Nat while making a vague gesture towards the living room. “I was sent to get ice? Tony is talking about some drink he wants to make.”

“I'll get it,” Nat volunteers immediately, turning towards the fridge.

“Thanks,” Bucky says. He walks into the room and Steve feels his heart give an affectionate little leap inside his chest when Bucky then proceeds to put an arm around his waist.

“Hey,” he says softly.

“Hey,” Bucky answers, and Steve can't help the smile that creeps across his mouth as Bucky leans in and gives him a quick peck on the lips.

“Sam, will you help me bring this out?” Natasha asks politely, gesturing towards two bottles sitting on the counter.

“Uh, sure,” Sam says quickly.

While Sam gathers the bottles in his arms, Nat picks up the bowl with ice from the fridge. As she walks ahead of Sam out the door, she sends a knowing little wink Bucky's way, and just like that, Steve and Bucky are alone.

“What was that about?” Bucky asks with a light chuckle.

“Nothing. They're just teasing,” Steve explains. “They think it's hilarious that I've managed to find someone like you, out of all people.”

“Someone like me?” Bucky asks, frowning slightly.

“You know,” Steve drawls. “Someone so dark, mysterious, and sexy like you. I think they've always thought I'd end up with someone a little less... streetwise.”

Bucky smirks, picking up on the suggestive purr in Steve’s voice.

“Is that so?” he asks softly. “Should I be flattered?”

“Oh, definitely,” Steve answers. He gives Bucky another soft kiss on the lips, and then heads over to the fridge. “You want another beer or something?” he asks while pulling the door open.

“Nah, I'm not thirsty,” Bucky says, coming up behind him to press himself up against the flat of Steve’s back.

This is when Steve discovers the second thing about Bucky that he hadn’t been aware of before.
Not only is Bucky a flirty drunk.

He’s a horny one too.

Steve pauses when he feels the warmth of Bucky’s body slot up against his back. When Bucky follows that up by skating his fingers against the sensitive skin at the nape of Steve’s neck, Steve has to grip around the refrigerator door to keep his knees from buckling right there.

Bucky hums as he presses a winding trail of kisses up Steve’s neck, and as he buries his face against the side of Steve’s throat with a soft moan, Steve’s entire thought process promptly turns into a shivering mess of, Oh, god yes, please…!

“You know,” Bucky murmurs against the back of Steve’s ear, “now that I’ve got time to think about it, you actually do look pretty damn cute in that godawful sweater of yours…” Steve swallows, failing to hold back a gasp when Bucky circles his arms around his waist, pulling him closer. “I wonder,” Bucky purrs, “how cute you’d look if I got on my knees and blew you, right here against the kitchen counter?”

“Jesus, Buck…” Steve groans, but he still tips his head to the side to give the other man more access to his neck, while clenching his fingers hard around Bucky’s forearms through his black sweater.

“Yeah,” Bucky hums. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

“Oh, sweetheart…” Slowly, Steve closes the refrigerator door and twists himself around in Bucky’s arms, facing him with a smile. “As much as I’d want nothing more than for you to do just that, I really don’t think Nat and the others would approve.”

“We don’t have to do it here,” Bucky coaxes. He rocks his hips forward, and Steve bites down on his lower lip when he feels the hardness that pushes in against the back of his thigh at the action. “C’mon,” Bucky murmurs. “I promise I’ll get you off quickly.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt it,” Steve retorts honestly. His fingers twitch when Bucky leans in to mouth over his pulse, and he gasps. “But… Where should we go?”

“Every house has a bathroom, right?” Bucky suggests innocently, and Steve groans under his breath while eagerly rubbing his hands down the length of Bucky’s forearms before stopping. He hesitates.

They shouldn’t.

It’s something teenagers do, and it’s rude towards the others. They’re two grown adults; they should be able to display more self-control than this.

But, oh, Bucky’s body is so warm, his hands so strong where they grip around the small of Steve’s back… The mere touch of them is enough to muddle Steve’s brain more efficiently than the alcohol has, and he grits his teeth, silently cursing himself for his lack of self restraint.

“How fast?” he breathes.

“Faster than you think,” Bucky shoots back, and yeah, that pretty much settles it.

Somehow – Steve can’t for the life of him figure out how – they manage to get through the hallway and into the bathroom without being spotted. Bucky more-or-less shoves Steve inside and locks the door behind them in one single movement, and Steve ends up backing up right into the
cupboard next to the sink with a loud rattle.

Bucky grimaces at the noise, holding up his finger in front of his lips to shush him, but fails miserably due to the fact that he’s already giggling like a goddamn idiot.

“Quiet,” Steve scolds with an anxious snicker, reaching for Bucky’s shoulder to calm him down, but he can’t stop laughing himself, so the reprimand ends up falling flat.

“You’re such a goddamn klutz,” Bucky hisses under his breath, and Steve has to literally lean against the sink just to keep himself upright from all the laughter threatening to spill over his lips, because this is just so ridiculous.

Bucky’s lips stretch into a wide grin as he watches Steve try to compose himself. Then, looking Steve straight in the eye as he does it, he hooks his thumbs into Steve’s belt loops, pulls him in close, and drops to his knees.

The act comes so suddenly, and with such blunt intent, that it completely steals the laughter out of Steve’s throat. As Bucky makes quick work of Steve’s jeans, Steve reaches down to card through Bucky’s hair with one hand while grabbing around the edge of the sink with the other, breath hitching when Bucky pulls him out of his underwear without any hesitation whatsoever.

Steve watches, mesmerized as Bucky takes him into his mouth, and he has to remind himself that they’re literally only two walls away from his entire circle of friends to keep from moaning out loud.

Bucky’s mouth is glorious, as always, and Bucky sure doesn’t waste time. Steve can feel his breathing grow increasingly ragged with each dip of Bucky’s head, and he swallows down a breathless groan when he feels the other’s tongue piercing drag against the bottom of his shaft. He feels drunk, in more ways than one. His head is swimming, his hips rolling, and his thoughts all feel floaty and fuzzy around the edges. Primal and basic, in the most simplest and carnal of ways.

“Wait,” he pants as he tugs at the shoulder of Bucky’s shirt, urging for him to stand up.

“C’mere…”

Bucky does, half-hauled up by Steve’s grip on his shirt, and Steve mashes their lips together with a muffled moan. Grabbing for Bucky’s studded belt, Steve manages to get Bucky’s pants unbuttoned and down without breaking the kiss, and he feels Bucky’s breath shake against his lips when he grips around him and begins to stroke.

That’s how they end up. With Steve’s back shoved up against Natasha’s bathroom cabinet and his hands down the front of Bucky’s pants, while Bucky rocks into his hand with eager thrusts while trying to reciprocate the favor.

It doesn’t take long before the pace turns frantic, growing hot and heavy as they breathe each other in. Bucky has begun to whine in the back of his throat, and the sound fuels Steve on to the point where he feels as if he’s about to combust. His hips stutter, and his eyelids threaten to flutter shut, but he fights to keep them open, because he wants to see Bucky’s face when the other comes undone before him. Bucky’s face. Bucky’s beautiful, gorgeous face…

His heart nearly comes flying out of his throat when suddenly there’s a hard knock on the door. They both still, panting hard as the sound of Natasha’s voice comes floating through the wooden barrier.

“Steve? Are you in there?”
Bucky and Steve look at each other, and Steve swallows.

“Yeah,” he calls back.

“Is Bucky with you?”

Steve looks down, and Bucky raises a brow at him.

“Yes?” he replies, somewhat hesitantly.

“Well,” Nat says firmly, “I don’t really care what the two of you are doing, but there’s alcohol at this party and some people really have to pee, so hurry up.”

Steve opens his mouth to answer, but shuts it just as fast when Bucky, without warning, resumes the movements of his hand.

“Steve?” Nat asks, and Steve tips his head back against the cupboard with a quiet gasp.

“Yeah, got it,” he assures her through slightly gritted teeth while sending a reprimanding glare Bucky’s way. “We’ll be out in a minute.” He holds his breath, listening intently, and when he hears Nat’s footsteps disappear down the hallway, he lets the air back out in a relieved rush.

He looks down at Bucky, and Bucky looks right back. Next thing, they both break down in a joined fit of giggles as they slump against each other in combined relief and embarrassment.

“Only one minute?” Bucky asks with a smirk.

“I know, I panicked,” Steve admits with a chuckle before smirking down at the man in his arms. “Think you can manage that?” he teases.

“Oh, baby,” Bucky murmurs with a grin as he leans in to nip at Steve’s bottom lip with his teeth. “She can go ahead and fucking time me…”

Steve’s responding giggle morphs into a throaty moan when Bucky’s hand picks up speed, and Bucky breathes out a low curse against the knitted surface of Steve’s sweater when Steve retaliates the action. Soon, Natasha’s interruption is all but forgotten, and when Steve bites back another moan, Bucky answers with a similar sound of his own.

“You close?” he pants, and Steve nods while gulping down another panting breath. Bucky hums, licking across his lips as he moves his gaze up to focus on Steve’s face with a hungry gleam in his eyes. “That’s it,” he urges under his breath. “That’s it, sweetheart, c’mon. C’mon, Stevie, come for me, baby…”

Steve nods again, feeling the gravel of Bucky’s voice travel down his spine. He can feel Bucky squeeze his fingers around him, how he angles his hand to the back just slightly, and then Steve gasps, eyes flying open.

“Oh,” he chokes. “Oh, god, Bucky—”

That is about as far as he gets, and then Bucky’s mouth swallows him down as Bucky drops to his knees for the second time. Steve grits his teeth, fingers curling into the hair at the top of the other’s head when the movements of Bucky’s tongue and throat milks him dry. “Jesus…” he groans, biting out the words under his breath. “Jesus, Buck, Jesus Christ…”

Bucky moans, and then he straightens up to sit back onto his heels, bracing his weight against the
sink with one hand while using the other to jerk himself off. The sight and sound of Steve’s orgasm already has him balancing on the edge, eyes half-closed and mouth open as his hand moves up and down his shaft in quick, hurried strokes, chasing the edge.

The sight is nothing less than breathtaking, and without a word, Steve reaches down and helps him up into a stand once more. Letting his hand silently fold on top of Bucky’s fingers, taking over, he searches out Bucky’s eyes through the lingering haze in his own. Bucky’s jaw goes slack when their gazes lock, and he swallows down a moan, gulping for breath when Steve nods, urging him on. Three heartbeats later, Bucky comes, breath catching in the back of his throat with a startled gasp while Steve angles his release into the sink.

Steve strokes him through it, slowly, tenderly, and Bucky bites down over his own lip to keep the sounds of his euphoric state to a minimum while the orgasm shakes through his limbs. Once the wave has passed, he slumps down against Steve’s shoulder with a drowsy sigh, and Steve can feel him rub his forehead against the knitted fabric of Steve’s shoulder, as if he’s trying to burrow his way underneath Steve’s very skin.

The afterglow is nice, but as much as Steve would like to stay like that, the reality of the situation is still picking for attention in the back of his head. “Hey,” he says softly, nudging at Bucky’s shoulder. “Minute’s up.”

“You think Natasha told the others?” Bucky murmurs into Steve’s shirt, albeit not sounding too hopeful.

“Oh, yeah,” Steve replies while snorting out a bitter chuckle. “She totally did.”

“You think they’re gonna tease us about it?” Bucky asks.

“Most definitely.”

At that, Bucky gives an exasperated sigh, and then stands up. “I guess that was to be expected,” he admits while moving to tear off a piece of toilet paper before wetting it in the sink. He cleans himself off, and Steve, who takes the hint, uses the sink to wash the evidence of Bucky’s release off his own hands. Then, once both Steve and the sink are clean, Bucky tucks himself back into his pants and washes his hands as well, before walking up to the door and unlocking it.

“Ready to face the music?” he asks, creaking the door open, and Steve snorts out an amused laugh through his nose as he steps through to walk ahead of Bucky towards the living room. His knees feel wobbly, his vision blurred, but if that’s due to the alcohol in his system or the lingering haze of his orgasm, he can’t tell.

The voices coming from the living room sounds cheerful and happy as they approach, laughter mixing with the notes of the music streaming from the speakers. It dies down the moment Bucky and Steve comes into view in the doorway, and Steve knows that they’ll most likely never get to hear the end of this. Yet, for some odd reason, he can’t seem to stop smiling.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you again for reading guys, you are all so lovely <3
As always, you're more than welcome to follow me on tumblr, or on Twitter. My inbox is always open, and you're free to message me if you want! :) 

Until tomorrow! Love you! <3
Thursday, December 22nd

Steve more-or-less attacks Bucky the moment they get through the door of their own apartment.

The mockery regarding their bathroom escapade back at the party had not been as crass as Steve had feared. There had been one or two jabs about it, and a lot of wiggling eyebrows, but nothing major. Probably because the group didn't want to make Bucky feel bad – which is awfully considerate, considering the normal tone the people Steve calls his friends uses amongst each other.

Once Bucky realized that they weren't gonna get kicked out, or even directly confronted about what they’d done, the bastard had almost become smug about the whole thing. Then, he had begun to tease.

Steve's neck is one of the most sensitive parts of his body – it had only taken Bucky one or two make-out sessions on the couch to figure that out – and at the end of the party, Steve, honest to god, wished that he'd have chosen to wear a turtleneck instead.

Fingers, lips, breath – there was no weapon Bucky seemed above using to succeed in his mission to render Steve a stuttering, shivering mess. Steve had never before contemplated how difficult it would be to keep up with a conversation while having a finger draw lazy circles against the skin just behind your ear, and after tonight, he no longer has to.
Four hours. That’s how long it had carried on for. Four \textit{excruciatingly} vexing hours of trying to keep a straight face, while Bucky innocently kept pushing Steve’s buttons in the most inconspicuous and covert of ways.

To extract revenge only seems appropriate.

That’s why, the moment the door closes behind the two of them, Steve turns around, grabs Bucky by the front of his jacket, and shoves him up against the thing with a low growl as he mashes their lips together.

To his combined surprise and disappointment, however, Bucky appears to have been expecting exactly that. At Steve’s assault, he simply responds by grabbing around Steve’s arms, pulling him closer at the same time as he pushes himself forward and up against Steve’s body with an eager groan.

The blood in Steve’s veins runs volcano hot when Bucky begins to tear at the zipper of Steve's jacket, and Steve immediately joins in to help Bucky with his own. God, he wants Bucky out of those damn clothes \textit{right now}. Even though a part of Steve is literally \textit{dying} for Bucky to let him fuck him while Bucky still has the Christmas sweater on.

He has no idea how he knows that’s the kind of activity they’re heading towards – he just does. They haven’t gone that far yet, even though they’d been well on their way for quite a few times, but oh, it is so happening, Steve can \textit{feel} it.

Kicking his boots off as he goes, Steve drags Bucky along with him into the living room, grunting when they have to momentarily break the kiss in order to get their scarves off. Bucky is still working on the laces of his left combat boot when Steve grabs around his jaw to resume the kissing, and Bucky ends up having to hop on one leg for a moment, before he finally manages to tear the shoe off his foot.

Chuckling against the seam of their mouths, he then pushes Steve backwards. Going with it, Steve ends up with his back pressed against the wall, right next to the doorway to the kitchen, with Bucky snaking his hands up underneath the hem of his sweater.

“Is this what you’ve been waiting for?” Bucky purrs. He ends the sentence by licking into Steve’s mouth, and his tongue piercing clacks when he drags it against the back of Steve's teeth with a teasing flick. Steve rolls his hips as he reaches around to grab around the small of Bucky’s back, pulling him closer.

“You really have to ask?” he shoots back. “As if you don’t know what you’ve been up to all night.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Bucky denies flatly, and Steve groans when the other moves in to nip at his right earlobe. “I just want to show my appreciation.”

“Like you did in Nat’s bathroom?” Steve counters breathily, failing to suppress the quaky that goes through his body when Bucky lets out a chuckle against his ear.

“That was different. I was horny.”

“Yeah, I noticed,” Steve comments. “Jesus, when you told me you were a flirty drunk, I didn’t expect it to be so hands-on.”

“Well, it’s not like you can blame me,” Bucky retorts. “I mean, you did look pretty fucking cute.” Then he laughs, and Steve hisses when Bucky pulls lightly at his earlobe with his teeth before adding, with a purr, “I didn’t even have to drink \textit{half} the bar to realize that…”
It takes Steve a few ticks, and then he leans his head back with a groan, blushing when he realizes what Bucky’s referring to.

“Oh,” he says sheepishly. “So you heard that, huh?”

“The walls are pretty thin in here,” Bucky admits, sounding pleased with himself. “And with the way you thunked your head against the table, I thought you’d fallen and injured yourself. Of course I had to investigate.”

“Damn sneak,” Steve accuses. “Eavesdropping isn’t considered polite, you know.”

“Says the guy who listened in on me jerking off in the middle of the night,” Bucky points out with a light stab of his index finger against Steve’s chest. “You’re in no position to speak.”

“Point taken,” Steve breathes back, and Bucky chuckles again before returning to the task of torturing Steve’s neck and ear with his mouth. Every touch sends ripples of pleasure coursing down Steve’s spine, and before long, he finds himself fisting the fabric at the back of Bucky’s shirt with his fingers, just to keep himself standing.

“Dammit, Buck, you’re driving me crazy here…” he gasps.

“Good,” Bucky hums while raking his nails down the front of Steve’s chest. “Means I must’ve done something right.”

“Oh, definitely,” Steve gulps. He shivers when the hot breath caused by Bucky’s responding chuckle fans across the line of his neck, and lowering his hands down to grip around the firm swell of Bucky’s ass, he rocks the two of them together, hard.

Bucky groans, dropping his forehead down to press it against Steve’s shoulder with a muted thump when the movement catches him off guard. Steve responds by doing it again, just to hear the quake that rips through Bucky’s breathing when he does.

“God, I’m gonna miss this once the holidays are over,” he says with a wistful sigh, and Bucky pauses curiously.

“How come?” he asks against his neck, and Steve chuckles.

“Well, I’ll be going back to work,” he explains. “I won’t be able to see you as much.”

“Oh,” Bucky whispers. “Right.”

“Hey, it’s okay,” Steve comforts. He presses his lips against Bucky’s cheek, moving down to spread soft, fluttering butterfly kisses along his jaw. “You can be my little stay-at-home wife,” he jokes. “And have the dinner ready for me when I get back home. After you’ve cleaned the house and done the dishes, of course.”

“What makes you think I’m gonna do all that?” Bucky huffs.

“Why, you’ve gotta earn your keep around here, don’t you?”

“Excuse me?”

“Yeah, you know,” Steve says, his smile faltering a little at the sudden change in Bucky’s voice. “Since you don’t have a job yet.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” Bucky asks sharply. He pulls away, and Steve realizes that
he probably stumbled onto a sore topic here that he really shouldn’t have stumbled upon. Oh, wow…

“I was just trying to be funny,” he tries. “You know I don’t mean it like that.”

“I could get a job any day now,” Bucky objects, and it’s obvious that he’s not willing to let the topic be dropped that easily. “I’ve handed out tons of applications already, and Nat promised to get me that number to the hardware store, too.”

“Yeah, I know, and that’s great,” Steve says, “I’m just saying that you can’t assume that’s gonna lead to anything.”

“So, what’s this about then?” Bucky asks, frowning. “You don’t think I’m good enough to work, is that it?”

“I didn’t say that,” Steve objects.

“Then what are you saying?” Bucky narrows his eyes as he takes a slow step backwards, out from within the circle of Steve’s arms. “Are you ashamed of me?” he demands, and Steve blinks.

“What?” he scoffs. “Of course not, what kind of a question is that?”

“You said it yourself,” Bucky says, still looking at Steve with that suspicious gleam in his eyes. “That I’m not the kind of guy your friends pictured you with. For some reason, you seem to think they’d see you as better off with someone else.”

“That’s not true,” Steve objects.

“Really?” Bucky argues. “Then how come you didn’t want to tell them about the fact that I’m homeless? That the only reason we even met was because you caught me trying to steal your shit?”

“I was only looking out for you,” Steve argues. “I figured that telling everyone you used to be a pickpocket might not have been the best kind of introduction.”

“Because you think it’s embarrassing,” Bucky concludes grimly.

“No,” Steve says patiently, “because I didn’t want them to assume things and get the wrong idea about you.”

“Yeah, because that’s all you ever do, right?” Bucky grates sternly. “It’s all about me. About my safety, and my future.”

“Yes,” Steve exclaims. “Of course it is, what else would it be about?”

“Bullshit,” Bucky mutters, and Jesus Christ, how is it even possible that they’re having this kind of conversation right now?

“All I’ve ever tried to do is look out for you,” Steve says, leaning off the wall to stand up straight. “To make sure you always have what you need.”

“By buying me stuff?” Bucky counters with a snort. “I told you, I don’t want your money. I never asked you to get me anything, I was doing fine with what I had.”

“No, you weren’t,” Steve disagrees firmly. “You were walking around town with holes in your socks and tears in your jeans. You didn’t even have a scarf, for Christ’s sake!”
“Yeah,” Bucky retorts with a wide gesture towards the hallway. “And so you just decided to give me one of yours instead.”

“Of course I did!” Steve nearly whimpers with frustration as he says it. “What else was I supposed to have done?”

“Do you have any idea how humiliating it is, not being able to pay for your own goddamn food?” Bucky snaps at him, suddenly angry. “To know that the clothes you wear aren’t really your own? That the space you live and breathe in on a daily basis is something you’re owe to someone else?”

Steve can barely find the words. His brain is struggling in the wake of the conversation, fighting against the violent currents trying to sweep his arguments away.

“We’ve already talked about this,” he tries, mentally backtracking to similar debates that they’ve been through in the past. “I’ve told you since the first day we met, that I don’t want anything from you. You needed help and I wanted to give it to you, is that really so bad?”

“No,” Bucky grates as he holds up his index finger and points it to Steve’s face. “No, helping would have been to give me a dollar and a cheeseburger from McDonalds, and then send me on my way. What you did—” He cuts himself off, his voice breaking. His eyes are hard, but there’s a vulnerability shining through from the depths of them that makes Steve’s throat pull in tight around itself. There is fear in that gaze, and it’s the first time Steve has seen it this clearly, so brutally stripped down and bared.

“I—” He swallows, searching for the words. “I just wanted to help you,” he ends meekly.

“Well, what if I didn’t need your help?” Bucky growls back. “What if I was fine where I was? Without all these—these fucking clothes and your goddamn stuff!”

“You were starving!” Steve argues loudly. “And about to freeze to death in a matter of days. You’re telling me I was just supposed to ignore that?”

“You could have started by minding your own fucking business,” Bucky snarls and Steve lets out a rejecting snort.

“You stole my wallet,” he points out, unable to believe that he’s actually hearing this. “At the time, you were very much my business.” Bucky glares at him, but he doesn’t reply, and so Steve lowers his voice when he continues, “I wanted to help you. I still want to help you...” He drags his hands through his hair, sighing deeply.

“As for the clothes and the food and—I mean, I get that you won’t be able to pay me back now, or even in a near future, but we’re gonna get you a job, Buck, you’ll see. It’ll all—”

“Would you just shut up about the money already?!” Bucky yells, and Steve barely has time to react before his back hits the wall for a second time when Bucky shoves him backwards, hard. It knocks the air out of Steve’s lungs, and he stares at Bucky in stunned disbelief when the other quickly steps back again.

“I’m not some goddamn protégé you can take on and use to fuel your ego,” he growls.
“What are you talking about?” Steve asks, completely dumbfounded, and Bucky snorts.

“You don’t think I’ve seen this before?” he asks. “People like you, helping people like me? You don’t think I’ve noticed the men and women who disappear for months at a time, only to come crashing back down again when the people who took them in get bored with them? When the novelty wears off? When there’s nothing left to fix?” he sneers.

He takes another turn, stomping three steps to the left before turning back around with a bitter laugh towards the ceiling.

“…And you know, they all talk about how fucking good it is,” he says, “to have someone who cares for them. Who’s willing to deal with their crap and be there for them when they need it. How unconditional and mutual it is. But that shit only lasts for as long as the people who took them in feel as if they have the higher ground.” He laughs, again, shaking his head. “I always thought they were so stupid…” he mutters. “So fucking gullible. And then I stomped straight into the same goddamn trap myself, like some idiot.”

“Bucky, you’re not making any sense,” Steve pleads. “What higher ground? What trap?”

Bucky stops, glowering at him.

“Once I get a job,” he grates, “we’re gonna be equals. When I can pay for my own food, and my own goddamn clothes, I’m not gonna have to depend on you to provide for me anymore, and then you’ll get scared. You’re gonna start to feel insecure. Threatened, because suddenly I won’t need you. So you’re gonna do the only reasonable thing and dump my sorry ass, and I’ll end up right back at the shelter where I started.”

Steve stares at him, gaping, and Bucky glares right back. “Is that what you think is gonna happen?” he says slowly.

“I don’t think,” Bucky mutters. “I know.”

“You really think I’d do that to you?” Steve asks. “You honestly think that I’d kick you out of here, just because you suddenly become independant? In case you haven’t noticed, that’s sort of where I’ve been trying to get you for the past goddamn month!”

“Well, maybe you don’t want me here, then?” Bucky retorts, raising his voice to level with Steve’s own. “Maybe you planned on letting me stay, but then you changed your mind when you realized that dating a criminal wouldn’t make you look so good in front of your friends? Maybe you’re just looking for a way to get rid of me as quick and guilt free as possible?”

“Have you lost your mind?” Steve asks desperately. “I mean, can you even hear yourself right now?!”

“You’re saying that you honestly planned for me to just move in here with you?” Bucky snorts.

“Yes!” Steve insists. “Has there ever been any other plan?”

“Well, last thing I heard, I was just staying for the holidays,” Bucky retorts grimly and Steve winces as he turns his gaze towards the ceiling.

“I’m not throwing you out,” he groans. “I never planned to, either.”

“Yeah, right,” Bucky murmurs, turning away.
“It’s the truth,” Steve retorts sharply, because really, this is getting ridiculous. “So what if we had never gotten involved with each other?” he says. “You really think I would send you packing the moment Christmas is over? I’d never do that. Not to you, not to anyone .”

He sighs, waiting for Bucky to make yet another wild accusation, but Bucky just glares down at his feet. The silence in the apartment is deafening and the seconds tick by, excruciatingly slow while Steve tries his hardest not to move.

Bucky’s chest is heaving, his nostrils flaring, and Steve can see him clench and unclench his fists where he stands. He looks so angry, back rigid and defensive in the middle of the living room, and Steve wants to reach out and touch him so bad. He wants to wrap him up in his arms and make this whole situation just go away, as if it had never existed.

How did this even happen?

What the hell happened?

“Bucky…”

Bucky sighs, looking away. Then he leans down and picks up his shoes from the floor, and begins to pull them on.

“Where are you going?” Steve asks.

“Out,” Bucky answers shortly, and Steve feels his insides turn cold.

“Why?” he asks. “What are you gonna do?”

“I just—I need—” Bucky shakes his head in frustration, unable to finish his sentence as he heads for the door without even tying his boots properly.

“Bucky, don’t do this,” Steve pleads, following him into the hallway. “Stay. We can talk this out. Whatever it is that’s bothering you, I promise—”

He reaches out to put his hand on Bucky’s shoulder, but he has barely made contact when Bucky shakes him off, snarling.

“Don’t—!” Bucky stills, cutting himself off mid-sentence to take a deep, calming breath. “Don’t touch me,” he hisses.

He stands up, and before Steve can say anything, Bucky has gathered up his discarded jacket and is already reaching for the door.

“Bucky,” Steve begs, one final time. “Bucky, please .”

“Just—” Bucky sighs, and Steve can see the tears in his eyes clearly when he turns his head to look at the floor by his feet. “Just stay the fuck away from me…”

And he’s gone, and the sound of the door closing behind him echoes through the apartment like the hollow sound of a bell.

Steve has no idea how long he stands there, staring at the handle without really being able to comprehend what he’s seeing.

He turns away, takes three dazed steps back into the apartment, and then he turns back around to stare at the door again.
Any moment, he thinks to himself. Any moment now, the door will open, and Bucky will come back inside. Still angry, still upset, but he'll come back, and that's all that's gonna matter.

But the door remains closed, and when it finally hits him that Bucky's truly gone, that he actually left, the realization clamps down like a vise around his lungs, making it hard to breathe.

Just like that, he's out the door, sprinting down the stairs, three steps at a time. The cold of the snow bites into the soles of his feet through his socks when they hit the pavement, and for a moment he just stands there, whipping his head around to stare down the street in both directions.

Bucky is nowhere to be seen, and the sidewalk lies deserted in the dark. Steve hesitates, and then takes off running, heading for the subway station.

“Bucky!”

He doesn't care that his feet have pretty much gone numb from the cold when he reaches the stairs leading underground. He doesn't care that the steps are covered in ice, threatening to send him skidding headfirst towards a concrete-assured death. He doesn't care, he doesn't care.

“Bucky!”

Please, let him be there, he begs, to whom, he doesn't know. Please, please, let him be there…!

His feet slap against the tiled floor of the waiting hall, but he can hardly hear it over the sound of his own pulse as it bangs against his ears.

There's no one in sight, and Steve skids to a halt. He turns, around and round, searching for signs of movement, listening for the sound of footsteps from somewhere ahead, but there's nothing.

Just him, and the ragged sound of his own labored breathing.

“Shit…” he pants, and his hands come up to pull at his hair. “Shit, shit shit…!”

He's gone.

The mere thought is enough to send the panic bubbling to the surface, and Steve can feel it when the muscles in his body begins to shake, adrenaline setting in.

He's gone.

Steve feels sick. The uncontrollable urge to lean over and throw up right there on the spot is near overwhelming as his stomach churns so hard it makes his throat flex around his windpipe. He lets out a low, throaty whimper where he stands, staring out over the empty platform, because just like that, he realizes that it's over. He swallows, and slowly, his gaze clouds over when the tears begin to fill up his eyes.

Bucky's gone.

Chapter End Notes
*Hides under desk*
I know! It's a cliffhanger! I did it again, I know!
You only have to wait 24 hours though, so it's not that bad, really. It could have been a lot worse.
*pokes head out*
Thank you for reading! <3

You're more than welcome to follow me on tumblr if you want, and for those of you who use it, I'm also on Twitter. Feel free to drop me a line! :)

Until tomorrow! <3
Friday, December 23rd

Steve stays up waiting for hours, but Bucky doesn't come back.

In the end, he falls asleep on the couch out of sheer exhaustion, still fully dressed. When he wakes up several hours later, he feels nauseous and hungover – though, he suspects, not just from last night's alcohol.

Jesus…what the hell happened? How did it end up like this? Last night had started out perfectly. Everything had gone so well, with Steve's friends, and the party…and then all of it had gone straight to hell the moment Steve had opened his big, fat mouth...

He feels like punching himself in the face. Hard. With a brick.

How could he have been so stupid? It had been partially alcohol, yes. Alcohol and drunken humor and bad, bad timing. But it had still been Steve’s fault. He should never have brought the subject of money up like that...

But Bucky had overreacted too. Sure, Steve fucked up, but to leave like that? And what had all that talk about Steve using Bucky's situation to feed his own ego been about? Were those the kind of signals Steve had been sending out? Or was Bucky simply imagining things?

God, Steve doesn't even know anymore…
He calls Nat first thing, once he's fully awake, and it's with a mix of both shame and relief that he
tells her everything. About Bucky, how they met, about the things that had happened during the
past weeks…about the fight. When he's done, he's already been forced to stop talking at least five
times in order to keep himself from choking up, but it's not until Nat says his name that the tears
finally come.

“Steve…”

“Yeah,” he croaks, pinching around the ridge of his nose, closing his eyes when they begin to burn
wet behind his eyelids.

“I'm sorry,” she says, and Steve nods, unable to answer in a way that can make its way through the
phone. “Has he been gone all night?” Nat asks softly.

“Yeah,” Steve rasps again. “I don't know where he is. He doesn't have a phone. Not that I know of,
at least.”

“Do you have any idea where he could have gone to?”

“No,” Steve confesses, before changing his mind. “Or, maybe,” he admits. “There's this shelter on
Staten Island. He used to stay there, but I don't know if he—” He can't bring himself to continue,
and on the other side of the line, Nat lets out a soft, sympathetic sigh.

“Oh, honey…”

Steve grits his teeth.

“This wasn't the way things were supposed to go,” he says, voice breaking.

“I know, Steve. I know.”

“What if he doesn't come back?” Steve continues, as if he hasn't even heard her. “What if I've lost
him?”

“You haven't,” Nat assures him. “He just needs time, that's all.”

“But—”

“No buts,” Nat cuts him off sternly. “Don't do that to yourself. Not now.” She pauses, and then
sighs. “Listen to me. Go eat something. Then grab a shower and put on some clean clothes. You'll
feel better, I promise. Bucky's gonna come back, you'll see.”

“How can you be so sure?” Steve asks.

“Because he's in love,” Nat replies softly. “Just like you are. And had the roles been reversed, you
know you would have gone back to him too. Eventually.”

Steve snorts, but he can't help but smile, in spite of himself. “Thanks, Nat,” he murmurs.

“Anytime, Rogers,” Nat answers. She's smiling too. Steve can hear it in her voice. “Now go get
that shower, all right?”

“All right.”

“Stay calm, and keep me posted. I'll check in with you later.”
When they've hung up, Steve heads straight to the fridge, following Nat’s advice to the letter. Afterwards, when he gets out from the shower, he has to admit to himself that he does indeed feel a little bit better. Even if better still feels like shit...

Upon his return to the living room, however, his eyes fall onto the Christmas tree sitting in the corner. The shine of the black bauble ornament hanging amongst the lower branches sends an anxious twist through his gut, and he stops, looking at it.

Did he really do things wrong?

Had he been so busy trying to be nice that he had ended up being nothing but rude?

Was he really the bad guy here?

He shakes his head, trying to clear the thought from his mind, but it won't go away. It nags him, picks for his attention even as he goes to get dressed. Like a rock in his shoe, it won't leave him be, and when he comes back out to the living room, all it takes is one more glance at the Christmas tree to make it rise to the surface once more.

He looks at the clock on the display of the media centre, and then he groans, heading out into the hallway.

It's barely past noon. If he hurries, he might be able to catch the next train to Staten Island before it leaves the station…

\///\///\///\///\///

The Shield Homeless Support Center is nearly completely empty when Steve steps through the doors. There is a handful of people strewn around the entry hall – some sitting idly, others reading or talking amongst themselves. A small group of men are conversing in mumbled words, sitting on a couch Steve hadn't even noticed the last time he was there.

The front door says registration hours don't start until five in the afternoon, which is most likely the reason for the center’s lack of visitors. Walking inside, Steve's eyes immediately drift towards the big front desk, where there had been a mass of people standing during his last visit. Now, only one of the stations is manned, and Steve heads towards it, for lack of other options.

He doesn't get time to ask the person on the other side of the glass for help, however, because he’s barely made it halfway over when a voice from behind suddenly stops him.

“Can I help you?”

Steve turns around.

It’s Peggy.

She’s wearing dark blue jeans and a cream-colored cardigan. Her hair is down, framing her face in large, soft curls. When Steve turns around, she blinks, and appears to temporarily lose her focus up until Steve opens his mouth to answer her. Then, once again, she cuts him off. “Do I know you?” she asks, frowning as her eyes narrow slightly. “Didn't you come here with Barnes a few weeks ago?”

“What brings you back here?” She asks, before turning her head to look around the room. “Is Bucky with you?”

“No, he's—” Steve swallows. “Actually, he's the reason I'm here,” he confesses. When Peggy frowns again, he clears his throat and throws a hesitant glance at the people strewn across the room. “Is there anywhere we can talk more privately?” he asks politely. In return, Peggy looks at him for a moment, as if trying to decide if he's worth trusting, before nodding once.

“Of course,” she says. “This way.”

She gestures for him to follow her, and Steve obediently does, trailing behind while Peggy guides him through a locked door next to the front desk. Behind the door lies a hallway, and at the end, there’s a door leading into an office. Peggy invites Steve inside, and Steve throws a quick, evaluating look around the room as he walks through the doorway.

It’s a small office, and perhaps not the most luxurious one that Steve's ever been in, but it's nice and – for some odd reason – feels remarkably safe.

“So,” Peggy says as she takes place behind the desk, gesturing for Steve to have a seat in the chair on the other side. “You're saying you're here because of Barnes?”

“Yeah,” Steve admits. “Sort of.”

“Why? Did something happen?”

Steve swallows. “How much time do you have?” he asks.

“Don't worry about that,” Peggy says firmly. “Just start at the beginning and we'll take it from there.”

And so, Steve does. The version he gives Peggy is slightly less detailed than the one he gave Nat – purposely leaving out the romantic aspects of his and Bucky's relationship. Bucky may regard Peggy as a friend, but to Steve, she's a stranger, and he's not really comfortable letting her in on that part of his person quite yet. He has no idea what her thoughts on same-sex relationships are, and he doesn't want to risk losing his only source of help because of a slip of the tongue.

While he talks, Peggy listens intently, and when the last, slightly trembling word of the story has left Steve's lips, she sits there quietly for another few moments before speaking.

“This was last night, correct?” she asks, and when Steve nods silently she continues, “Did he leave anything behind when he left? Or did he take it all with him?”

“No, he— It all happened so quickly, he didn’t even stop to tie his shoes,” Steve mumbles.

“So his belongings are still in your apartment?” she persists. “His backpack, do you have it?”

“Yes, it’s in his room.”

Peggy nods, and Steve is both surprised and a bit confused when she gives him an assuring smile. “He’ll be back for it,” she says confidently. “His entire life is inside that thing. He wouldn't leave it behind.”
“No offense,” Steve says, “but I’d feel a lot better if he came back for more than just the bag.”

At that, Peggy actually lets out a little laugh, tilting her head to the side to look at him. “One more time,” she says while smiling softly. “He wouldn’t leave it behind. Which means that he hasn’t really left. That bag is the only thing I’ve ever seen him care for, and he’d never risk losing it, or leaving them somewhere he thought unsafe.”


“I don’t know exactly,” Peggy confesses. “But it took me almost two and a half months to make him part with it. We don’t allow bags in the sleeping halls here,” she explains when she notices Steve’s confused expression. “For safety. Hence the storage hall out in the lobby.”

“Oh,” Steve says. “So…what did he do during the first two and a half months?”

“Slept in the kitchen,” Peggy answers simply. “In secret, of course.”

The information leaves Steve struggling with whether he should be laughing or crying. He can picture it inside his head; Bucky asleep on the floor, arms protectively curled around his backpack while hugging it tight against his body. Of course, he doubts that Peggy allowed Bucky to sleep directly on the floor, but the mental image still hurts.

There’s only one thing Steve can think of that would bring out such a stubborn side of Bucky’s personality, and he can only imagine what Bucky’s reaction had been when he got told that he had to hand that particular thing over to a group of strangers.

*I still have the Christmas card she wrote me…*

What else had Bucky saved from his past life? And where else would he have put those things, if not in the only kind of container that he owns?

“So the backpack,” Steve says slowly, “does it have something to do with his family?”

At that, Peggy blinks, apparent surprise on her face. “He told you about his family?” she asks, and when Steve nods, she gives a short, yet impressed, chuckle. “Now that’s something new,” she comments. “He must really trust you.”

Steve smiles, but inside, he feels his heart clench with guilt. Bucky had trusted him. And Steve drove him away… Peggy must sense his discomfort, because when Steve looks up, she’s once again regarding him with that same scrutinizing squint, leaning forwards with her arms folded on top of her desk.

“Did he tell you about the dog tags?” she asks suddenly, and Steve blinks.

“No,” he confesses. When he sees the look on Peggy’s face, he continues, “They’re the real deal?”

“Belonged to his father, as far as I’ve understood it,” Peggy says. “He never takes them off.”

“No…” Steve agrees. “I guess he doesn’t.”

Now that he thinks about it, it strikes him that he’s never seen Bucky without that necklace on. It’s always been there, dangling from around his neck, just like his piercings have always been ever-present on his face and ears. During workout, during showers… And Steve never even bothered to see what the damn things said.
It strikes him then how much Bucky has really lost. How alone he must have felt; how helpless. Steve knows what it feels like to lose a family member, but this… He cannot even begin to compare the loss of his mother to Bucky’s situation. First his mother, and after that, his sister and father. After such a thing, being homeless or broke must have been like getting punched in the face after surviving a stab wound. Not worse, but still insult to near paralyzing injury.

Suddenly, the need to see Bucky again, safe and sound, is near overwhelming. It claws at Steve’s insides like an animal in a cage, and he closes his eyes with a wince.

“I just wish…” he starts, and Peggy glances at him. “I just wish I could have told him how much having him around means to me,” Steve continues. “I wish I’d told him how much I—” He catches himself before he can finish the sentence, swallowing hard.

“You should tell him that,” Peggy agrees, and when Steve looks up, she adds, “All of it.”

She meets his gaze from across the tabletop, and Steve realizes with a start that she already knows. Her gaze is steady, and Steve quickly finds himself blushing beneath the tender weight of it.

“Barnes needs someone to care for,” Peggy continues as she leans back in her seat. “It terrifies him, of course, because caring for something also means that you can lose it. So he Waltzes around, pretending like he couldn’t care less, when in fact he’s so desperate for it, it nearly consumes him.” She gives Steve an evaluating look, and Steve does his best to meet it calmly. “If Bucky’s become comfortable enough to admit that he cares about you, then maybe that’s a sign that he’s finally learning how to come to terms with that part of himself. God knows it’s about damn time.”

Her words, and the significance they carry, etch their way into Steve’s conscience, and he swallows thickly, nodding in silence. Peggy looks on as he makes an attempt to gather himself enough to at least sit up straight, but when he doesn’t succeed, she smiles at him.

“Go home, Steve,” she says softly. “Rest. Bucky can take care of himself, and he’ll come back when he’s ready.” She cants her head, catching Steve’s gaze. “This is more than just a fight about money for him.”

“I really do hope things work out,” she says earnestly. “And remember, Barnes can be stubborn, but he’s really just scared. Be gentle with him. Although,” she adds contemplatively, “perhaps not too gentle. The boy needs a kick up his backside from someone, and I have a feeling you might be just the right person to give it to him.”

“Don’t worry, I know,” Steve assures her with a smile, because really, he does. He moves towards the door, only to stop with one hand still on the handle. “Hey,” he says, turning around. “If he does come by, would you mind telling him that I’m looking for him?”

“I’ll make sure to do that,” Peggy promises. She offers Steve her hand, and when Steve takes it, she pulls him closer to give him a quick, encouraging hug. Normally, being hugged like that by a complete stranger would make Steve feel uncomfortable, but this time it doesn’t. Again, he believes that he understands how this woman had managed to make Bucky drops his guard enough to get on his good side, and once again, he finds himself impressed.

“Good luck,” Peggy says, pulling back slightly. “Feel free to keep me posted, all right?”

Steve nods, and Peggy gives his shoulders a final squeeze before letting him go.
“It’ll be okay,” she promises. “You’ll see.”

“I hope you’re right.” Steve answers. Then he smiles, and walks out the door.

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As he puts the key into the lock of his apartment, Steve notices two things pretty much instantly.

One is that the next door neighbour left their radio on, again. The other, is that his front door is already unlocked, and Steve freezes, key in hand.

Slowly, he pulls the key out of the lock and puts it in his pocket. He quickly assess the situation before him, even though pushing the surprise and anxiety aside in favor of logic feels like an extremely difficult task to perform.

There are no signs of forced entry on the door or doorframe, and a quick peek through the spy hole tells him that the lights have been turned on inside. Now, even if thieves were to break in without leaving a trace, common sense says they wouldn’t proceed to announce their presence to the entire neighbourhood by lighting every single light inside the place. Unless they’re pretty damned stupid…

Steve swallows, and then grips the doorknob, turning it without a sound as he peeks inside. The first thing he sees, is Bucky’s jacket – the new one – which is hanging in the hallway, and the black boots that have been placed neatly in the shoe rack on the floor underneath it.

The sight sends a violent throb of something through Steve’s body, and for a moment, he feels as if he’s forgotten how to breathe.

Warily, he steps through the door and closes it behind him. He doesn’t bother to call out. Instead, he shrugs out of his own jacket and hangs it up next to Bucky’s, before taking his shoes off. His heart is pounding, but he decides that it’s okay.

It’ll be okay.

Bucky is waiting for him in the kitchen, sitting by the kitchen table. He doesn’t look up when Steve walks through the door, and Steve gives him a long, curious glance before looking back towards the front door behind him.

“How did you—?” he starts, but Bucky beats him to it.

“Picked it,” he says flatly, while fidgeting with his fingers on the tabletop, and Steve frowns.

“You can do that?”

“Thief, remember?” Bucky mumbles. He shoots Steve a quick look from underneath his bangs, and Steve swallows, looking away. He has already realized that Bucky could have broken in, grabbed his stuff and then left again, just as fast. The fact that he chose to stay makes Steve feel calmer, but he is still nervous.

He nods towards the chair opposite of the one Bucky’s currently sitting on.

“Can I sit?” he asks politely, and Bucky shrugs.
“It’s your chair,” he replies simply, picking at his nails. It’s not a hostile answer, or even accusing, yet, those three words still manage to hurt as they dig into Steve’s chest in the same way a bullet would.

Warily, Steve pulls out the chair and sits down, regarding Bucky from a distance. Bucky looks tired, but otherwise okay. He’s had a change of clothes since Steve last saw him, and most likely a shower, because his hair looks like it’s still a bit wet.

“How long have you been back?” Steve asks softly.

“A few hours,” Bucky murmurs.

A few hours. Which means that Bucky must have arrived at about the same time as Steve left for Staten Island. Had that been a coincidence? Or deliberate?

“You know…” Steve says slowly, reaching a conclusion. “I’m not gonna ask where you’ve been, or what you did, because it doesn’t really matter. To be honest, I’m just glad you’re back.”

He waits for Bucky to respond, but when Bucky just keeps staring down at his own two hands, Steve sighs. “Bucky, I’m sorry,” he says pleadingly. “I messed up bad. I didn’t mean to—” He cuts himself off, sighing again.

“Go on,” Bucky grates as he finally looks up at Steve’s face. “You didn’t mean to what?”

“Upset you,” Steve says. “Hurt you. Belittle you, push you.” He throws his hand out to the side. “For making it sound as if I didn’t believe in you.”

“Those are a lot of things to be sorry for,” Bucky points out, face still blank, and Steve snorts out a bitter laugh.

“Yeah,” he agrees. “That’s what I get for being a dumbass jerk, I guess…”

“You’re not a jerk,” Bucky mutters. Then he sits up higher in his seat, sighing heavily. “But I am.”

Steve frowns, and Bucky takes a deep breath as if steeling himself, before he looks Steve straight in the eye as he continues, “I freaked out and lost my shit over something stupid, and then took it out on you.” He swallows hard. “I’m sorry.”

“All right…” Steve says hesitantly, a bit stunned by the sudden confession. To be honest with himself, he had not expected this conversation to take such a turn so abruptly, if at all. He clears his throat. “All right,” he says again. “So…what should we do now?”

Bucky glances at him, and then back down at his hands again, resuming the fidgeting.

“I don’t know,” he confesses under his breath, and Steve nods.

“That’s okay,” he says softly, making Bucky look up at him again. “We’ll figure it out.”

Chapter End Notes
See, it's a little better at least, right? (And don't worry, the proper conversation is coming up, I have no intentions of leaving this topic at that.)

If you want, you're more than welcome to follow me on tumblr and for those of you who use it, I'm also on Twitter. Feel free to drop me a line! :)

Until tomorrow, sweeties! Thank you for reading! <3
Friday, December 23rd

Bucky looks at him from across the table, and then licks his lips nervously.

“Okay,” he grates out. “So where do you wanna start?”

“How about we start with talking about why all this happened?” Steve suggests. When Bucky frowns, he adds, softer, “So that we can keep it from happening again.”

Bucky nods in agreement, even though he doesn’t look like he’s too fond of the idea.

“What did I do wrong?” Steve asks, and immediately, Bucky lets out a soft groan, shaking his head.

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” he says. “I mean, not that wrong, I just— I thought—”

“Was it the money talk?” Steve prompts. “Because that was one hundred percent my fault, okay, I don’t even know what I was thinking.” Again, Bucky shakes his head.

“No,” he gruffs. “Or yeah, maybe, but it wasn’t that, it… It was the time.”

“Time?”
“You know,” Bucky says. “You, talking about going back to work. It made me realize how little time I have left, and I just…freaked.”

“Time to do what?” Steve asks, confused, and Bucky shrugs.

“Prove myself,” he mumbles. “Make myself useful. Worthy.”

“Why’d you feel like you have to do that?” Steve asks, but he realizes the answer to that question the moment it leaves his mouth. “Bucky…” he says, and Bucky drops his head down as if he wants to make himself as small as possible.

“I wasn’t sure, okay?” he defends himself. “I didn’t know if you’d still want me around after—”

“You thought I’d throw you right out along with the Christmas tree?” Steve asks, and Bucky groans, tipping his head back.

“You make it sound so stupid,” he accuses.

“That’s because to me, it kind of is,” Steve argues. “Really, Buck? After all this, you thought I’d abandon you, simply because we passed a specific date?”

“I don’t know,” Bucky whines, leaning forward to hide his face in his hands, bracing his elbows against the tabletop. “I’ve never— You’re the first, you realise that, right?”

“First what?”

“The first who’s ever cared,” Bucky exclaims. “Like, really cared.”

Steve opens his mouth, wanting to point out that he’s pretty certain that Peggy cares too, but then he realizes that it’s not that kind of care that Bucky’s talking about. He looks on as Bucky leans back off the table once again, the agitation of not being able to express his own thoughts making him restless.

“And I just don’t know,” Bucky continues, speaking to the wall in order to avoid having to meet Steve’s gaze head on. “Because I want to trust you, and I do trust you, but— I know what happens when you trust people, and it never ends well.”

“I’d say that depends on what kind of people you trust,” Steve says calmly, and Bucky glances at him, lips pinched together tight. “I know you haven’t had the best run so far, and that’s putting it mildly,” Steve points out softly. “But there’s no reason for you to be afraid of this.”

“Who says I’m afraid?” Bucky grates defensively.

“Your eyes,” Steve says. He nods towards the arms crossed in front of Bucky’s chest. “Your posture.” Bucky quickly unfolds his arms, looking sheepish, and Steve sighs. “It’s okay,” he says with a smile, “I know it’s tough and feels like a weakness to admit, but it’s okay to be scared, Buck. I’m scared too.”

“Of what, exactly?” Bucky asks with a snort.

“Of losing you,” Steve answers truthfully, and Bucky’s face softens as Steve continues, “Of you walking out that door for a second time, and not coming back. Of saying the wrong thing at the wrong time, again. I’m freaking terrified.”

“And what if you’re lying?” Bucky asks.
“You really think I am?” Steve retorts, still smiling, and Bucky’s jaw clenches.

“And what about if I don’t make it?” he says wryly. “If I don’t ever get a job and end up leeching off of you for the rest of my life?”

“You won’t,” Steve says confidently. “Because one, that's not gonna happen. You're too smart, and far too dedicated not to get employed by someone. And two, because you’re more likely to run away out of guilt first, rather than become a freeloader. I’ve come to know that much about you, at least.”

When Bucky still looks doubtful, Steve reaches out across the table and slowly wraps his fingers around Bucky’s own where they are, lying flat against the wooden surface.

“I know you’re feeling pressured,” he says softly. “And I know that it’s hard to shake the feeling of having a deadline, but you’ve gotta try. Because I don’t care how long this takes, as long as you keep trying, and you already are, so what’s there to worry about?”

“But what if you—”

“There are no buts,” Steve argues. “I never wanted a project, Bucky, I wanted to help. I realize that I've been going about this in all the wrong ways, but I promise you, I never meant any harm. And if you want me to, I promise I won't buy you as much as a pretzel, ever again. It's all up to you, and whatever you choose, I'll be totally fine with it, I swear.”

Bucky gnaws at his lower lip. He looks doubtful. Steve doesn't blame him.

“You wanna know what I think?” Bucky says slowly, and Steve's stomach ties together into a nervous knot, before Bucky lets out a low snort, shaking his head. “I think we both suck at this whole thing. I mean, look at me,” he says, gesturing to himself. “I'm a fucked-up mess. This whole time I've spent with you has felt like something out of a dream, and I've gone to sleep every night, praying that I'll still be here when I wake up.”

Steve's shoulders slump, and he looks at Bucky from across the table, sympathy pulsing through him. He squeezes Bucky's fingers, and Bucky looks down at them. Then he squeezes back.

“I spent so much time worrying about what it all meant, I didn't even let myself think it might be the real deal. The other night… It was the first time I actually forgot about the fact that none of this really belongs to me. Then you tried to make a joke, and I know, we've joked about it before, but this time— I just—” He cuts himself off, throwing his free hand out to the side. “I didn't mean to blow up like that,” he says under his breath, and Steve nods. He gets it. He does.

“I didn't mean to make it sound as if I thought I was better than you, either,” he confesses. “It was a dumb joke, and I shouldn't have pushed it the way I did. As for all this,” he says with a nod towards the kitchen, “it never even occurred to me that there might be something called ‘too much’ help. I wanted to make things easier for you in any way I could, and I crossed the line.”

He sighs.

“I get intense, I know. I really need to learn that people might not actually want the help I wanna give them, and that's my flaw. I mean, I would tear the world down if I thought it would make you smile, without giving it as much as a second thought. I'd probably not even stop to think that maybe you wouldn't want me to.”

“Yeah, you're pretty stupid like that,” Bucky mutters, and the corner of Steve's mouth twitches up in a smile.
“I am,” he admits. “These past weeks, I’ve been shoving all this in your face, thinking it would make you happier, when in reality it wasn’t at all what you wanted. Or even needed. You tried to tell me, but I didn't listen. I just wanted to help.” He rubs his thumb over the back of Bucky's hand, and then grabs around it with both of his.

“I still want to help,” he adds, firmer. “Not because you’re homeless or unemployed or need me to, but because you’re strong, and passionate, and deserve every single chance you can get. Really, you are the most intense, most fierce, and most beautiful person I’ve ever met, inside and out. And watching you walk out of my life would be like watching the Moon crumble out of the sky.”

Bucky’s eyes flicker towards Steve’s face when he says the last part, and Steve has to keep himself from smiling when that now familiar blush slowly begins to crawl up the other man’s cheeks.

“I'm not saying that it'll be easy,” he continues. “And I'm not gonna sit here and pretend that this is the last time we'll ever have this discussion, but I'm fine with that. More than fine, because if that's what we've gotta do to get through this, together, then I'm all in.” He cants his head down. “Please stay,” he begs. “Live here, for as long as you want. Preferably forever, as long as you do so with me.”

“You’d really be okay with that?” Bucky asks, and Steve laughs.

“Of course I would,” he says, squeezing Bucky’s fingers. “I love you, stupid.”

Bucky’s chest rises in a sharp intake of breath, and Steve realizes that wow, that’s the first time he’s actually said that out loud, isn’t it? His mouth goes dry, but he forces himself not to linger on it. Gingerly, he gets up from his chair, and without letting go of Bucky’s hand, he walks around the table and pulls the other man up to stand in front of him.

“I love you,” he says again, looking Bucky in the eye. There it is again, that little hitch of breath that leaves Bucky’s lips slightly parted. Steve has truthfully never wanted to kiss someone this badly before in his life. “I love you,” he repeats, once more, “And you don’t have to say it back, but I want you to know—”

“I love you too.”

Oh, dear god, Steve’s hands are trembling. or maybe Bucky’s the one who’s trembling, he can’t tell.

“That’s—” He chokes on the sentence, and has to try again. “That’s good,” he croaks. “That’s really good…”

“Yeah,” Bucky breathes, and Steve lets out a soft, relieved sigh when finally Bucky leans in, lips against his, kissing him eagerly. A shiver wracks through him so hard he can feel his breath stutter, and then Bucky’s hands are on the small of his back, tugging him closer.

“Yes, yes, finally.”

“I’m sorry,” Steve says, because he want’s to make sure that it’s really over, and Bucky nods, pulling away just enough to speak.

“Me too,” he breathes, and then he kisses him again, just as passionately. “Can we have sex now?” he pants against Steve’s lips. “Please?”

Steve can barely bring himself to breathe after that. Just to hear Bucky beg is an ecstasy without comparison, and to hear him beg for that, nonetheless, this soon.
“You want me to— You mean like that?” he asks, has to make sure, before his imagination gets the better of him, and in return, Bucky lets out a short, gasping laugh into the kiss.

“Yeah, exactly like that,” he agrees with a purr, mouthing at Steve’s lower lip. “Want you inside me, Stevie,” he whispers. “Want you to fuck me, how does that sound?”

Steve just groans, because there’s no way he can find words good enough to explain how absolutely amazing he thinks that sounds, and he nods eagerly into the kiss while trying to pull their bodies even closer. The back of Bucky’s thighs bump against the kitchen table, coaxing a surprised groan out of his throat, and just like that, Steve’s suddenly so horny he feels lightheaded. The relief floods his system, mixing with the endorphins from their kiss, and oh, he’s so in love, he shouldn’t even be alive!

“God…” Steve breathes as he reaches down to grip around Bucky’s hips. “Oh, you better tell me where you wanna do this, or I’m gonna end up taking you right here on the table.”

“You make that sound like a bad thing,” Bucky pants, tipping his head back while pushing his pelvis forward against Steve’s own. “But if you insist, I sort of feel like…lying down for a while…”

“Bedroom?” Steve asks, and Bucky nods. “Bedroom,” he agrees. Then he tears himself away, and Steve misses the heat and firm muscle of his body the moment it leaves his, but Steve is not about to let that stop him.

Of course, they could have kept on kissing all the way to the bedroom. Bumping against the walls and dragging it out, but Steve decides that all of those things can wait for another time. They’ve waited long enough already, and Bucky seems to be of the same opinion as he grabs hold around Steve’s elbow and drags him along, out of the room.

He doesn’t stop until they’re inside Steve’s – or, as of late, their – bedroom, and there, Bucky simply uses his grip on Steve’s arm to push him down onto the bed before climbing in after him. Steve lets out a surprised grunt when Bucky’s lips latch onto his, and his hips roll up, searching for the alluring friction of Bucky’s body when Bucky straddles him across the waist.

“Please, tell me you’ve got supplies in here…” Bucky groans against his mouth, and Steve chuckles.

“Bedside table,” he says, waving his hand in that general direction. “Bottom drawer.”

Bucky hums, and then pulls away, standing up. Steve watches him as he undoes his jeans, dropping both them and his underwear to the floor and unceremoniously stepping out of them. At the same time, he also pulls the drawer out in search of the bottle Steve keeps stored in there.

“You want me to…?” Steve offers, licking his lips when Bucky straightens back up again, cock hard and proud between his legs.

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“You want me to…?” Steve offers, licking his lips when Bucky straightens back up again, cock hard and proud between his legs.

“Nah, I’ve got it,” Bucky says as he crawls back up on the bed, bringing the lube, a condom, and a pack of wet wipes from the drawer with him. “It’ll be faster.” Tossing all three items onto the bed next to Steve’s hip, he then leans forward to make quick work of Steve’s own jeans. “You don’t mind giving me a little something to look at in the meantime, do you?” he asks cheekily, and Steve raises his hips in order to help slide his underwear down his hips, getting the picture. While Bucky gets rid of Steve’s pants and socks, Steve drags his shirt over his head and tosses it aside. Next thing, he finds himself lying naked on the bed with Bucky kneeling in between his parted legs.
When Bucky sits back, now dressed only in his black tank top, Steve grips around himself and begins to stroke slowly. He can see the way Bucky’s eyes follow with the movement of his hand as Bucky reaches for the lube to squeeze out a generous dab of it on top of his fingers.

Bringing the fingers back behind himself, Bucky then lets out a groan, eyelids swaying down to half mast as he begins to open himself up. His mouth falls open as he arches his back, moving to reach further, and Steve watches mesmerized at how the tendons in Bucky’s neck and arms tense with every slow thrust of his fingers.

Steve strokes himself, lazily and steady, keeping the pace Bucky sets up for them both. It’s slow and it drags out, but it’s a good kind of slow. Steve knows that Bucky needs to take his time, and so, he watches, observes and memorizes every single twitch of Bucky’s body – every gasp, every stuttered breath, dedicating them to memory.

Bucky is so beautiful. His eyes, the dazed expression on his face. The way the muscles of his thighs flex as he begins to push back over his own fingers, rocking steadily. Steve could watch him for hours and never get enough, and his chest heaves in an unconscious mimic of the other’s breathing as Bucky lets out a shuddering moan.

“Oh, yeah…” Steve breathes, and Bucky’s eyes tear away from Steve’s cock to look up at his face.

“Oh, Steve…” he pants, throat bobbing. “Oh, Steve…”

Steve’s grip around his cock hardens momentarily when Bucky throws his head back with a groan, and then Steve lets go of himself as he sits up, kneeling while reaching for Bucky’s body. There’s sweat beading at Bucky’s temple, and Steve gently wipes it away before trailing the tip of his fingers down the side of his face and throat.

“So gorgeous,” he murmurs. Leaning in, he presses a soft kiss against Bucky’s jaw, and another one against the sharp jut of his Adam’s apple, moving down. “So absolutely stunning…”

Bucky moans breathlessly when Steve’s thumb comes up to rub a tender circle around his nipple piercing through his shirt. Then, his entire body gives a violent shake as Steve brings his other hand up to comb his fingers through the soft strands of Bucky’s hair.

“I wanna make love to you so bad,” Steve whispers. “Not just fuck you like anyone else would. I wanna make you feel it in your bones, Buck. Wanna make you shake with it from the inside out, will you let me do that?”

“Yes,” Bucky gasps breathlessly. “Oh, please, yes…”

“You ready?” Steve asks softly. He drags his fingers down the bend of Bucky’s arm, and Bucky nods, pulling his fingers out. Steve hands him a few of the wet wipes, giving him time to clean up. In the meantime, he tears open the condom pack and slides the condom down over himself. Once he’s done cleaning himself off, Bucky then tosses the tissues over the edge of the bed and shoves his other hand against Steve’s shoulder.

“Lie down,” he orders, and Steve obeys, smirking.

“Why? You gonna ride me?” he teases, making Bucky huff as he moves to sit on top of him again.

“Like a fucking cowboy,” Bucky growls, and Steve choke down an amused laugh when he feels Bucky grab around the base of his cock to angle it right. Next thing, it’s all heat and tight, wonderful pressure as Bucky lowers himself down, and Steve’s moan mixes with Bucky’s gasp as the head of his erection pushes past that first ring of muscles inside the other’s body.
Slowly, Bucky sinks down, taking Steve all the way in a single, torturous slide while bracing himself against Steve's chest. The dog tags around his neck jingle when he moves to adjust his weight, leaving them dangling just above the span of Steve's clavicle. The temptation is too strong, and Steve reaches up and let's his fingers twine and wrap around the beaded chain, pulling Bucky down at the same time as he leans up to press their lips together.

He groans, feeling Bucky tighten up around him with surprise, and he deepens the kiss even further. It's still too soon for him to move, and using the kiss to distract both of them from the wait, he licks into Bucky's mouth with a breathy moan, keeping his grip around the chain to hold Bucky in place.

He smoothes his free hand up Bucky's back, up along his neck and then into his hair, fistng it lightly at the back. Bucky hums, and Steve lets go before moving his hands down to repeat the process over and over, until he feels Bucky relax around him.

Tentatively, Bucky grinds his hips down, testing out the friction. In return, Steve lifts his hips, rocking them up, and Bucky promptly gasps against his lips.

"That feel good?" Steve murmurs, and Bucky nods, pulling back to look into Steve's eyes for a moment before moving to sit up higher.

Steve thrusts up again, and this time Bucky meets him halfway. The wet slap of skin on skin lights a fire in Steve's veins, and he reaches down to grab around Bucky's hips with both hands to keep him still. The next shove is harder and Bucky chokes on his breath before letting out a throaty whine against the ceiling, grabbing around Steve's wrists, holding on as he squeezes his eyes shut. His jaw is slack, his cheeks flushed... There are a few strands of hair lying slick against his forehead, and he looks so beautiful, Steve could eat him up.

"How does it feel?" Steve asks, biting back a moan. "Tell me how you're feeling…"

"Good," Bucky gulps, and his fingernails dig into Steve's skin when Steve picks up the pace. "S'fuckin good, Stevie… Oh, god…"

"You want it harder?" Steve purrs. "Faster?"

"Oh, yeah," Bucky gasps. "Fucking ruin me, baby… Fuck me up, Jesus Christ, fucking—" He swallows the last of his blasphemous sentence down with a deep, ravenous groan, and Steve decides that of that's not a green light, then nothing ever will be.

He sets a pace. Hard, controlled, but fast enough to make Bucky's breath hitch, over and over again. It forces Bucky to let go of Steve's left wrist in order to brace himself against Steve's thigh, back arching from the pleasure that's so evident on his face.

"Hey," Steve urges, rubbing his thumbs against the ridge of Bucky's hip bones to get his attention while slowing down a little. "Hey, look at me."

It appears to take a lot of focus, but after a few seconds, Bucky squints his eyes open. He looks down at Steve from above, hips rolling to compensate for Steve's sudden lack of movement. His gaze is dazed, hazy, as if he's not really capable of seeing Steve clearly. He looks absolutely ravished, and Steve lets out an astonished curse under his breath.

"Fuck, I've always loved your eyes…” he murmurs softly, and Bucky's fingers flex against the thick of his thigh the moment the words leave Steve's mouth. "From the moment I first saw them," Steve continues. "I thought they were so damn beautiful. I had no idea they'd be even prettier,
seeing them like this…”

Bucky whines, closing his eyes again, as if Steve's praise is something he can shut out by not looking at him. It doesn't stop Steve from talking, however, especially not when Bucky gives such a delicious clench around Steve's cock in response to the words.

“You're so good, Bucky,” he whispers, rocking up, rolling his pelvis slowly while trying to keep Bucky's still. “So kind and generous. Anyone can tell that you're beautiful on the outside, but inside… I swear, it's like staring at the sun.”

“Shut up…” Bucky hisses, still without opening his eyes, and Steve groans, pushing his head back into the pillow at the next twitch of muscles around his cock.

“You're everything I could have ever dreamed of,” he continues, gasping. “I love you so much, it's driving me crazy.”

Bucky echoes his gasp, and by now the flush on his cheeks has spread all the way down his neck and chest, blooming beneath the dark ink of his tattoos in tell-tale patches of how much he's enjoying himself.

“Dammit, Buck,” Steve groans. “I swear, I could do this all night just to see you like this.”

“Steve, be quiet,” Bucky pleads, nearly sobbing. “S—Stop talking…!”

“No,” Steve refuses. “No, I want you to know exactly how much I love you. How much I love your smile, and your dumb, cynical sense of humor… Like the way you always roll your eyes at me when you think I'm being an idiot.”

This time Bucky just whimpers, his entire body shaking with a vicious tremble that rushes through his limbs.

“I love how thorough you are, even with things you don't really care for,” Steve carries on. He pauses, steadying his voice before he continues, “I love how competitive you are…and yet, how you'd willingly give a victory away just to make someone else happy. I love you, James, I love you so much.”

“Shut up,” Bucky pleads, barely with enough force to be called a whisper. “Shut up, just shut up, oh, god…” He's leaking, wet and dripping against the soft trail of hair on Steve's abdomen, and the breath catches in his throat every time Steve rocks into him, making him nearly sob from the emotional and sexual frustration caused by the words whispering over his skin

“Show me,” Steve begs, “show me that pretty face. Let me see you come for me.”

He smoothes his hands up from around Bucky's waist, up over his ribs and chest. He makes sure that every single one of his fingers catches on the perky tips of Bucky's nipples through his clothes as he drags them past, producing another thick dribble of precome to seep down the head of Bucky's cock. Man, that really is a sweet spot, all right…

He repeats the movement, just because he can, and Bucky stutters his hips down with a throaty groan, writhing beneath the touch.

“You getting close, sweetheart?” Steve asks softly, and when Bucky nods, biting down on his lower lip, he continues, “Want me to keep going?”

Again, Bucky nods, and Jesus, with the way he keeps shaking beneath the touch of Steve's hands,
one might think he was actually freezing to death.

“Yeah, you want me to fuck you now, don't you?” Steve pants, his breath growing ragged. “Want me to mark you up? Make sure you won't forget that you're mine?”

Bucky's only response is an incoherent groan that rattles Steve to the very core as he pushes down over Steve's cock, pleading for it with his body in a way that can't be misinterpreted. It's needy and desperate, and it nearly sends Steve's heart beating through his chest. He can feel the muscles of Bucky's thighs clench tight when he picks up the pace again, but this time, it's not the same. His thrusts aren't as steady, the pace more frantic, and he can feel the control slipping through his fingers with every move Bucky makes on top of him.

“Jesus, you're gonna kill me,” he hisses, clutching around the sides of Bucky’s ribcage. He can feel the rapid pace of Bucky's breathing against the palm of his hands, and Steve's eyes drift up the span of Bucky's chest, across the heart and text peeking out from underneath the collar of his tank top.

With his right hand, Steve reaches up to trace the peacock feather of Bucky’s neck with his fingers, pressing his thumb down into the little notch in between Bucky's collarbones in passing. The reaction is instantaneous as Bucky gasps for breath, and then his entire body goes rigid when Steve grabs around the top of his shoulder, fucking into him hard.

The bed creaks while the headboard smacks against the wall, and Steve can feel the hard length of Bucky's cock slap against his stomach with each thrust he makes. At a particularly hard shove, Bucky tips his head back, baring his throat with a strangled cry, and that's all the reminder Steve needs. His hand smoothes up the side of Bucky's neck, and Steve can feel the other's pulse beat against the center of his palm as he tenderly closes his fingers around it.

“Yes…” Bucky pants, and his right hand immediately closes around Steve’s forearm with an eager twitch of fingers. “Oh, fuck, yes, Steve…!”

Steve gulps, eyelids fluttering. Bucky is so tight, and Steve's getting closer by the second. He presses his thumb down harder, and Bucky's Adam's apple bobs frantically as the air supply is slowly being cut off.

“C’mon,” Steve pants. “C’mon…”

Bucky nods, lips moving without sound, and Jesus, Steve’s so close.

“Come for me, James,” he whispers, and Bucky's breath would have stalled, had it only been able to. His cock goes rock solid, twitching for a few seconds before Bucky, with a choked whine, spills warm and wet over Steve's chest. His body shakes as Steve continues to milk him dry, thrusting up over and over, until his eyes nearly loses their focus from the pleasure. When Bucky’s fingers give a warning scratch against Steve’s arm, Steve gently eases up on the pressure around his throat with soothing swipes of his thumb. When it’s over, and when the violent quake of Bucky’s muscles has calmed down into a delicate tremble, Bucky finally drags in a rattling gulp of air into his lungs as he slumps down, panting hard against Steve’s chest.

“You okay?” Steve asks, trying not to move while Bucky catches his breath, and slowly, Bucky opens his eyes and glances up at him. Then he smirks.

“That's all you've got…?” he says hoarsely.

Steve gives in.

He sits up and wraps both his hands around Bucky's body, pulling him in close, and he hears Bucky
choke out a gasp next to his ear when his still semi-hard cock rubs up against the slick mess on Steve's stomach.

It doesn't take long, just a few hard thrusts in combination with Bucky's voice biting out breathless cries of encouragement against his shoulder, and then Steve’s coming with the repeated whisper of Bucky's name – his real name – on his lips.

He feels Bucky wrap both his arms around his shoulders as he slowly comes down, head swimming, and he groans as he slowly sinks back against the mattress, dragging Bucky down with him.

“If we're gonna keep doing this,” he pants softly, “then I'm gonna have to get myself better life insurance. That was so good, it damn near killed me.” He feels Bucky's body shake as the other man chuckles at his statement, and then Bucky presses his lips against Steve's cheek in a soft, lingering kiss.

“You'll get used to it,” he promises, nuzzling his nose against Steve’s temple. “We just have to make sure to practice.”

“Is that so?” Steve hums. “And how often do you suggest we do that?”

“Oh, at least three times a day,” Bucky decides firmly while moving his face down to press his lips against Steve's neck. “Preferably four.”

“So that leaves us with about… three more rounds before midnight, correct?” Steve asks curiously, and when Bucky just hums in affirmation, Steve lets out a snort of laughter, pulling him in tight. Bucky hums again, and nips his teeth over Steve's ear with a hoarse chuckle that sends goosebumps prickling over Steve's skin.

“So,” Bucky asks cheekily. “How long until you're ready for round two?”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading guys <3

You're more than welcome to follow me on tumblr if you want, and for those of you who use it, I'm also on Twitter. Feel free to drop me a line! :)

Until tomorrow! <3
Chapter Notes

Beta by the wonderful and ever so glorious Nursedarry <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Saturday, December 24th

The next morning, Steve wakes up to what he, after a few seconds of sleep induced confusion, decides are a pair of lips slowly working their way down his abdomen. He groans and stretches leisurely, smiling when the lips are joined by a set of fingers stroking up along the sides of his stomach.

“Morn’n,” he grunts under his breath, and Bucky presses another fluttering kiss against Steve’s hip bone with a low hum. “What time is it?” Steve asks. He still has his eyes closed, so he has no idea what the clock on his bedside table says, but his cock is most definitely saying rise and shine – in big bold letters, no less.

“Almost eight,” Bucky provides him from below his waist, and Steve curiously peels his eyes open.

“Trouble sleeping?” he asks.

“No,” Bucky says simply. “I just got bored.”

Steve chuckles, and then he reaches his hand down, urging Bucky to come back up.

“You sure you wanna be kissing me right now?” Bucky asks skeptically. “Morning breath’s a real thing, you know.”
“So are closed mouthed kisses,” Steve points out with a smile, and Bucky chuckles. Proving that he took the hint, he gives Steve one of the aforementioned kisses, and then snuggles down to settle his head against Steve's chest.

“So what do you wanna do today?” Steve asks softly while slowly combing his fingers through Bucky’s hair. “I mean, it is Christmas Eve.”

“Don't know.” Bucky looks up, searching out Steve's eyes from below with a smirk. “I was thinking maybe you'd wanna bend me over the kitchen table like you talked about yesterday?”

Steve laughs and tugs teasingly at the hair curling between his fingers. “Yeah, you'd like that, wouldn't you? Wasn't last night enough?”

“Never,” Bucky purrs, and Steve laughs again when Bucky slings his leg over Steve's thigh, pressing as close as he can get with his entire body.

“You get any closer, and you'll cut off my circulation,” Steve points out.

“Yeah, we wouldn't want that, now would we?” Bucky retorts slyly, and Steve bites back a moan when he feels fingers close around the base of his cock. When Bucky begins to stroke him, he pushes his head back into the pillow and arches his back, feeling wonderful shivers of pleasure rush up his spine. He is just getting into it when Bucky suddenly stops and lets him go in favor of crawling off the mattress.

“Hey…!” Steve huffs and gestures to his now abandoned body, but Bucky just smirks at him over his shoulder while heading for the door.

“You want more of that, you're gonna have to work for it,” he teases. “I'm gonna grab a shower, and you're more than welcome to join me. If you manage to drag your sexy ass out of bed, that is.”

Steve scoffs. As if that's supposed to be a challenge.

He is out of bed before Bucky even has time to get the water running. Soon after, Steve pushes Bucky’s soaped-up body against the wall of the shower with an impatient growl beneath the hot spray of water coming from above.

Bucky hisses, arching away from the cold of the tiles while Steve buries his face in the crook of his neck. Smirking against the skin, Steve takes the opportunity to snake his hands up the other's back, only to rake his fingernails down Bucky's spine once they reach his shoulder blades.

“I thought— *Fuck...* I thought I was supposed to take care of you ,” Bucky points out with a stutter. His body makes a violent jerk when Steve drops down to give his nipple a quick, hard suckle. It tastes a little like soap, but what does that matter in comparison to the lovely noise that falls from Bucky's lips at the action.

“You can do that later,” Steve assures him. “Right now, I wanna make you feel good.”

“Okay,” Bucky pants under his breath, nodding frantically. He's already pressing hard against Steve's leg, but Steve doesn't pay that part of him any attention. Instead, Steve reaches for the body wash sitting on the little shelf underneath the shower blender.

“But first,” he says, shaking the bottle a little, “we've gotta get you cleaned up.”

“You just want an excuse to fondle me,” Bucky accuses playfully, and Steve smirks as he squeezes the soap out into the palm of his hand.
“Can you blame me?” he asks. “I did manage to keep my hands off of you for an entire month, you know.”

“I noticed,” Bucky says with an eye roll. “For a while there, I thought you were lying about the whole being queer thing.”

Steve laughs, and puts his hands on Bucky's body to rub more soap over his skin, massaging his way up his torso in slow, lazy movements. “I was being a gentleman,” he defends himself. “If you could have seen what was going on inside my head, you wouldn't have doubted me for a second.”

“Sounds interesting…” Bucky hums while arching into Steve's touch.

“Very interesting indeed,” Steve agrees.

After that, the conversation dies down, and Steve remains quiet while he rubs his way across the muscles of his partner's body. Bucky's neck, shoulders and arms come first, followed by his chest, where Steve takes extra care to toy with his nipple piercing for a while before moving around to his shoulder blades and lower back.

At that point, Bucky's got both arms wrapped around Steve's neck as he leans in against him in absolute relaxation, moaning softly in appreciation against Steve’s neck with each delicate slide of Steve's fingers.

Steve fetches a new dab of soap, and Bucky’s breath catches next to his ear when he then resolutely brings his hand in between the globes of Bucky's ass cheeks to rub against his center.

“Fuck…” Bucky breathes, pushing back against the digits, but Steve just as decisively moves them away.

“Soap’s not a good substitute for lube, Buck,” he points out when Bucky lets out a displeased sound against his shoulder. “We're just cleaning you, remember?”

He finishes the sentence by bringing the fingers back in to rub over the furled edges of Bucky's hole, making Bucky growl when he then pulls them away, yet again.

“If you're not gonna open me up, then what's the point of being there at all?” Bucky asks impatiently, and Steve laughs. He takes a firm grip around the swell of Bucky's ass and squeezes, taking a few moments to savor the feel of it in his hands before letting go.

“Turn around,” he orders softly, and even though Bucky groans, he still does as he's told. “Now lean against the wall,” Steve instructs.

“What, you're gonna soap up my legs next?” Bucky asks with a snort when Steve drops to his knees behind him. “You know, I have showered before, I know how to— oh…!”

Steve hums in affirmation at Bucky's sudden gasp, and flicks his tongue against Bucky's hole again. Bucky's body slumps against the wall in front of him as he buries a groan in the crook of his right arm, pushing back against Steve's mouth in near violent appreciation.

“Is that good?” Steve asks, pulling back for a moment.

“Yeah,” Bucky groans under his breath. “S’fucking amazing…”

“So you like it?” Steve continues. “I remember you hinting about it, but I wasn't sure if you were serious.”
“Just keep going,” Bucky begs through gritted teeth as he pushes back into the grip of Steve's hands, and Steve lets out a low chuckle as he leans back in.

It's new, doing this. Steve hasn't done it before, or had it done to him either, for that matter, but he's familiar with the concept. One does not simply browse for gay porn online without stumbling over the topic once or twice. To actually do it, however, is a very conflicting experience.

Because the obvious fact is that there's a definite amount of ass-to-mouth contact, which in every other scenario should be discouraged on all possible levels. But, after a generous amount of soap and scrubbing, it's all still skin – clean and harmless – and it's not as if Steve hasn't had his mouth or tongue up against Bucky's skin before. And then, there's Bucky, and Bucky currently trumps every single aspect of this that Steve might have once felt reluctant about.

Bucky is rocking back against Steve's mouth, hips swaying while his hands ball into fists against the wall. He is panting and gasping with every sinful lick of Steve's tongue where he stands, leaning against the tiles with his back arched and head hung low between his shoulders. The water is cascading down his arms, following the line of his body and muscles underneath his skin in tiny silver streams. Down his back, down the crevice where Steve is currently licking him open, down his legs and onto the tiled floor below. His hair drapes around his face, heavy and sleek with water while his eyes squeeze shut, and dear god, Steve's never heard anyone be this vocal in his life.

Bucky's usual whimpering and whining noises are gone. Instead there's moaning; loud and unrestrained, gasps and growled out curses that echo between the walls of the bathroom. Bucky is so greedy for it; rocking against Steve's tongue, begging for more and faster and everything in between. He is hard, and he twitches between his legs, thick and flushed every time Steve's tongue flicks over his rim, sometimes fast and pointy, sometimes slow and flat. Fuck, Steve can feel him throb and pulse against his tongue, nerve endings sparking with every single touch, and there's so much power in doing this, Steve feels like he's drunk.

Steve's own erection is straining against his stomach, and every so often, he sneaks a hand away to give himself a few relieving strokes to take the edge off. It makes him moan, and the vibrations of his voice makes Bucky's muscles clench down in a way that's absolutely fascinating. How is Steve supposed to resist doing it again?

He does, over and over, moaning and gasping in time with the strokes over his own cock. Just like that, the edge that had been so distant moments ago, is suddenly getting a whole lot closer. The pleasant churn in the pit of Steve's stomach rises, and Steve groans, hand moving faster.

In front of him, Bucky opens his eyes in response to Steve's voice, and when he moves his gaze down between his legs and sees what Steve is doing, he lets out a breathless gasp, body shaking.

“Shit…” he breathes. “Oh, fuck, I think I'm gonna come…”

“Me too,” Steve moans, feeling Bucky’s body pulse against his tongue when Bucky lets out a hoarse whine, fingers curling against the tiles. Bucky closes his eyes again, jaw going slack as Steve keeps chasing the edge for both of them.

“Fuck, you're gonna make me lose it,” Bucky gasps, sounding close to disbelieving. “Jesus fuck, you're actually— From your tongue, I didn't— Oh shit. Oh fuck, Stevie, Jesus Chri— Oh, god…!

Bucky comes, untouched and shaking in a series of drawn-out moans. His thighs tremble, his voice breaks, and Steve lets out a breathless groan as he finishes himself off with a few more strokes while he licks Bucky through it.
When it's over, Bucky slumps, panting and moaning against the wall. He whimpers when Steve gives a final wet lap to his core before pulling away to lean his forehead against the back of Bucky right thigh, steadying himself.

“You okay?” Steve asks hoarsely. “Did I break you?”

The response is a low, disoriented grumble, and Steve laughs.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart,” he says, smiling. “I can't hear you.”

“I said,” Bucky grates out, louder, “go brush your fucking teeth so I can kiss you.”

The rest of the day is spent lounging on the couch in front of the TV. They had, on Bucky's very persistent request, dragged the pillows and duvet out from the bedroom and wrapped themselves up in them, turning their naked, spooning selves into a big, fluffy burrito, right there on the couch cushions.

They only move when it's time to get food or drinks, or visit the bathroom, and whoever gets up has to pay the other at least one kiss as a fine, before they are allowed back inside the warmth.

They decide to order pizza, even if the waiting time is almost an hour long. It's the night before Christmas after all, and they're not the only ones with the same brilliant idea, despite the fact that a bunch of restaurants are closed for the holidays. Before the food arrives, however, Steve is forced to put on a pair of sweatpants and a shirt, because Bucky blatantly refuses to let him open the door wrapped up in a blanket.

“We'll never get them to deliver here again,” Bucky informs his firmly, gesturing to Steve's naked body as the other tosses his phone back onto the coffee table. “Seriously, they'll ban your number.”

“You really don't think they've seen worse than me?” Steve asks with a curiously quirked brow.

“Steve, there’s literally a thousand reasons why you shouldn’t answer the door half-naked, and they all include the word porn. You’ll get your ass prosecuted for sexual harassment.”

“I think you’re just jealous,” Steve teases as he untangles himself from the mass of duvets and pillows to stand up.

“What?” Bucky snorts. “I’m the one naked on your couch.”

“Well, what if the pizza delivery guy turns out to be really hot?” Steve quips, heading into the bedroom to get the clothes his beloved boyfriend apparently wants him to wear so badly.

“That’s also porn,” Bucky points out. “The odds of landing a hot pizza guy in real life is like a million to one.”

“I landed myself a hot pickpocket,” Steve reminds Bucky from inside the closet. “I could get a pizza man too.”

“Hardly,” Bucky calls back with a chuckle. “After hauling me in, you don’t have enough luck left to win a thumb war.”
Steve laughs, pulling his sweatpants on. He’s not about to argue with Bucky on that one, that’s for sure. Still smiling, he makes his way back into the living room, and Bucky sends a hungry look up and down his still naked torso.

“Don’t give me that,” Steve says firmly. “You’re the one who wanted me to put my clothes on.”

“You could have waited,” Bucky points out. “The pizza is gonna take like forever, and it’s probably gonna be late, anyway.”

“I know, but there’s a thing I need to fix downtown first.”

“You’re leaving me here?” Bucky asks with a sullen pout, and Steve laughs again.

“Not for long,” he promises. “I’ll be back before you know it.”

“As long as you leave me some cash to pay for the pizza if it shows up before you do,” Bucky demands. “I’m not in the mood for handing out sexual favors right now.”

“Gross, Buck,” Steve comments, and Bucky smirks. He’s just about to say something more when Steve’s phone begins to chime, and Steve picks it up from the table to look at the display.

“It’s Nat,” he informs Bucky, who gives an approving nod before snuggling back down underneath the duvets while Steve answers the call.

“Hey,” he greets. “Sorry, I forgot to call you.”

“It’s okay,” Nat says. “Have you heard from him yet?”

“Yeah, he’s here,” Steve says. When Bucky pokes his head out and gives him a quizzical look, Steve waves him away with an assuring smile. “No, he came back yesterday,” he says into the phone when Natasha asks him about it. “Yeah, he’s fine. We’re both fine. Yes, we’ve made up. No, I didn’t— You wanna what? Nat, I—” Steve closes his eyes and fights to hold back a smile when Nat sends him an ultimatum through the phone that would make Tony Stark himself blanch, and then he obediently hands the phone over to Bucky.

“She wants to talk to you,” he informs him calmly, and Bucky gives him a long, worried look before slowly taking the phone out of Steve’s outstretched hand.

“Hello?” he says, and his confused frown deepens even further when Natasha answers him. For a long time, he just sits there, covers pooling around his bare waist, phone in hand, and with the most adorable expression of confusion on his face. Then he swallows. “Yes,” he grates, glancing up at Steve. “No.” There’s a short pause. “He— Really?” he asks, sounding surprised. “I didn’t know that. Yeah, we’re all good.” He frowns again, and then he lets out a short, scandalized laugh. “Not that it’s any of your business, but yes,” he says, glancing back at Steve again. “Twice.” He winks at him, grinning widely, and Steve has a very fair suspicion about what Nat just asked.

“Hang up,” he says loudly, making sure that Natasha can hear him through the phone, and Bucky laughs, listening to Nat’s reply.

“She says you owe her details for not calling sooner,” Bucky passes on. “And that you better take good care of me outside of bed as well.”

“I just ordered you pizza, isn’t that enough?” Steve asks with a feigned huff, and Bucky bites down on his lower lip to stifle a laugh as he turns his attention back to Nat on the phone.
“You heard that?” he asks, smiling. “I know, he gets cranky when he’s hungry. Yeah, I know. Thanks. I’ll tell him that. You too. See ya.”

He ends the call and hands the phone back to Steve, who in turn gives Bucky a long stare.

“What?” Bucky defends himself. “You do get prissy when you’re hungry.”

“And you don’t?” Steve asks.

“Of course I do,” Bucky answers, “but we’re not talking about me now, are we?”

Steve chuckles as he heads over to the front door in order to pull his shoes and jacket on. It’s already getting dark, and he better hurry if he’s gonna get to the hardware store before closing time.

“Did you really cry?” Bucky asks suddenly, and Steve turns back around with the scarf dangling loosely from around his neck.

“What?” he asks.

“Nat said you called her yesterday and cried,” Bucky clarifies. He sits up higher, looking at Steve from across the room. His eyes are serious, and there’s no teasing in his voice when he asks, “Did you?”

“Well, I— I didn’t bawl, but…” Steve clears his throat, and shrugs. “Yeah. I guess I did cry. A little.”

“Is that pride I hear?” Bucky says softly, and Steve swallows again.

“Maybe,” he admits. “I’m usually not the crying type.”

“But you cried for me?” Bucky prompts.

“I did.”

At that, Bucky smiles, and then he throws the blankets off and firmly walks across the apartment to wrap his arms around Steve’s neck to press his lips against his. The kiss is soft, tender, and it makes Steve feel like his knees are made out of slowly melting butter.

“I went looking for you,” he confesses, once Bucky pulls back. “I went to the shelter on Staten Island, but you weren’t there.”

“Really? You did that?” Bucky says, sounding both flattered and surprised, all at once.

“Yeah,” Steve confirms. “Peggy says hi, by the way. You should swing by and let her know you’re all right.”

Bucky closes his eyes, smiling. “Peggy,” he mumbles with a shake of his head. “She’s a proper mother hen that one.”

“She cares about you,” Steve points out.

“Yeah…” Bucky agrees. There’s a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth as he says it, and Steve gets the feeling that Bucky’s just realized that he might not be as lonely as he thought himself to be. It’s a nice feeling, and Steve leans in to give Bucky another kiss on the lips before pulling back again.
“You are very naked right now, by the way,” he points out, as if he just realized it, and Bucky smirks.

“You’ve got a problem with that?”

“Not really. I just don’t want you to catch a cold. I prefer my partners warm and cuddly, not feverish and snively.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Bucky hums, and Steve smiles when he receives yet a third kiss on the lips. Then he decides that he really has to get moving, naked boyfriend or not, and he gives Bucky’s ass a gentle slap before he pulls away to zip up his jacket and tie the scarf properly around his neck.

“I’ll be back in just a few,” he promises. “Don’t let the pizza man leave any marks on you.”

“Oh, very funny,” Bucky says with a snort, but he’s still grinning when Steve closes the door behind him with a wink.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you again for reading guys<3
We're coming up on the end of this story. Only one chapter left ;)

As always, you're more than welcome to follow me on tumblr, or on Twitter. My inbox is always open, and you're free to message me if you want! :)

Until tomorrow! Love you! <3
Sunday, December 25th

Steve wakes up first.

His usual grogginess and post-sleep haze only lasts for about five seconds, and then he’s wide awake. Turning his head to glance at his alarm clock, he sends a silent prayer to the heavens that it’s not too early, and he’s pleased to see that it’s already nine o’clock in the morning.

On Christmas morning.

Smiling, he turns around to look at Bucky, who’s still sound asleep in the bed next to him, and his smile immediately grows into a fond grin.

Bucky is lying flat on his back, hugging a pillow against his chest with one arm, while the other is thrown out to the side in an unconscious reach for Steve from across the mattress. His hair is fanned out over the sheet, (since his pillow is obviously not underneath his head anymore) his lips are slightly parted, which in turn makes him snore a little, and all in all, he’s the most adorable thing Steve’s seen in his entire life.

Gently, Steve scoots closer and settles into the little gap between Bucky’s chest and outstretched arm to give those parted lips a quick, teasing kiss.

“Hey,” he whispers, smiling. “Rise and shine, sugarplum.”
Bucky grumbles and turns his face into Steve’s chest, and his pillow meets the floor with a soft thud as Bucky abandons it in favor of wrapping both his arms around Steve’s body.


At that, Bucky’s sleepy cuddling pauses for a moment. “Today?,” he says, and Steve chuckles.

Slowly, Bucky pulls back, and Steve takes the opportunity to sit up higher on the bed before Bucky decides to drag him back down. “So?” he asks. “Do you wanna open your present now or later?”

“My present?” Bucky murmurs, and yeah, he’s obviously not as awake as Steve thought he was. “Aren’t those…? What?”

“Your present,” Steve repeats, watching with amusement how Bucky sits up, and arranges himself, cross-legged on the bed, while trying to wipe the sleep from his eyes. “Your Christmas present.”

Finally, the message seems to go through, because Bucky halts himself in the middle of an eyerub and sends Steve a wide-eyed look over the covers.

“It’s Christmas,” he says slowly, and Steve grins.

“It’s Christmas,” he agrees cheerfully, and Bucky lets out a dazed little chuckle.

“Wow…” he Breathes. “Didn’t think hearing that would actually make me feel excited.”

Steve reaches out and brushes his thumb over Bucky’s cheek, smiling fondly at him. Bucky leans into the touch, and then Steve’s heart nearly stops beating when his eyes fall onto the bare plane of Bucky’s chest. “Where are your dog tags?” he asks, letting Bucky go to look around the bed in search of the missing necklace.

“I left them in the bathroom.”

“Huh?” Steve looks up, blinking.

“Yesterday,” Bucky clarifies, looking at Steve as if he’s gone nuts. “When we showered. I took them off. They’re on the top shelf next to the mirror.” He frowns. “Why do you ask?”

“Nothing,” Steve answers quickly. “I just— I just didn’t realize you took them off. I thought maybe you lost them.”

“No, no,” Bucky chuckles. “I know exactly where they are.”

Steve lets out a short, nervous laugh. His gaze wanders to Bucky’s bare front, and knowing exactly what that now naked stretch of skin actually means, he swallows down the sudden lump of feelings rapidly forming in his throat. “That’s it,” he announces firmly, scrambling to reach for the middle drawer of the bedside table. “You’re getting your present now, whether you want to or not.”

“Should I be grateful or scared?” Bucky asks suspiciously when Steve comes bouncing back up into a sitting position, wrapped up gift in hand.

“Scared? Nah,” Steve says, before adding with a mischievous smile, “but we’ll see about grateful in a minute.” He holds out the present. “Merry Christmas, Buck.”

Bucky gives both him and the gift a quick, hesitant look. Then he slowly takes the bundle out of Steve’s hand with a grateful, yet bashfully murmured, “Thanks.”
Steve watches as Bucky then turns the parcel over in his hand, as if he’s not quite sure what to do with it. He pulls at the red string, removing it, and then gingerly begins to peel the paper off. Worrying his lower lip with his teeth, he then pulls out the item inside which is wrapped up in bright red tissue paper. After removing that, Bucky holds up the item and lets it unfold onto the bed, where it rolls all the way up to Steve’s knee before stopping.

It’s a scarf. Roughly about seven feet in length, tightly knitted, with wide red and black stripes. Bucky stares at it as he lowers it onto his lap, smiling fondly while rubbing his thumbs over the fabric to test the feel of it against his skin. It’s soft, Steve knows that for a fact. It’s one of the very reasons he picked it out. Bucky hates scarves that itches.

“This is amazing,” Bucky says, looking up at Steve with a smile that stretches across his entire face. “Thank you.”

“Now you won’t have to use my scratchy old one anymore,” Steve explains, chuckling when Bucky determinedly wraps the scarf around his neck.

“What do you think?” he asks, holding his arms out to the side for Steve to look him up and down. The scarf nearly covers the entire lower half of his face, and the tail of it is hanging over his left shoulder, down across his chest to pool in his naked lap.

“I think it suits you,” Steve decides, and Bucky’s eyes crinkle at the edges with how happy that approval apparently makes him. “So,” Steve says secretively. “That one’s for leaving the apartment.” He reaches behind his back, and plucks out the single, white envelope he had kept hidden there while Bucky opened his gift. “And this…” he says, holding it out, “is for coming back inside.”

“What did you do this time?” Bucky says with a chuckle as he snatches the envelope out of Steve’s hand. “Did you crochet me a pair of socks? Or get me a gift card for a snug rug?”

“Not really,” Steve muses. Bucky gives him a curious smirk, and carefully opens the envelope up before reaching inside it. He is still looking at Steve when the smile slowly melts off his face, and then he turns his gaze down, staring at the object now lying in his hand.

It’s a key. An ordinary metal key. Flat, with jagged cuts and an oval head. It’s attached to a keychain that looks like a big, silver safety pin, and Bucky slowly places it into the palm of his hand, gawking down at it with his mouth open.

“I figured using that would be easier than picking the lock,” Steve says softly.

“This is for the apartment?” Bucky mumbles.

“It is.”

“You’re—” Bucky cuts himself off, clearing his throat. “You’re giving me a home for Christmas?”

“That’s the gist of it, yeah,” Steve replies simply, and Bucky huffs out an astonished laugh, shaking his head.

“You’re fucking insane,” he says under his breath.

“No,” Steve smiles. “Just in love.”

“You sentimental sap,” Bucky complains, even though his eyes are glassy with emotions as he says it. Next thing, Steve nearly topples over when Bucky throws himself at him to hug him tightly.
Steve pretends not to hear the wet snivel of Bucky’s nose when Bucky drags in a breath, and it only takes another hard squeeze for Bucky to composes himself and straighten back up again.

“All right, you smooth bastard, two can play this game.” he says, wiping his nose with the back of his left hand. He then nearly succeeds to fall over the edge of the bed as he turns around to reach in underneath the mattress, coming back up just a few seconds later. Steve frowns in confusion at the bright white envelope Bucky holds out towards him.

“Merry Christmas,” Bucky says, and when he waves the gift pointedly towards Steve’s chest, Steve takes it with a weary glance at Bucky’s face. It’s unreadable, and so, he carefully opens up the flap of the envelope and reaches inside it.

“Be careful with it,” Bucky warns, and Steve obediently keeps a light grip around the object as he slowly drags it out from its container. “It’s not really for you,” Bucky explains, suddenly sounding apologetic, “but I figured you might appreciate it anyway.”

Steve’s confused frown deepens even further, and when he looks down, he finds that what he had first believed to be a thick postcard, is actually a…pamphlet for fireworks? He raises an eyebrow at the other man, and Bucky rolls his eyes to the ceiling.

“Turn it over, stupid,” he scolds affectionately, and Steve does. There’s something scribbled across the back of it, and it takes Steve more than a few tries to actually figure out what it says. He blinks, and then reads it again, just to make sure, before he looks up at Bucky, mouth gaping.

“You got a job?” he asks, stupefied.

“Yeah,” Bucky says, grinning back at him, and Steve blinks again.

“I— I don’t— When?” he ends lamely, and Bucky looks so pleased and proud, Steve can feel his own smile widen just by looking at him.

“At Nat’s party,” Bucky explains. “Tony hired me. And yeah, that’s just like, a temporary contract,” he adds when he sees the way Steve looks at the colorful pamphlet in his hand. “Tony snatched it off Nat’s side table by the couch, and he misspelled a few words, I think, but it’s totally legit. See, Clint and Bruce witnessed it and everything.” He licks his lips while pointing to the two additional signatures on the bottom of the pamphlet, eyes gleaming. “I signed the real papers at Stark Tech’s office the day before yesterday,” he reveals proudly, “before I came back home.”

His smile falters a little as he glances up at Steve’s face. “I was really gonna tell you about it when we got back from the party, but then…you know…stuff happened.”

Steve looks down at the pamphlet.

“That’s why I…freaked out,” Bucky continued sheepishly. “I was so excited about telling you I got a job, and then—”

“And then I fucked up,” Steve ends with a sheepish smile.

“We both fucked up,” Bucky corrects him sternly. He shrugs. “So I decided to make it a surprise instead.”

“Bucky, I—” Steve doesn’t even know how to describe it. “I mean this… This is amazing. Congratulations.”

“I’m gonna be a salesman,” Bucky reveals, his entire body vibrating with barely contained
excitement. “At their main store in Manhattan, can you believe it? Me? Tony says he needs someone who knows how to sell a concept, and he wants to give me a shot. Oh, and I’ll get a phone too!” he adds excitedly. “A brand new one, just for being employed! For free!”

“That’s awesome,” Steve says, grinning fondly at Bucky’s excitement. In reality, for Steve, the fact that Bucky is so happy is a better gift than the job itself. Right now, he’s willing to agree with practically anything Bucky says, as long as it keeps the man smiling the way he is.

“He also wants me to help him with a new thing his tech department is working on,” Bucky continues happily. “Like, a consultant, you know.”

“Really?” Steve says, impressed. “What’s the thing?”

“As far as I’ve understood it, some kind of Virtual Reality goggles,” Bucky says. “They’re only in a theoretical stage still, and we just touched on the subject at the party, but… It’s basically just like a pair of normal glasses, but with a hologram screen instead of glass. Tony wants to make it a sort of headset so that you can walk, talk, and do stuff on your phone at the same time, but I told him I wasn’t sure how that would work out in traffic and shit.”

Suddenly, Steve recalls the wide gestures Bucky had been making during his conversation with Tony at Nat’s party, waving his hands around in the air and down in front of Tony’s eyes. So that’s what that had been about.

Meanwhile, Bucky laughs, shaking his head.

“Tony hadn’t really thought about traffic, since… Well, Tony Stark rarely drives himself or walks anywhere, you know? We got talking about it, and…basically, he volunteered me to the project.” He picks up the empty envelope by Steve’s side, and gives it a little shake. “So, you know, I’ll get you a proper gift later,” he promises. “As soon as I get my first paycheck.”

“I really have to wait that long?” Steve asks, pretending to be disappointed. “I mean…” he adds slyly, leaning forwards and into Bucky’s space under the pretence of carefully placing the contract onto the bedside table behind them. “You could technically give me something now?”

“Really?” Bucky asks sarcastically. “That’s your comeback?”

“Oh, you bet it is,” Steve murmurs, smiling as he wraps his hand around the tail of Bucky’s scarf, using it to pull him in closer. “Unless you have any objections, of course?”

“Nope,” Bucky says. “None whatsoever.”

“Good,” Steve decides as he closes the last, elusive inch between their lips with a final tug at the scarf in his hand, and Bucky falls into the kiss with a breathy chuckle, wrapping his arms around Steve’s neck.

Steve lets the weight of Bucky’s body push him backwards, and as they drop down onto the mattress, Steve gently reaches up and uncurls Bucky’s fingers from around the house key still in his hand, putting it on the bedside table.

Bucky yelps when Steve then grabs around him and rolls the two of them over so that Bucky ends up on his back below Steve’s body, and Steve immediately apologizes byleaning down to kiss him softly.

The vibrations of Bucky approving hum rumble against Steve’s lips, and then again when Steve pulls away to slide his mouth over the side of Bucky’s throat. Lazily, Steve unwraps the scarf from
around the other man's neck as he continues down to kiss the little notch between Bucky's collarbones, before moving lower.

He laps his tongue over a hard nipple, and Bucky groans, arching into the slick touch. Steve gives the nub a quick little suckle, and then moves on to the other. Closing his teeth around the metal bar and tugging, Steve brings a hand up to slowly rub circles over the flushed skin of the nipple he just left, and the combined action sends Bucky positively writhing beneath him.

Steve tries his best not to grin when Bucky clutches around his shoulders with both hands, holding on while Steve continues his wicked actions. Steve doesn’t have to look in order to know that Bucky’s currently biting down on his lower lip, trying his hardest to stay quiet.

“Aren’t you enjoying yourself?” he asks sweetly. “You’re not saying much.”

He pinches Bucky’s left nipple, twisting slightly, and Bucky lets out a gasp and a whine before digging his nails into Steve’s back.

“Maybe you’d prefer my attention a bit further…south?” Steve tries, and when he slowly begins to kiss his way down Bucky’s ribs, Bucky gives a full body shudder and a groan in response.

Steve takes his time trailing kisses all over Bucky’s heaving chest, his ribs, his abs and stomach. He bites down loosely over the ridge of a hipbone, before letting his tongue swipe out in a teasing slide across Bucky’s pelvis. Spreading kisses all the way down to the middle of Bucky’s legs, he then places his hands on either side of the man’s knees, pushing them aside and up to reveal the unprotected skin on the inside of his thighs.

There, he can clearly see the two foreign words scribbled in cursive black ink, right at the femoral triangle on each leg, and he lazily moves in to lick over them, one by one, tracing the letters with his tongue.

“You wanna tell me what these mean today?” he murmurs. “Like a second Christmas present, to make us even?”

Bucky shivers as he presses his face into the side of the pillow, burying a moan in the fabric. “Yeah, you wish,” he grits out.

“C’mon,” Steve pleads. “I’ve been asking you nicely for almost a week.” He waits, but when Bucky doesn't answer, Steve tightens his grip around Bucky’s knees, pulling them apart wider.

“Well then, if asking nicely doesn’t help…” he says slowly, “then maybe I'll just have to try another method?”

“What are you—?” Bucky cuts himself off with a startled groan, his back arching when Steve slides his teeth over the sensitive skin of his inner thigh. The action has him nearly jackknifing off the bed as he reaches down, hands held out as if he's going to shove Steve away. When Steve repeats the action, however, he slumps back down, just as fast as he had gone up while gritting his teeth to keep the startled moan in his throat at bay. “Shit...!!”

Meanwhile, Steve knows exactly how sensitive Bucky is right here. Not only when it comes to tickling, which all on it's own is pretty damn incredible, but also in other, much more interesting ways. Steve had, in fact, discovered that pretty much the first time they got naked together. That, along with those two, annoyingly mysterious words tattooed along the firm inside of the other man’s thighs...

He had asked about them, of course, but Bucky had refused to tell him, just like all the other times
Steve had asked since. The font is beautifully done, like the rest of Bucky’s other tattoos are beautiful. Simple in their design, and perhaps, Steve decides, it’s their simplicity in combination with Bucky’s secrecy that somehow makes them so darn intriguing?

Licking across the right word, Steve traces the curve of each letter with the tip of his tongue, over and over, and Bucky squirms beneath the touch. His breath hitches as he gasps and groans, biting back breathy giggles behind his teeth.

“Oh, that's not fair…” he pants. “Fuck you, that's not— Oh…!”

Steve knows that it tickles, but he also knows that it’s a good kind of tickle, and that Bucky both hates and loves it at the same time. Steve hasn't tried yet, but he's pretty certain that if there's one foolproof way to make Bucky beg, teasing the insides of his thighs is it.

“Tell me what it says,” he murmurs.

“No,” Bucky grits out, his entire body twitching. Then he gasps when Steve rake the nails of his left hand down the inside of the other leg, all the way down to the back of his knee. “Fuck…! You son of a bitch, that's— That's not—!”

“Fair?” Steve offers sweetly, and Bucky arches off the mattress with a frustrated whine. “Tell me what the tattoos mean and I might stop… If you’re lucky. What language is it?”

Bucky pants, clenching his teeth together. “Gaelic,” he confesses, biting the word out.

“Why Gaelic?” Steve pushes on.

“M—My mom— “ Bucky gasps as he twists his head to bury a groan into his pillow. “She was Scottish,” he whimpers. “It's— Buchanan is a Scottish name…!”

“What do they mean? This one,” Steve ask before licking a broad swipe over the tattoo on the left. “What does it say?”

Bucky clamps his mouth shut, biting his lip.

“What does it say?” Steve repeats as he digs his fingers into the thick muscle of Bucky’s thighs.

“Fighter…!” Bucky gasps, and the words come out muffled as he covers his face with his hands. “It means fighter…!”

“And this?” Steve continues while giving the other thigh the same treatment.

“L— Lover. It's a— Fuck… It's just a saying, okay?” Bucky drags his hands up through his hair, fistig it at the back, before letting his hands drop back down to his sides with a groan.

“Oh, no,” Steve says with a chuckle. “All your tattoos so far have had a meaning to them. This one is no different. Considering how sensitive this part is…” he says while ghosting his fingers over the skin, causing Bucky’s entire body to quake, “… putting tattoos on here must have required some dedication. Why’d you get them?”

By now, Bucky is shaking, breath hitching ever so often as Steve continues to brush his lips over Bucky’s skin while he speaks.

“Bucky,” Steve drawls, the name carrying an obvious warning.

“Because,” Bucky half pants, half hisses, “if I'd tried fitting the phrase do no harm, but take no shit
down there, I would have either jizzed my pants or passed out…!"

“That’s not a real answer,” Steve sing songs, and Bucky digs his heels into the mattress when Steve nips at the right tattoo with his teeth. For a moment, he goes completely incoherent, fistng the sheets in his hands and wringing them in between his fingers while squirming on the bed, gasping and groaning.

“All right!” he decides, quaking all over his body. “All right, I’ll tell you. I’ll tell you, just— Stop it, okay? Fuck, you’ve gotta stop, I can’t—”

Steve gives a last, wet lick to the ink beneath his tongue, and Bucky literally goes limp with relief when Steve finally pulls back. Steve gives him a few seconds to collect himself, but he keeps his thumbs resting against the inside of Bucky’s thighs, just as a gentle reminder.

“So?” he prompts. “What’s the story?”

Bucky peers down at him with an exhausted glare and then tips his head back into the pillow with a sigh. “Mom knew Gaelic,” he groans, and Steve gives an impressed arch if his eyebrows. “Like, fluently. She used to mumble it to herself whenever she was upset, but didn’t want me to know what she was saying.”

The mental image makes Steve chuckle, and he gently leans down and kisses the top of Bucky’s thigh as a rewards, and Bucky moans softly.

“After she died…” he continues, “I often wished I’d taken the time to learn it properly like she did. So when I decided to get tattooed, making it Gaelic only seemed fitting.”

“That’s a sweet thought,” Steve agrees. “I like it.” He looks down at the tattoos again. “But why here?” he asks. “I mean, c’mon, all I have to do is this…” He jabs his thumb into the thigh, and Bucky gasps, flinching wildly. “… and you go like that,” Steve ends pointedly. “You must have been a mess.”

“Yeah, pretty much,” Bucky confesses, still shuddering. “But I knew Dad would be pissed if he found out I got inked, so I wanted it somewhere people wouldn’t see, unless I let them.”

“Well, mission accomplished,” Steve says with chuckle. He slides his thumbs over the scripted letters. “Lover and Fighter, huh?” he murmurs. “How come you went with those two? You said something about do no harm?”

“Yeah.” Bucky nods, smiling, as if he’s just recalled a fond memory. “After mom, I was angry a lot. Got into fights and shit.” He sighs as he turns his gaze up towards the ceiling. “When I came home from school with my third black eye of the week, my dad sat me down to try and talk some sense into me.”

“Did he succeed?”

“Actually, he did,” Bucky confesses. “Or, you could say that he guilt tripped me into getting a grip of myself, but it worked, so…”

“What did he say?” Steve asks curiously, leaning down to rest his chin on top of Bucky’s thigh.

“Basically, he reminded me about what mom would have said, if she knew I was out there on the school yard, picking fights with my classmates,” Bucky says. He grimaces. “Mom hated fighting. She always said fists were what people without brains used to win intellectual arguments.” He sighs again. “Dad told me it was okay to be upset. To be angry, but that it wasn’t okay to let the
anger get the better of you. Especially not if doing so made you take it out on others. The tattoos are a reminder about sticking to the middle of the road, I guess.”

Steve nods. “How come you didn’t want to tell me this?” he asks curiously. “With the way you’ve been acting, I thought you’d gotten something offensive scribbled down there.”

Bucky snorts as he closes his eyes, and Steve lifts his head up to look at him.

“Truth is,” Bucky says, “apart from Becca, you’re the first one I’ve ever told who hasn’t laughed at it.”

“Why the hell would people laugh at something like that?” Steve asks. “It’s a real nice thought.”

“Yeah, exactly,” Bucky says. “It’s nice. Which means that it’s corny and sappy.” He looks down at Steve. “In the end, I just made something up when people asked. Told them what I assumed they wanted to hear, and… Yeah, you get the picture.”

“Well, I think it’s a great tattoo,” Steve says firmly. “And I’m not just saying that because it gives me an excuse to do this,” he adds, rolling his thumbs in slow, massaging circles over his thighs, making Bucky suck down a surprised breath into his lungs.

“Thanks,” Bucky rasps, and he shivers again when Steve begins to place kiss upon kiss over the top of his thigh, moving down and in towards its centre. When Bucky’s hips makes a twitchy thrust towards the ceiling, Steve stops to send a curious glance up the other man’s body.

“So…” he mumbles. “The middle of the road, huh?” Then, he lifts himself up by the elbows, and licks a long, flat stroke of his tongue up the line of Bucky’s semi-hard erection. The action has Bucky gasping, and then groaning as his knees twitch with the effort to close beneath the weight of Steve’s hands.

“Middle like that?” Steve teases with a pleased little smirk, and Bucky’s hips stutter again.

“Maybe not exactly like that…” Bucky gulps, swallowing hard. “But I’ll take it.”

Steve grins as he moves to settle his body more comfortably in between Bucky’s parted legs, and leaning down, he then repeats the move, feeling Bucky twitch up against his mouth and tongue as he does. He has to keep his hands firmly planted on top of Bucky’s hips to keep him from moving around too much, and he hums as he licks over Bucky’s cock in broad, flat swipes of his tongue, over and over.

Bucky tries to keep his breathing steady, but Steve knows that it’s just a matter of time before that too changes. Bucky whips his head from side to side, body jerking every time Steve pauses to pay extra attention to some specific part of the erection throbbing against his lips, and when Bucky finally begins to whimper, Steve decides to show mercy. He takes Bucky’s length into his mouth and closes his lips around him with an eager hum, relaxing his throat to take him as far in as he can without choking.

“Oh…” Bucky breathes, melting into the sheets. “Oh, yeah, just like that…”

Steve hums again, showing that he understands the instruction. He keeps going, moving his lips up and down, all the while rubbing his hands up and down the length of Bucky’s legs, tenderly massaging them.

Bucky moans as he begins to thrust up into Steve’s mouth in slow, lazy movements, and Steve lets him. He keeps moving, altering between fast and slow, and he hollow his cheeks while gripping
around the base of Bucky’s cock with his right hand, enjoying the breathy little noises that escape Bucky’s throat when he does. It’s amazing, Steve thinks, how just listening to someone else’s pleasure can make his stomach twist and curl in on itself like this. How it can make him feel so goddamn good without even a single touch.

He groans, thrusting his own hips down against the mattress where his erection is pressing in against the sheets. It feels nice, and it doesn’t take long until he’s rutting against the bed in time with the movements of his mouth, relishing in the warmth pooling in his groin with each enticing roll of his pelvis.

He hears Bucky moan, and then he feels fingers brush against his scalp when Bucky sits up higher to look at him while leaning his weight against his left elbow.

“God, if only you could see yourself…” Bucky breathes. “Your lips are so pretty right now. Stretched around my cock like that…” He shivers, eyelids fluttering. His hips stutter up, and he tips his head back while tightening his grip in Steve’s hair. “Fuck…” he hisses, drawing the syllable out. “Oh, shit, I wanna come in your mouth so bad…”

“Then do it,” Steve offers as he pulls off for a moment to look Bucky in the eye, and Bucky exhales, slow and deep.

“You sure?” he asks, thrusting into the tunnel of Steve’s hand, speeding up. “Because I’m right fucking there.”

At that, Steve just smirks before lowering his mouth back down, and Bucky lets out a noise that makes the hair at the back of Steve’s neck stand up.

“Oh, yeah, baby…” Bucky whispers. “Oh, yeah, just keep sucking it. Keep— God, so fucking pretty… Gonna make me blow my load right down your throat, is that what you want?”

Steve groans, nodding, and Bucky growls.

“Gonna do it,” he says, half a warning, half a promise. “Gonna come, Stevie, gonna come so fucking hard…” He shoves his hips up, taking Steve a little by surprise, but Steve stays where he is, letting Bucky set the rhythm while keeping him in place by the hair. “Oh, yeah…” Bucky growls, gritting his teeth. “Oh, fuck, yeah, baby… Oh, fuck…”

Steve moans when he feels the liquid warmth of Bucky’s release fill his mouth, and he swallows it down eagerly. He doesn’t care about the bitter taste it leaves on his tongue, because Bucky is still moving, still thrusting up in between Steve’s lips while his thighs shake underneath Steve’s hand. He doesn’t pull off until Bucky begins to slow down, and he wipes across his mouth with a pleased little chuckle as he sits back up.

“That was fucking amazing,” Bucky decides, voice thick and drowsy as he flops down against the mattress.

“Thanks,” Steve says with a grin as he nudges his finger against Bucky’s leg. “Fetch me the lube, will ya? Before you fall asleep on me.”

Bucky groans, but he rolls over onto his stomach nonetheless and does as he’s told. Retrieving the lubricant from the drawer, he tosses the tube onto the bed by Steve’s knees before slumping down onto his back on the mattress again.

“Lift your legs,” Steve instructs, and Bucky sleepily obeys, eyes already closed. “Your enthusiasm is overwhelming,” Steve comments teasingly while squeezing the lube onto his fingers, and
Bucky’s lip quirks up into a smile.

“Just give me a minute,” he murmurs. “I’ll be good to go in no time.”

Steve chuckles. “You just relax,” he instructs. “Let me take care of you.”

Bucky hums, and when Steve rubs his slick fingers up against him, he breathes out a soft sigh, pushing back against the digits with a sway of his hips.

Steve slides the first finger in with nearly no resistance at all, and Bucky’s breathing picks up, just slightly. Steve knows that he would probably be able to insert a second finger right away, but he doesn’t. He takes his time to open Bucky up, tenderly, slowly, drinking in the sight of Bucky’s chest as it rises and falls with every gentle twists of Steve’s wrist.

Bucky is drowsy at first, eyes closed and limbs weak, but the longer Steve keeps going, the more animated he becomes. It doesn’t take long before his breathing has gone shallow, and he turns his head from side to side, panting and gasping softly, cock starting to twitch between his thighs.

“Steve…” he whines, pushing down over Steve’s hand and the four fingers he’s currently got curling inside of him. “Enough…”

“You sure?” Steve whispers, and when Bucky nods, he slowly pulls his fingers out. Using the wet wipes from the drawer, he cleans himself off, but when he grabs one of the tin foil squares to tear it open, he’s stopped by Bucky’s hand on his wrist.

“Put that thing away,” Bucky orders, and Steve obediently drops the condom back into the drawer with a curious arch of his eyebrow, before allowing Bucky to pull him closer. “I’m clean,” Bucky explains. “Finally got my lazy ass tested. Properly. Figured it was about time…”

“Not gonna argue with that,” Steve agrees.

They’d discussed this already, of course, once they realized that sex would be something regular happening between the two of them.

Thanks to a drunken night with some random girl at one of Tony's infamous house parties that previous summer, Steve already had himself tested; coming out clean, thank god. He hadn’t been with anyone else since then, until Bucky, but he had still offered to take another test, just to make sure.

Bucky had objected, saying that the only health hazard there was him, and that he’d get a test done as soon as he got the chance. Steve would honestly have been good with a simple promise that he was clean, but Bucky wouldn't have it.

He had insisted on them using protection, and sure, they’d slipped up a few times already, but Steve was never worried. To finally have it on paper that they’re both all-clear is a relief beyond proportion.

“You sure you don’t want me to do another test, then?” Steve asks teasingly, making sure.

“One hundred percent,” Bucky assures him. He leans up, kissing Steve on the mouth – just a quick, encouraging touch of lips – before falling back down. “I want to feel you properly”

“Then roll over,” Steve instructs softly while brushing his fingertips against Bucky’s hip. “On your knees.”
“Aye-aye, Captain,” Bucky says with a snort. He smirks over his shoulder as he moves to follow the order, and Steve grabs around his legs, pulling him closer by the knees.

Leaning down, he then begins to kiss a winding trail up the length of Bucky’s spine while rubbing his palms up and down the back of his thigh. “How do you want it?” he murmurs against his lover’s skin. “Slow and sweet? Or fast and rough?”

“Surprise me,” Bucky groans. He tips his head to the side to give Steve better access as his lips reach the nape of his neck. Steve chuckles, and Bucky gasps when the tip of Steve’s tongue swipes out to lick over the skin beneath the metal rod at the top of Bucky’s ear.

“Are you ready?” Steve whispers, and he feels Bucky’s body shudder against his chest when he nods eagerly. When Steve presses up against him, Bucky lets out an impatient growl, thrusting back, and god, one of these days, Steve’s really got to teach this guy some patience.

He grabs hard around Bucky’s hips and gives them a warning squeeze. “Still,” he orders, and Bucky huffs, but obediently stops moving. Steve bites down on his lower lip, grabbing around the base of himself to get the angle right, and then begins to push.

The first breach is always the most exhilarating one. That span between one heartbeat and the next, where everything is just tension and tight, tight resistance, before the muscles just give. Not from violence, or force, but simple acceptance. A sigh, a groan, and then Steve’s inside, feeling the warmth of Bucky’s body close around him.

It’s tight, in the best kind of ways, and the lack of latex between them only serves to make the sensation even more intense. Steve keeps his right palm firmly planted at the hollow of Bucky’s lower back as he makes the first, slow thrust in and out, moaning softly.

“Oh, that’s good…” he breathes, doing it again. “You always feel so good, Buck…”

Bucky nods, too busy trying to level his breathing to answer, and Steve rubs his hands soothingly up and down his back in an attempt to calm him down.

“You okay?” he asks. He doesn’t believe that Bucky is in pain, because he would have already told Steve if that were the case, but pain is not the only thing that can be overwhelming when it comes to doing this.

“Yeah,” Bucky pants, and Steve swallows down a moan when Bucky rolls his hips back against him. “Just waiting for you to stop wasting time and fuck me already…”

Steve smiles. He recognizes the sassy tone of Bucky’s voice, even though he sounds more breathless than cocky at the moment, and he slowly moves his hands back down towards Bucky’s waist. Curling his fingers over the edge of the other’s hips, he leans down and presses a soft, lingering kiss to the spot in between Bucky’s shoulder blades.

“As you wish,” he whispers, and then Bucky gives a throaty gasp when Steve proceeds to rock into him even deeper.

The pace is lazy as Steve makes sure to keep it deliberately slow. Mostly because he can tell that Bucky’s longing for it hard and rough, as has been his preference so far. Steve loves to tease him by dragging the pleasure out into languid torture for as long as he can. Bucky calls him a sadist for it, but if that’s the truth, then Bucky in turn must surely be the world’s greatest masochist.

Just going by the sounds he makes, Steve guesses that Bucky’s having the time of his life right about now. Gasping, panting, moaning and biting out curses under his breath, he sounds like all of
Steve’s favorite pornos wrapped into one. He hasn’t begun to beg yet, though; something Steve intends to change.

Reaching down and around, he wraps his fingers around Bucky’s cock, and Bucky hisses, his body quaking under Steve’s touch. The hiss then turns into a whimper as Steve begins to stroke him, going fast in obvious and deliberate contrast to the slow rolls of his hips. The moment Bucky tries to move with it, however, Steve lets him go and leaves him twitching and moaning in the wake of his hand.

“Didn’t I tell you to keep still?” Steve scolds with a whisper while sliding his fingertips along the bottom of the bobbing length. “Was I being unclear, or are you just planning to be difficult with me?”

“No,” Bucky grates, shaking his head, and Steve immediately feels the blood boil hot in his veins. Normally, Bucky would respond with some sort of witty remark, or sarcastic insult, but here, like this, that attitude is nowhere to be found. It’s an absolutely glorious thing to witness.

“I promise I’ll keep touching you,” Steve murmurs as he leans down to press a kiss against Bucky’s spine. “As long as you promise not to move.” He gives him another kiss. “Think you can do that?”

Bucky moans, and Steve can feel his muscles clench down over him when Steve begins to stroke again. The obedience only lasts for about a second, however, and then Bucky’s hips jerk forward, and Steve lets go of him once more.

“Fuck…!” Bucky hisses under his breath in frustration, and Steve chuckles.

“C’mon, you can do it,” he encourages. “Just don’t move.”

“Easy for you to say,” Bucky snarls, and Stevepunishes his insolence by grabbing him around the shoulder to push his upper body down against the mattress.

“Then let’s try it like this instead,” he purrs while draping himself over Bucky’s back. “You get to move as much as you want…” He whispers the words against his ear while firmly wrapping both of his arms around Bucky’s torso. “That is, if you can.”

He hears Bucky swallow, and then he feels the other's arms tense as Bucky tries to untangle himself from Steve’s grip, without result.

“Fuck…” Bucky whispers, realizing the predicament of his situation, and Steve grins while rolling his hips.

“Yeah,” he groans when Bucky’s breath promptly catches. “Already on it.”

It’s amazing how quickly Bucky goes from being defiantly horny, to flat out desperate after that. Steve is still moving slowly, thrusting in and out of him as if he’s literally got all day, and the slow pace alone would have been more than enough to drive Bucky downright crazy in the end. Less than ten thrusts later, he’s already shaking, and Steve watches from over his shoulder how Bucky buries his face against the pillows to muffle the noises spilling from his mouth with every one of Steve’s lazy thrusts.

Steve can feel him try to move when Bucky’s body jerks out of its own accord under Steve’s touch, but Steve doesn’t let him. Keeping his arms locked tight around the other’s ribcage, Steve simply roams his hands over Bucky’s chest and body, as far as he can reach. He alters between rubbing the insides of Bucky’s thighs, fondling his balls, and jerking him off with one hand, while
teasing his chest with the other. Pinching, twisting, stroking, and flicking at the nipples, his fingers send Bucky into a shivering fit every single time, and he soon discovers that doing so also leaves the other man’s cock near dripping wet with pleasure.

“God,” he moans against Bucky’s shoulder as he lets his thumb rub over the mess leaking out of the twitching length in his hand. “You really have those things hardwired, don’t you?”

He pinches around the barbell on Bucky’s chest, wiggling it back and forth at the same time as he thrusts his cock inside a little bit harder than before. He feels more precum dribble out against the palm of his other hand, and Bucky keens, jaw going slack.

“Jesus, just look at you,” Steve marvels. “So goddamn sexy… Do you even know how hot you are right now?”

Bucky shakes his head, and Steve moans from the sudden pleasurable constriction around his cock.

“I wish I could take a picture of you like this,” Steve confesses breathlessly while nuzzling his nose against the back of Bucky’s shoulders. “I’d never need to watch porn again, Buck, you realize that, right? Never again. Just that one picture. Just you, do you understand?”

“Steve—” Bucky moans, but he doesn’t get any further, losing his ability to speak the moment Steve’s name leaves his mouth.

“You’re my dream come true, sweetheart,” Steve confesses, voice shaking as he picks up speed. “The wish I didn’t know I had. God, I love you so much, I can barely stand it…” He gasps, hips stuttering when Bucky’s body instantly reacts to his voice, squeezing him, pulsating around him, and Steve pushes his forehead down, tightening his hold around the other’s body. “Jesus Christ, you feel so fucking good…” he whimpers, and Bucky lets out a noise that sounds like something in between a gasp and a sob.

“Please,” he tries again. “Please, Steve, I— Oh, Steve…”

“Gonna come for me, baby?” Steve asks, feeling his own balls tighten from the thought alone, and Bucky nods, his entire body shaking.

“M’close,” he slurs, near incoherently, and his mouth falls open as he squeezes his eyes shut so tightly it almost looks painful. “So close, so close…”

“I know,” Steve soothes, feeling the heat lick up his spine from the sound of Bucky’s voice. “I know, Buck, I know. Gonna get you there, don’t worry. Gonna make it so good for you…”

Underlining the promise, he moves both of his hands to Bucky’s front, and then Bucky’s entire body goes rigid when Steve begins to roll both of his nipples beneath the pads of his fingers.

“Oh, shit…!” Bucky gasps, and his own fingers curl into the sheets as he arches into the touch. “Oh, fuck, Steve, don’t— Oh, please, don’t stop! Oh, please, please, for the love of god, don’t stop…!”

Steve shakes his head, still keeping it pressed against Bucky’s back, and the heat is so good, so painfully good.

“Gonna fill you up, sweetheart,” he rambles through gritted teeth, only half aware of what he’s saying as he pistons in and out of the man writhing in his arms. “Gonna fill you up so good, so slick and warm… Gonna make you come from my cock up your ass and my hands playing with your chest. Gonna make you come all over the goddamn bed…’’
“Yes…” Bucky whines. “Yes, fuck, yes…”

“Come with me,” Steve gasps. “I’m coming right now, Buck, gonna come inside you. Jesus fuck, I love you… Bucky… Oh, Bucky…”

The fire explodes, and the force of it whites out Steve’s brain when he feels Bucky tighten around him with a throaty whimper. He comes, deep and hard, and Bucky releases another strangled noise as he spills onto the bed underneath their bodies, shaking, trembling, and completely untouched.

The shockwaves roll through them both, rocking their bodies in time with their laboured breathing. Steve clings to Bucky, breathing him in. He’s not even aware of the fact that he’s been chanting Bucky’s name against the other man’s skin during his entire climax, until the white noise fades enough for the sound of it to reach his own ears.

Bucky, on the other hand, doesn’t say anything. He just lies there, slack-jawed and panting against the sheets, looking as if he’s passed out cold. His chest rises and falls against the palms of Steve’s hands, and once he’s coherent enough to move, Steve slowly begins to massage his hands down Bucky’s sides, squeezing and rubbing over his ribs while pressing slow, languid kisses all over his neck.

“Hey, gorgeous,” he whispers, smiling. “You alive?”

“No,” Bucky rasps out flatly, and Steve laughs, nuzzling his nose against Bucky’s hairline.

“Well, in that case,” he says, “congratulations on being the prettiest ghost I’ve ever seen.” When Bucky’s body responds with a vicious tremble, Steve chuckles again. “Seriously?” he asks. “Being complimented really does it for you that much?”

“Shut your face,” Bucky grumbles, and Steve lifts himself up with an intrigued smirk, because whenever Bucky tells him to shut up like that, it usually means that Steve’s caught on to something.

“Hold on,” he muses. “That’s an actual thing of yours? Not just the dirty talk, but the flattery too?”

“That’s funny,” Bucky ponders loudly, “I could have sworn I just told you to shut up like that, it usually means that Steve’s caught on to something.

“Buck…”

Bucky groans, sending Steve a glare over his shoulder. “I can’t help it, all right?” he mutters. “I don’t know why or how, it just works. It’s not like I chose it.”

“Hey, I’m not judging,” Steve says, smiling fondly. “I just think it’s an interesting reaction, is all.”

“Yeah, as if you don’t have any secrets kinks you’re ashamed to admit.”

“You mean apart from the newly discovered one where I stick my tongue up your ass?” Steve asks innocently. “Nope, none at all.”

“Fuck you,” Bucky laughs, and Steve leans down, straining to press a kiss against Bucky’s cheek before slumping down against his back again.

“Hey,” he murmurs while rubbing his nose in against the back of Bucky’s ear. “Merry Christmas, Buck.”

“Yeah,” Bucky answers, chuckling under his breath. “Happy Humbug to you too.”
And there we go.
Advent Calendar is over, and fuck it, I'm actually getting emotional over here.
This has been so much fun, and you guys have all been so great. So great, in fact, that I'm currently writing a New Year's bonus chapter for all of you. I'm going to try my best to have it done for the actual New Year's Eve, but I can't make any promises, but I'll try, because you guys deserve nothing but the best.

Also, I should probably mention that I have plans to create a separate fic, where I'll be posting little snippets and oneshots out of these two idiots' future lives together. Perhaps some from their past too. There's still so much left to explore when it comes to their relationship, and I honestly can't let them go, not yet, because I love them too much. So stay tuned for that! :)

And there you have it.
Thank you so much for reading, guys, I can't even begin to describe how much your support has meant to me <3
And thank you to Nursedarry for assisting me with Beta for this story on such short notice. I'm honored by the help and friendship you've given me, and hopefully you won't mind it when I dump the New Year's chapter in your lap later this week <3 ;)

To all of you, a Merry Christmas/Happy Holidays (because there are so many different versions and I don't know the right term for them all, sorry) and a (coming soon) Happy New Year! :) <3

If there's anything you'd like to know, or ask, you can find me on my tumblr more or less 7 days a week. Feel free to drop me a line! <3
What are you doing New Year's Eve

Chapter Notes

As promised, here is the New Year's dedicated epilogue!

Beta by the wonderful and ever so glorious Nursedarry <3
Thank you for getting this done on such a short notice, honey!

ATTENTION! THIS CHAPTER FEATURES BOTTOM (SLIGHT SUB) STEVE AND TOP (SLIGHT DOM) BUCKY, SO IF THAT'S NOT YOUR THING, THEN STAY OUT OF THIS CHAPTER. YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Saturday, December 31st

Steve checks his watch for what has to be the eleventh time in the past fifteen minutes. The party had started almost an hour ago, and even though Steve knows that Bucky said he had some things to fix after work, he still hadn't expected those things to take this long.

Steve had already left his bag in the guest room Tony had set up for them on the floor below. Previous years, Steve had opted to either take a cab home after the party, or simply steal a spot on Sam's couch, but this year, arrangements have been made a bit differently. This year, Steve has a boyfriend, and so, Bucky and he have been offered to stay the first night of the new year at Stark Tower, along with a few other privileged guests. That is, if Bucky actually shows up.

Tony had swung by the apartment a few days after Christmas and invited them both to the party personally. Steve had been confused about it at first – up till now he had always had a permanent
invitation to Tony's New Year's parties – but then he realized that the invitation hadn't been for him. It had been for Bucky.

The whole *coming over personally to invite you* gesture had solely been to let Bucky know that he was being included as an *individual*, not as Steve's plus one. Steve had figured it out when, after half the conversation, Tony hadn't faced away from Bucky even once, and when the subject of the party was finally brought up, Tony had addressed Bucky about it first.

“You're invited, of course,” he had said, before pointing his thumb towards Steve. “Just make sure to get that one properly drunk. Last year, he was still sober when the clock struck twelve.”

Bucky had grinned, promising that he'd make sure Steve was appropriately wasted by midnight, and when Tony eventually left, the millionaire had once again aimed his good-bye towards Bucky, before turning to Steve.

It's funny, Steve decides. It's been so long since anyone new came into their little circle of friends, he had completely forgotten how considerate Tony could be. For him to show up and address Bucky personally had meant a lot to Bucky, even though he had done his best to keep his cool about it.

The happiness had lasted up until dinner time, when Steve reluctantly, and very gently had mentioned the fact that they would probably have to get Bucky a suit for the party.

To be honest, he should have expected the way Bucky had looked at him in silence from across the kitchen table for a few seconds, before grumbling out a low, "I know," into his coffee mug.

Steve hadn't pushed the topic. He had learnt his lesson, and reading Bucky had become a lot easier now that he knew what signs he was supposed to be looking for.

Because one, a new suit meant money, which Bucky didn't have. Two, a party with a dress code that requested a suit, also meant a guest list of people who most certainly didn't have any trouble acquiring such attire. Third, the party was being held at Stark Tower, and those parties weren't exactly meant for the public.

This was an *extravagant* party, filled with rich, important, *extravagant* people, and Steve didn't need for Bucky to tell him out loud that thinking about attending such a party made him nervous.

Bucky had only just recently met Steve's closest friends, and even though that had gone more-than-well, this was different. Steve knows that Bucky wants to do this right. Not just because Tony is Bucky's new boss, or because the opinion of the other guests means anything to him, but because he wants to prove, to *himself*, that he can do this just as well as anyone else.

Attending this party was an important challenge to Bucky's self esteem, and so, Steve had kept quiet, and allowed his boyfriend to deal with it in his own way.

As suspected, two days after Tony's visit, Bucky had casually approached Steve to ask him where one could buy a suit.

Steve had just as casually given him the names of a few stores, and Bucky had gone quiet. Steve had waited, and sure enough, ten minutes later, Bucky had asked how much a suit would hypothetically cost. Steve had answered that too, and when Bucky had gone quiet once again, he had turned to him on the couch and given his thigh an encouraging little nudge.

“No one is going to notice what kind of suit you wear,” he had offered softly. “There's no need for you to get anything more expensive than you feel comfortable with.”
“It's not about the suit,” Bucky had grumbled back.

“Then what is it?” Steve countered, and Bucky had simply gestured towards his tattoos and piercings in silence, with a ‘duh’ sort of look.

“They're not going to care about that either,” Steve had promised. “Rich people have tattoos too.”

“Yeah, but I'm not rich.”

“Which they won't know,” Steve reasons. “You're at the party. Whether you are because you have money or not, people won't care.”

Bucky had sighed, and Steve had given him a sympathetic look.

“You know that I'll help you pick one out if you want me to,” he offered.

“I know,” Bucky had sighed. “I just… I didn't think I'd have to get one this soon. If ever.”

Steve got it. A suit would have been in the works at some point, surely, but yeah, given that Bucky hadn't even started working his new job yet, the money question was still a big issue for him.

“Have you thought of what style you think you'd like?” he had asked.

“Not yet,” Bucky had answered. “I was thinking I'd look around a bit first.”

“Okay,” Steve agreed. “Just let me know if you need help.”

“I will.”

It had been the last they’d spoke about it, up until last night when Steve had asked Bucky if he’d ever found a suit. Bucky had said yes, but nothing more. Given the short answer, Steve hadn't made any follow-up questions, but as he stands here, surrounded by people while dressed in his own navy blue suit, he's starting to think maybe that hadn't been such a good decision.

Because what if Bucky doesn't show? What if he didn't actually get a suit, because he was too reluctant to ask Steve for help? Should Steve have offered to help him more than once? No, they'd already been through that, like, a hundred times. Bucky would ask for help when he needed it, as long as Steve didn't try to shove the help in his face. It's the new agreement, and Steve had held up his end of it.

Then again, if Bucky hadn’t needed help, then why isn't he here yet?

Steve looks up, scanning the crowd. Suddenly he's nervous. God, what if Bucky actually doesn't come?

He glances at his watch again.

Where the hell is he?

He moves to pull his phone out of his pocket to call him, when suddenly a familiar figure appears in the corner of his eye.

It's Nat. Her radiant red hair stands out in beautiful contrast to the midnight blue, sleeveless dress she's wearing, and Steve raises his hand, mouth already open to call for her attention, when he spots the person trailing in behind her.
It's Bucky. But it doesn't look like Bucky. Yet, at the same time, it absolutely, one hundred percent, does look like Bucky, and Steve makes a little whimpering noise in the back of his throat as his hand drops back down by his side as if it had been shot down.

Bucky is dressed in black. All black. There's a black suit jacket stretched over the broad width of his shoulders, layered over a matte black button-down shirt and a black silk tie. His hair and bangs lie water-combed and slick against his head, having been pulled back into a tight bun at the neck. His ears are decorated with the same black, sleek metal stretchers and silver earrings as he had worn back when Steve first met him, and Steve's eyes immediately drop to linger on the two black studs sitting below the full set of the other man's lips.

He is fully aware of the fact that his jaw is probably hanging at the level of his shoelaces at this point, but he doesn't care. Bucky looks stunning. He looks every bit of handsome as Steve would ever have been able to imagine or even wish for. The tattooed peacock feathers peeking out over the collar of his shirt gives an absolutely marvelous accent to his strong jawline, and when Bucky's eyes suddenly move to lock onto Steve's own over the crowd, Steve empties his champagne glass in one single gulp.

Jesus Christ, he might not actually survive until midnight.

He watches as Bucky gets offered a drink by a passing waiter, and how Bucky accepts it with a gracious smile before heading in Steve's direction. He makes his way through the crowd, and Steve feels an excited tug in the pit of his stomach when he sees how smoothly he moves. Bucky glides between the guests, maneuvering himself and others using nothing but a gentle hand on a shoulder, a polite smile, or a light touch to an elbow.

He could pick every single pocket in this room without as much as a pause, Steve thinks, with an odd spark of pride, and by the time Bucky's made his way over, Steve is grinning openly at him.

“Hey,” he greets, and before Bucky has time to respond, Steve pulls him in by the elbow to give him a smoldering kiss, right on the lips.

When they break apart, Bucky sends a wary, somewhat flustered look around the room, and Steve laughs.

“Don't worry,” he says softly. “Even if these people did care, at the end of this party no one is going to remember who kissed who anyway.”

He takes a step back to send an appreciative look up and down Bucky's body, and Bucky throws his hands out to the sides, turning a little to the left.

“Thoughts?” he asks humbly, and Steve's grin widens.

“Looking good,” he approves. “You've got the whole sexy Bond-villain look down to a tee.”

“Thank you very much, Mr Rogers,” Bucky quips back in a fake Russian accent that practically ripples it's way down Steve's spine to settle as a sharp throb in his gut.

“Don't do that,” Steve warns under his breath. “People are gonna get upset if I ruin the buffet table by bending you over it”

At that, Bucky just laughs and takes another sip from his glass, and he looks so handsome, and dapper, for a moment, Steve seriously considers whether ruining the buffet would be worth it…
He looks him up and down again. It's a very nice suit, and the material beneath Steve's hand when he touched it had been soft and silky. It both looks and feels expensive, perfectly fitted over Bucky's muscular frame, and Steve frowns.

"Is this tailored?" he asks curiously. "It looks as if it must've cost you a fortune?"

"It was a bit on the pricy side, yeah," Bucky admits. "I…uh…" He clears his throat, and then looks up at Steve, gaze firm. "I borrowed some money from Nat. And I know," he says, when Steve opens his mouth to speak, "I could have asked you. I also know that had I done that, you would have gone and made a big-ass deal out of me not having to pay you back and whatnot, and— Well, to be honest, I just wanted to do this one by myself."

He says it all almost defiantly polite, as if he's expecting Steve to get mad at him for not coming to him first, and Steve feels an affectionate smile tug at the corner of his lips when he settles on a simple nod in return.

Bucky looks taken aback by the obvious lack of objections, and when Steve's smile widens, he looks down, licking his lips nervously.

"I picked it out myself, though," he says, sounding as if he's apologizing. "I didn't want it to feel as if I was putting on a costume… And I tried the ordinary black and white ones, but I just felt silly. Like I was playing dress-up, or some shit…"

"Well, you did one hell of a job," Steve compliments. "Black’s always looked good on you." He leans in and presses a quick, reassuring kiss against Bucky's left cheek, whispering into his ear, "You look hot as fuck."

Bucky smiles, and Steve's heart gives a light, exhilarated flutter at the sight.

"Oh, good, you found him!"

Steve turns around, only to get his arms full of a happy Natasha as she throws her arms around his neck with a wide smile.

"Hey, Nat," he greets, and Natasha pulls back.

"Looking slick, Rogers," she comments, before lowering her voice as she continues, "Not as slick as your papi chulo over there, though."

"Tell me about it," Steve mumbles back. "He walked through the door, and I nearly had a heart attack…"

Natasha laughs, and then she turns to put one hand on Bucky's arm.

"I found this lost little lamb wandering around the lobby when I got here. Apparently," she says, smiling fondly, "nobody told him which floor the party was on."

"That might have been my fault," Steve admits sheepishly. "I've been here so many times, it was sort of obvious to me." He turns towards Bucky with a confused frown. "Why didn't you call and tell me to come down and meet you?"

Bucky blinks.

"Oh," he says. "I didn't think about that." He pulls his cell phone out of his suit pocket to look down at it with an affronted frown. "I still forget that I even have this thing nowadays."
“Well, you better get used to it,” Tony says, suddenly appearing by Nat's side, “Or I might just take it back.” Grinning, he reaches out and slaps his hand against the top of Bucky's shoulder. “Glad you could make it, sport. I was getting worried you'd gotten lost on your way over here.”

“Oh, no, no,” Bucky promises. “I'm just being less-than-fashionably late.”

“Trust me, friend, there is no such thing,” Tony assures him, turning towards Steve. “Good to see you, Rogers. Though I can't help but notice that you're still being annoyingly sober.”

“I got here less than an hour ago,” Steve defends himself.

“Well, it only takes half an hour to get drunk, so your excuse is hereby ignored.” Tony raises his hand and gives one of the waiters a pointed wave. Next thing, Tony thrusts a full glass of champagne into Steve’s hand while simultaneously ridding him of his empty one. “There,” he decides. “Much better.”

“So,” Natasha says, turning towards Bucky. “How was your first day at work? Did you have fun?”

“That's right,” Tony recalls, before Bucky can answer, “that was today, wasn't it? I hope Rhodey showed you around all right?”

“Oh, yeah, he did,” Bucky says with a nod. “He was very educational.”

“He's one of the best,” Tony agrees. “Too bad you got landed with the early shift, though.”

“It's all right,” Bucky says. “I don't usually sleep that late.”

“He was up at five this morning,” Steve complains loudly. “Woke me up and everything.”

“Don't be so melodramatic, you were snoring again before I even left the room,” Bucky scoffs.

“I was acting,” Steve defends himself with a snort. “I didn't want you to feel bad about waking me up.”

“Sure you were,” Bucky comments, smirking. “I especially liked the theatrical part where you drooled all over your pillow. That was a nice touch.”

Steve rolls his eyes with an offended huff, but then he leans in and gives Bucky a quick kiss on the lips.

“So what do you think of the job so far?” Tony insists. “Got any ideas you wanna share?”

“It's good,” Bucky answers. “I mean, it's new, obviously, but it looks like fun. I'm gonna have to get through a few more shifts before I can start talking about making any changes, though,” he says apologetically, but Tony waves him away.

“Don't worry,” he says nonchalantly. “You'll get the hang of it in no time. Give it a week and you'll probably be managing the place.”

“Does that mean he'll get to sleep in?” Steve butts in when Bucky ducks his head with a bashful smile, and Tony rolls his eyes at him.

“It's business, Rogers,” he says with an exasperated sigh. “We're talking big bucks here, I can't exactly take your snuggle schedule into consideration.”

Steve slumps his shoulders, feigning disappointment, but he's still smirking when he sends Bucky
a proud glance from the corner of his eye.

Bucky looks happy, spinning his champagne glass in his hand while smiling at the conversation. His posture is relaxed, his voice calm. Steve just barely manages to subdue the sudden overwhelming urge to wrap him up in his arms and kiss the living daylights out of him.

“There you are!” Steve looks back up just in time to see Pepper come up to slip her hand around Tony's waist. “I've been looking for you. There are guests waiting for you to come over. Hey, everybody,” she greets, ignoring the way Tony groans while tipping his head back.

“Do I have to?” he pouts.

“Yes, you do,” Pepper decides firmly. “You've been avoiding them for more than thirty minutes. They've begun to notice.”

“But they're boring,” Tony objects.

“You didn't invite them for their sense of humor,” Pepper reminds him. “Oh,” she adds, turning towards Natasha with an apologetic tilt of her head, “and I'm so sorry I couldn't make the Christmas party at your place, Nat. I had to work.”

“Don't worry about it,” Nat says. “There will be more parties.”

“If I didn't invite them for humor,” Tony mutters under his breath, “then the fact that I actually have to listen to their dumb jokes is even more ludicrous.”

“Be nice,” Pepper scolds. She gives his arm a pointed tug. “C’mon now, you can play with your friends later.”

“I hate you,” Tony grumbles, but follows nonetheless when Pepper begins to drag him away.

“I know, sweetie, I know,” she soothes. “It was nice seeing you all! I promise, we'll be back later,” she adds towards the others.

“Don't forget to drink!” Tony calls over his shoulder. “I didn't pay for all this booze just for you guys to look at it!”

Bucky laughs, and Steve gives the disappearing couple a little wave.

“You heard my boss,” Bucky says, nudging Steve in the side. “To the bar.”

“Yes, sir,” Steve agrees, stomach curling in on itself when Bucky sends him an approving glance and a smirk, before taking the lead.

The bartender pours them each a drink – Steve orders something with whisky while Bucky goes for a little red number with vodka. Once they've been served, they head towards the buffet table, which really ought to be caving in beneath the weight of all the food placed upon it.

The buffet consists exclusively of finger foods, divided into separate sections; vegan, fish, meats, and desserts. There is also an impressively large, fancy fruit platter sitting at the far end, along with an equally impressive, five tier high chocolate fountain.

“Very Eighties,” Bucky comments where he stands, looking out over the table, and Steve chuckles as he hands him a plate from the stack next to the food.

“Like your hair,” he teases, and Bucky scoffs at him.
“The man-bun is making a comeback, babe,” he says simply. “But I guess a Ken-doll like you is too basic to understand fashion trends like that.”

Steve smirks when Bucky winks at him, and then he turns to the plated food before him, trying to decide what to go for first.

A lot of the food looks like it contains ingredients Steve's never seen before in his life. Warily, he picks out the ones he feels are the safest alternatives, thinking that he can always come back later if he changes his mind.

Bucky works from an entirely different angle. He appears dead set on trying out everything there is to try, and when his plate doesn't have enough room left to contain any more appetizers, Bucky simply solves the problem by eating the food directly at the table.

He doesn't gorge, absolutely not. He eats slowly, carefully, savoring every single bite, and Steve watches as he then proceeds to lick the lingering cream and sauce garnishes off his fingers with little soft suckling noises that ratchets up Steve's libido.

However, even if he does it all seemingly without an outward hint of shame to his body, Steve can tell that Bucky is extremely aware of the fact that this is not really how you're supposed to eat a buffet.

He can tell by the way Bucky keeps throwing stealthy little glances around, before popping another morsel into his mouth, always going for bite-sized ones that he can swallow in one go. Quick, silent, and efficient. Like picking a pocket.

He also sees it in the nonchalant way Bucky keeps eating from his already over-stocked plate to make room for the more luxurious treats that he still has to choose from. Bucky keeps licking his lips, both to rid himself of lingering crumbs, but also, Steve knows, because he's nervous. He doesn't have his normal lip rings in, which he usually pulls at with his teeth when he feels uneasy, but Steve recognizes the pattern well enough without them. Mostly because Bucky's tongue on its own is a very distracting thing, and no matter how much sympathy Steve has for his boyfriend at the moment, he still can't seem to keep his mind out of the gutter long enough to express it.

However, when Bucky stops to send longing, contemplative glances between his brimming plate and the chocolate fountain, Steve decides that an interjection might be in order.

He steps up and gently places his hand in the curve of Bucky's lower back, feeling Bucky flinch from the touch.

“Relax,” he coaxes. He nods towards Bucky's plate. “You do realize that the food won't run out, right? They've got a hundred more of these stashed away in the back.”

“I know,” Bucky says. “I'm hungry, is all.”

“Then I guess you also know that the food here is free?” Steve continues. “No one's going to tell you off for eating it.”

“People act like they'd like to,” Bucky mumbles under his breath. “They keep looking at me funny.”

Steve smirks, leaning in closer.

“They look at you because you're hot,” he declares, quiet, but firm. “They probably can't even help it.”
“Yeah, right,” Bucky snorts.

“I don’t blame them,” Steve continues casually, ignoring Bucky’s doubtful response. “I mean, with your body, in a suit like that…” He nuzzles his nose against the edge of Bucky’s ear, purring, “I’d bend over for you any day of the week…”

He feels the muscles of Bucky’s back tense underneath his palm when Bucky drags in a sharp breath through his teeth. Then, slowly, Bucky puts the bruschetta he had been about to take a bite out of back down onto his plate, before turning around to give Steve a long, suspicious look.

“Really?” he asks slowly, and Steve blinks.

“Why, I—” Wow, he hadn’t expected the comment to get that kind of reaction, and he shifts his weight from one foot to the other, licking his lips. “Yeah,” he ends lamely.

“You’d let me do that?” Bucky insists. “Like, you’d actually want me to do that?”

“Sure,” Steve answers, but then he realizes that such a simple answer might sound a bit nonchalant, so he adds, “Absolutely.”

“Right now?” Bucky persists, and Steve’s gut feels like it drops right out of his body, only to come bounding back up again just as quick. Bucky is looking him straight in the eye, and Steve knows what that look means. Right now. Jesus, Bucky is asking him if Steve would like to do that right now.

He blinks, and then he whips his head around, scanning the room. The party is held on the top floor – the same floor it had been held the year before – and if Steve remembers correctly there had been a conference room at the other end of the corridor that had been used as a cloakroom back then. This year, they’d left wraps and coats to the building’s cloakroom in the lobby, which meant that the conference should be empty. And hopefully, also unlocked… But—

“We don’t have any supplies,” he points out, turning back to Bucky with a disappointed frown.

“Yes, we do.”

Steve looks up sharply, and Bucky slowly reaches his hand into his pocket with a pointed arch of his pierced eyebrow.

“You didn’t,” Steve says, and Bucky nods.

“Oh, I did,” he retorts, smirk already playing at the corner of his mouth.

“Why?” Steve asks, only to receive a shrug in return,

“Just in case,” Bucky answers simply. “I was gonna leave it with the bags in our room, but…then I figured, better safe than sorry.”

Steve blinks again, and Bucky smiles, stepping up to lean into his personal space.

“So what do you say?” he purrs softly. “You want me to take my thick…” He mouths at Steve’s ear, and Steve closes his eyes when he feels teeth graze his skin, “hard…” Bucky whispers, curling his fingers around Steve’s lower back, “cock, and use it to fuck you so hard, your eyes roll into the back of your head?”

Oh, dear god, that visual… It sears its way into Steve’s brain, and Steve lets out a slow, shaky
breath, opening his eyes.

“Yeah…” he breathes. “That's exactly what I want.”

“Good,” Bucky whispers back. He pulls away, and then puts his plate back down onto the table. Steve takes the hint, and grabbing hold of Bucky’s wrist, he then proceeds to lead the way towards the hallway outside. He notices that Bucky has time to snatch a generous handful of napkins off the buffet table before they end up out of reach, and a part of him throbs with excitement at the realisation of what Bucky plans to use them for.

The hallway outside is empty, and the door to the conference room is, as predicted, unlocked. Nobody sees them as they slink inside, and Steve closes the door behind them with a deft, but determined click of the lock.

When he turns back around, Bucky is already sauntering along the edge of the big conference table in the middle of the room, sliding the tip of his fingers against the sleek surface. He’s got the other hand tucked into the pocket of his pants, and in the dark of the room, he looks more like a gentleman villain than ever. Not that Steve minds.

Steve swallows hard as he walks up to the big panoramic window that stretches across the entire length of the room, looking out. They’re high up, and the lights of New York twinkle far down below as he cant his head down to look over the edge of the floor at his feet.

“That’s a pretty nice view,” Bucky murmurs from behind him, and Steve feels the other man’s hands reach around to hug his waist as Bucky leans in to kiss softly at the nape of his neck.

”Yeah,” Steve agrees. “It’s pretty damn high.”

“That's not what I meant.”

Steve chuckles, and Bucky folds his hand around his hips while nuzzling his nose against the side of Steve’s neck, rocking them slowly back and forth.

“It does make your stomach swirl a bit, doesn't it?” he whispers. He moves his hands lower, and Steve tips his head back against Bucky’s shoulder to let the other man spread fluttering little kisses all over the stretch of his throat. The crunching whisper of a zipper is heard, and Steve sighs, pushing into the touch of Bucky’s hand when he reaches into his boxers to grab around him.

It’s warm, and safe, and Steve lets his eyes slip closed with a soft moan when Bucky begins to stroke him in time with the slow sway of their bodies.

“Have you ever done it?” Bucky asks against his skin. Steve doesn’t have to ask to know what he’s talking about.

“Apart from with myself?” he mumbles back. “No.”

“You sure you want to then?” Bucky whispers. “Like this, I mean?”

“Oh, yeah…” Steve replies, nodding without opening his eyes. “I’m sure.”

Bucky hums and rocks against Steve’s backside a little harder, but then he curses, and Steve frowns.

“What?” he asks.
“I just realized that we only have napkins to clean up with.”

“So?” Steve counters, and Bucky sighs, kissing at his neck.

“Nothing, really, I just… I would have liked to do this right for you… A pack of wet wipes would have been nice, if you know what I mean…”

“Well… There’s a fridge over by that counter,” Steve says with a nod towards the short wall of the room. “In the counter, really. Third cupboard to the left.”

“What am I looking for in a fridge?” Bucky asks, stepping away from Steve to follow the instruction.

“Water?” Steve suggests.

“Huh,” Bucky responds under his breath. He tugs the cupboard open while leaning down to peer amongst the refrigerated shelves revealed on the other side. Then he gives a short, triumphant whistle.

“Bingo.”

Steve smiles, watching Bucky close the door and then toss the water bottle in his hand up into the air with a flamboyant little spin, before catching it again with the same hand.

“Spring water,” Bucky comments. He raises his gaze to look at Steve over the label. “Fancy.”

Steve laughs, and Bucky grins at him as he walks back across the room to put the bottle down onto the conference table. Then he pulls up a chair and seats himself next to Steve’s left hip, before hooking his index finger into the hem of Steve's pants. Steve swallows down a groan as Bucky then proceeds to unceremoniously tug the unfastened pants down, along with the underwear beneath, to let the two garments pool around Steve's feet.

Steve’s heart picks up speed as he watches in silence how Bucky leans back into his seat with a contemplative glance up and down the length of Steve’s half-naked body. When Bucky then reaches out to lazily brush his fingers up the back of his thigh, Steve’s skin prickles with goosebumps from the touch.

“Lean against the window,” Bucky instructs calmly. “And touch yourself. You know how much I love watching you do that.”

“Yeah…” Steve answers under his breath, already moving to comply. “I do…”

He grabs around himself, stroking slowly as he hangs his head down between his shoulders, closing his eyes. He hears Bucky move beside him, and he shivers, knowing perfectly well that Bucky is watching his every move. He can picture it in his head clearly; those sharp, attentive eyes eating him up while Bucky bites down and pulls at his lower lip, over and over. In Steve’s head, Bucky has his lip rings in, not the black studs he’s currently wearing, but it doesn’t matter, because Steve loves it all the same. Before his inner eye, he sees Bucky shift his weight to lean even further back, sprawled out leisurely in his seat. Then, he imagines the way Bucky’s hand would find its way to his own groin, and how he would touch himself through those black suit pants while watching Steve jerk off, groaning quietly under his breath.

The mental image alone is enough to make Steve's toes curl in his shoes, and he peels his eyes open to throw a stealthy glance to the side. The sight that meets him when he does promptly steals the breath right out of his lungs.
Because Bucky isn’t watching Steve’s hand, like Steve thought he would. He’s looking at Steve’s face, and when Steve turns to look at him, Bucky stares right back without as much as a flinch. He is sitting, leaning back in his seat, just like Steve imagined. His chest is rising in deep, steady ins-and-outs of breath, and his fingers are curled hard around the edge of the chair’s armrests, as if holding onto them is the only thing still keeping him seated. There’s something downright predatory about the way his lips part when he meets Steve's gaze, and Steve breathes out a noise that sounds like a mix between a moan and a whimper at the sight.

Steve turns away, because having Bucky look at him like that is slowly making his brain melt. He’s only allowed to give himself another five-or-so strokes, however, before he hears Bucky move, and he gasps when the firm slide of Bucky's fingers reaches in to grab around his left ass cheek.

“What’s the matter?” Bucky purrs. “Don't you wanna look at me?”

“Not if I wanna last,” Steve confesses shakily, his breath stuttering when the hand on his ass squeezes him even tighter.

“Well then,” Bucky hums, “guess we better get this show on the road, before you end up making a mess of yourself.”

“You mean, before I get tired of waiting for you to actually do something?” Steve counters with a sly grin, and Bucky snorts out a laugh, letting him go. Steve sends a stealthy glance to the side, watching Bucky pull out three foil packs of lube from within his pocket, along with a fourth pack containing a condom. Bucky then proceeds to take one of the lube packs and tear it open with his teeth, before emptying the content into the palm of his right hand.

“Eyes up front,” he orders, “and keep working that cock for me.”

Steve obediently turns his gaze forward again, and when Bucky slots the first finger up against his hole, he’s proud of the fact that he manages to keep himself from flinching.

Bucky takes his time, spreading the lube out and getting his fingers thoroughly coated in it, before finally easing the first digit inside.

“This okay?” he asks, and Steve nods, sliding his palm up the length of his erection in a teasing stroke.

Bucky takes the hint, and lazily begins to shift his finger in and out, brow furrowed as if he's concentrating on something very delicate. Steve groans, trying his damndest to keep still, but it's so much harder when it's not his own fingers back there.

Bucky does a great job, though. He goes slow, and after a minute or two, Steve begins to relax into the touch. Another minute later, Steve hears the tearing of foil and feels the chill when Bucky opens up the second pack of lube to squeeze another finger in alongside the first.

It's a tight fit, and Steve tenses up in spite of himself. Bucky notices, and immediately pauses, giving Steve time to adjust before continuing, albeit slower.

“Hey,” he says. “Did you see our bed back at the room?”

“Yeah…” Steve grunts, panting. He squeezes his eyes shut, struggling to make his throat work long enough to actually produce a sentence. “It was pretty big, huh?”

“It was,” Bucky agrees. He presses his fingers in a bit deeper, scissoring them slightly. “You
know, I'd totally let you tie me up against the headboard of that sucker,” he says nonchalantly, as if he's talking about what to make for dinner. “Let you have your way with me however you wanted.”

The mere suggestion causes Steve’s cock to twitch, and Bucky chuckles. “Yeah, figured you'd be into that,” he muses. “Maybe later, huh?”

Steve bites back a moan, picking up the pace of his hand, and Bucky answers with a similar sound as he carefully wedges a third finger into Steve's entrance.

“Fuck, you've got such a pretty little ass…” he declares with an affectionate hiss. “I can never decide whether I wanna grab it or bite it. You know…leave little teeth marks over it and shit…”

Steve hears the chair scrape against the floor as Bucky scoots closer. Next thing, he lets out a startled yelp when he feels the sharp points of Bucky's teeth sink into the swell of his ass. Then he hears Bucky snicker.

“Oh, you liked that didn't you? You tensed up so nicely just now… A little pain doin’ it for ya, baby?”

He bites down again, a bit slower, and this time Steve can't hold back the moan that claws its way out of his throat. When Bucky does it for the third time, Steve gives a violent twitch all over as he slumps against the glass with a ragged moan, fists working his cock even harder.

“Yeah, keep going, baby…” Bucky moans, and Steve whines, feeling Bucky kiss and stroke over the back of his leg. “Want you right there on the edge when I finally slide into you. Because I gotta be honest, honey, I'm not gonna last very long…”

“Fuck…” Steve groans, loudly, and Bucky immediately gives the other side of his ass a hard slap.

“Keep it down, or someone might hear you.”

“Then stop being such a fucking jerk,” Steve grits, and then he hangs down his head with a startled gasp as Bucky curls his fingers against his insides.

“Yeah, that's the spot…” Bucky growls under his breath. “Right there…”

He picks up the pace, and Steve balls his hand into a fists against the glass, rocking back to meet with the steady thrusts of Bucky’s hand. Suddenly, it's not about stretching and scissoring anymore. As Steve lets his head thump against the window with a choked out gasp, he realizes with a start that Bucky's actually trying to make him come.

“Jesus…” he pants, back arching as he lets go of himself. “Bucky, wait… Wait.”

“Wait for what?” Bucky asks, smirking. “For you to come? For you to paint this fucking window for me?”

“I'm serious, Buck, I— Shit, stop… Oh, god, you've gotta stop…! Stop!”

Bucky snarls, the sound of his voice travelling up Steve's spine in a zing of lightning, and Steve lets out sigh of relief when Bucky pulls his fingers out at the same time as he stands up from his chair, pushing it back.

“Don’t move,” he orders sternly, and Steve nods, showing that he understood.

He hears the crack of plastic when Bucky unscrews the lid from the water bottle, followed by the
rustle of napkins. He waits patiently, both hands on the glass, while Bucky cleans himself off, and he relishes in the cool of the window as he presses his forehead against it.

After a couple of minutes – or seconds, Steve doesn’t know – he hears Bucky come back to stand behind him, and a shiver rattles through his limbs when the crunch of Bucky’s zipper reaches his ears. The crinkle of foil being torn open makes his stomach draw tight in a mix of trepidation and excitement, and he drags in a grounding breath through his nose when he feels a hand settle at the slope of his back.

“Yeah…” Bucky murmurs, more to himself than anyone else. “This is the best fucking view in town, all right…”

The comments make Steve snort, but then he feels the cold touch of lube and latex press up against his ass, and next thing, Bucky is sliding into him. Slowly. *Gloriously.*

The tension has Steve shying away from the touch on pure reflex, despite the fact that he actually wants to stay still. Luckily, Bucky appears to have anticipated that, because before Steve can move too far, Bucky has grabbed hold around his hip with his right hand to keep him still. A split second later, Steve feels the firm touch of fingers curl over the top of his left shoulder, tightening the hold.

“Say it.”

Steve drags down a trembling breath. He swallows hard.

“Fuck me,” he whispers.

“Fuck you how?”

Steve grits his teeth. He can see the image clearly inside his head. Bucky with his suit pants eased down low on his hips, just enough to get his cock out without risking getting lube on the fabric. The way his suit jacket hangs open, leaving the tip of his tie dangling just over the skin of Steve’s ass… The way he’s most likely looking down at Steve from above, eyes hooded, bottom lip caught in between his teeth, and fuck, Steve just wants him to move already…!

“Don’t care,” he answers tightly. “I don’t care, Buck, just— Dammit…”

“You’re lucky we’re not at home right now,” Bucky drawls, and the thick rasp in his voice sends Steve’s insides quivering. “Or I’d’ve made you beg me for it so pretty…” He presses his thumb down against the muscle of Steve’s shoulder, rubbing hard. “Guess we’re gonna have to save that for another time…”

Steve nods, without even caring about what the hell Bucky just said.

“Move…” he whines. “Just move…”

“Easy,” Bucky soothes. He swallows down a groan. “Don’t wanna hurt you…”

“I can take it,” Steve breathes out, rambling with his fingers twitching hard against the window. “I can take it. I’m good, Bucky, I— Bucky, *please.*”

“Goddammit, Steve…” Steve feels Bucky’s grip around his hip tighten, as if he’s steeling himself, and then Bucky rocks forward, pushing inside even further, before slowly pulling back out. The action causes Steve’s lungs to lock up inside his chest, unable to breathe for what feels like half an eternity, before Bucky thrusts inside once more and shoves the air out of him in a strangled moan.
Sweet god, it’s nothing like when Steve did it by himself. The girth and fullness of Bucky’s cock is so much in comparison to his own fingers, the mere thought of having it inside him makes Steve’s spirits soar.

“More…” he gulps, and Bucky responds with a low grunt, picking up the pace. Oh, fuck, that’s good. That’s so, so good…

His fingers slip against the glass as he braces himself against it, pushing back to meet Bucky’s movements while Bucky holds him in place, preventing him from losing his balance. Bucky fucks him with slow, steady, strong thrusts. Fucks him in silence, with the exception of the soft groans he makes each time he sinks into Steve’s body, and the low hiss that comes from sucking in air through his teeth when he pulls back out.

It’s all accompanied by the low smacks of skin hitting skin, and the continuous gasps and choked out noises spilling from Steve’s own lips. When a particular hard thrust causes Steve to cry out, Bucky growls, and tightens his fingers around Steve’s hips as he yanks him back over himself with a reprimanding tug.

“Quiet,” he warns, and Steve nods, watching his own breath fog up the glass as he presses the side of his face against it with a whimper. “You’re such a noisy little punk,” Bucky huffs, still moving. “I ought to gag that loud-ass mouth of yours…”

He pauses, hips stilling, and half a second later, Steve flashes his eyes open with an objecting noise in the back of his throat when Bucky pulls out of him.

He doesn’t get the time to voice his protest properly, however, before Bucky grabs him by the elbow and drags him along across the floor to more-or-less wrestle him down onto his back on top of the conference table. Once there, Steve finds himself at a loss for words when Bucky takes hold of Steve’s tie and holds it up in front of his face while looming over him, eyes dark and hungry.

“Mouth,” he orders. Steve’s gaze flickers between the tie in his boyfriend’s hand, to the stern and totally-not-joking look in his eyes. Then he opens his mouth, and Bucky stuffs the silky piece of fabric inside without a word. The tie in itself probably isn't the most efficient tool to muffle his voice, but the act of letting Bucky do this to him, with his own tie no less, sends an excited chill racing up Steve’s spine.

Apparently, Bucky feels the same way. Seeing Steve lie there with the tie stuffed between his teeth, he grabs around the back of Steve’s knees and pushes them up. Using his left arm to hold the two limbs down against Steve’s chest, he then brings his right down to help steer the blunt head of his cock to push in against Steve’s entrance once again.

“Still want me to fuck you, babe?” he purrs. His voice is low and dangerous. Like a predator asking its prey if it wants to get eaten.

Steve groans, nods, and in the dusk, he sees Bucky smirk.

The makeshift gag in his mouth is barely enough to muffle the moan that punches out of him when Bucky shoves himself inside, and Steve throws his hands out to the side, palms flat against the tabletop in a scrambled search for leverage, but finding none.

Bucky rams into him, driving deep and hard, and Steve takes it, takes it with a euphoric sense of delirium bubbling through his veins that has him feeling more drunk than any champagne in the world ever could. Oh, it’s so amazing, so good, he can barely stand it. The new position sends Bucky’s cock sliding up against him in a completely different angle, leaving Steve struggling with
the choice on whether his first priority is to scream out his pleasure through the gag in his mouth, or breathe.

Bucky’s grip around the back of his knees is firm, but each thrust still causes Steve to slide over the table, hands squeaking against the polished surface as he fights to keep himself in place. He can hear the sound of Bucky’s breathing – deep, ragged breaths, mixed with what sounds like near growling – and the sound alone could have made him come, had he still been touching himself; he’s convinced of it.

Steve lifts his head in an attempt to catch a glimpse of where Bucky’s cock is disappearing inside of him, but he can’t. It’s too dark, and the only thing he sees in the dim light is the outline of his own erection, hard and leaking against the planes of his stomach. He’s on the edge already. He can feel the heat churn and bubble underneath his skin in hot pulses from the centre of his gut, and he knows that he’s not going to last much longer, but fuck, Bucky isn’t stopping.

Through the haze, Steve somehow manages to gather himself enough to reach out and clutch around the sleeve of Bucky’s jacket, grounding himself in the soft texture against his skin. Peering up from underneath heavy eyelids, he marvels at the way the soft light from outside curves across the features of the man above him, making the black metal jewelry Bucky's wearing gleam. Steve can see the details clearly, in spite of the dark surrounding them both. The silhouette of Bucky’s face, the strong line of his cheek and jaw, the tendons in his neck, the sharp line of his shoulders… God, he’s so beautiful… So strong, so handsome, so fierce, and explosive. It’s downright lethal, the way his eyes seek out Steve’s through the dim, the way he locks his gaze in place, on target, never losing focus in spite of the way his mouth falls open in ragged gasps and groans with every other move he makes.

He’s the most gorgeous thing Steve’s ever seen in his life.

And he's Steve's.

He shifts his grip around Bucky’s sleeve to clutch around his bicep, relishing in the firm feeling of muscles that meets him as he does. He pulls, and Bucky obediently moves his hands down to grab around the top of Steve’s thighs instead, and as he tugs him further down the table, the angle at which his cock rubs against Steve’s prostate gets even better.

“You’re so fucking pretty…” Bucky grunts, snapping his hips forward when Steve gasps around the silk in his mouth. “So pretty for me, Stevie…”

He feels Bucky’s fingers dig into the flesh of his thighs as he presses Steve’s legs in against his sides, holding on as if he’s scared to let him go. He keeps rubbing his thumbs over Steve's skin, and he's barely even pulling out anymore. He just rocks, hips rolling and pressing in against the back of Steve’s legs so hard, Steve is convinced they’ll leave bruises on him. The thought makes him feel a bit like he's floating.

“Do you like it?” Bucky hisses, underlining the question with another hard thrust, and Steve groans, nodding frantically. He loves it.

“Good…” Bucky drawls. “Because I’m gonna give it to you so good, darlin’… I’m gonna make you come, just like this. Gonna fuck you until you go crazy with it…”

Steve’s aware of the fact that the tie falls out of his mouth when Bucky drives into him again, and the moan that spills over his lips echoes between the walls of the room, bouncing back to him.
“Keep it down,” Bucky growls, but his voice sounds too breathless, too lost with pleasure to hold any real reprehension. His fingers twitch against Steve’s skin as his breath stutters, and Steve moans again, shaking all over.

“You’re gonna get us caught,” Bucky breathes harshly, groaning himself as his hips pick up pace. Steve’s back arches off the tabletop with a gasp as he claws with his free hand across the wooden surface beneath him.

“You’re gonna get us caught,” Bucky breathes harshly, groaning himself as his hips pick up pace. Steve’s back arches off the tabletop with a gasp as he claws with his free hand across the wooden surface beneath him.

“Bucky…” he whines, near incoherent. “Bucky, I’m— Bucky…!”

Oh, he’s so close. He’s so close he can feel it in the back of his throat, and when Bucky lets out a warning growl, the primal sound if it twists Steve’s stomach into a knot of unabashed want.

“Steve, be quiet…!”

Steve shakes his head. He can’t. He can’t, because it’s too much – Bucky is too much. His hands, his voice, his cock inside Steve’s body, driving him closer and closer to that dithering edge, and he simply can’t…!

He can only think of one thing that makes sense. Quickly, before Bucky has the time to fuck the capability to do so out of him, Steve sits up and wraps his arms around the back of Bucky’s neck to mash their lips together, breathing his groan into the warm hollow of Bucky’s mouth.

The action catches Bucky off guard, and he rears back a little, freezing up. When Steve drags his tongue against the piercing in Bucky’s own, however, he lets out that same, low growl that sends Steve’s gut curling in on itself as he grabs around Steve’s ass with both hands, fucking into him even harder.

Steve’s hands somehow finds their way up the nape of Bucky’s neck, and without even thinking about it, Steve tears Bucky’s hair tie out and digs his fingers into the water-combed strands, not caring that doing so probably messes the hairstyle up completely.

Bucky’s piercing drags against the roof of his mouth, and fuck, Steve will never get tired of that feeling. It sends a delicious shiver wrecking through his limbs, rippling through his nerve endings, and he groans when Bucky does it again, sparking pleasure that lights up his entire body.

“Oh, my god…!” Steve gasps against Bucky’s lips, still kissing him. “Oh, my god, Buck, oh, god…!”

“Yeah,” Bucky pants, nodding eagerly. “Yeah, baby, that’s it…”

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“Touch yourself,” Bucky hisses. “Fuck, I’m ‘bout to come inside you so hard, darlin’… Want you to come with me…”

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Steve is shaking so hard he can hardly move, but he still manages to bring his hand down in between their bodies to wrap his fingers around himself. He’s wet, near dripping, and he knows that all it’s gonna take is a few rough strokes for it all to come crashing down on him.

“Gonna come…” Steve whimpers. “Gonna come, gonna come…”

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“Me too,” Bucky replies. His breath beats hot against Steve's lips, and there's a tremble to his voice that feels damn near physical when it reaches Steve's ear. “God, I love you so fucking much…”

“Me too,” Bucky replies. His breath beats hot against Steve's lips, and there's a tremble to his voice that feels damn near physical when it reaches Steve's ear. “God, I love you so fucking much…”
Steve doesn't have time to reply. He's already there, tumbling over the edge before Bucky even finishes his sentence, and he just barely has enough coherence left to cover the head of his cock with the palm of his hand before the wave hits, shorting out his brain completely.

He feels more than he hears Bucky gasp into his mouth, and then Bucky’s grip around his ass turns near-painful when Bucky shoves inside him one final time, then stays there as he spills his release in breathless silence.

For a few, blissful moments, time appears to freeze around them while they breathe each other in, the rest of the world falling away in suspended animation. It’s the most addicting feeling, being so close, so intimate, and Steve allows himself to drown in the depths of it as they keep kissing during the time it takes for them to slowly come down from the high together.

Steve's mind is swimming, and his fingers feel weak where they're still clutching around Bucky's neck. With a gasping moan, he allows himself to slump down to lie back on the table, both hands flung out to the sides and with Bucky bracing himself against the tabletop with one hand above him.

Steve’s body is twitching from the aftershocks still rolling through his limbs, and he lets out a ragged groan, writhing and shaking when Bucky pulls out.

“Holy shit…” he sighs breathlessly, eyes sliding closed. “Jesus fucking Christ, Buck…”

“You're welcome,” Bucky grunts back, and Steve chuckles under his breath. He throws a quick, investigating glance down his front, checking for stains on his suit, but finds that he can't see anything due to the lack of light.

“Turn the lights on,” he rasps, “I can't see a goddamn thing.”

Bucky huffs and moves away. Seconds later, the lights come on, leaving Steve squinting in the sudden flicker from the ceiling lamps above.

Steve looks up just in time to see Bucky remove the condom from his cock and tie it off, before wrapping it up inside a napkin and tossing it into the trashcan next to the door. Then he returns to the table, tucking himself back inside his pants as he goes.

“Here,” he says, reaching over, and Steve feels a nudge against his shoulder when Bucky hands him a few of the remaining napkins.

“Thanks.”

Steve takes them and then gets to work on the mess below his waistline. His suit got away unscated, thank god. Though, at a party like this, coming up with an excuse to why he's got unidentifiable stains on his clothes would have been close to ridiculously easy…

They clean up quickly, and even though the remaining contents of the water bottle is still uncomfortably cold, Steve has to admit it gets the job done.

“We should probably stop by the bathroom on the way back, though,” Bucky points out while Steve tucks his shirt back into his pants. “Get some soap on there.”

“Yeah, I was thinking that to,” Steve answers. He checks his tie, frowning a little at its crinkled appearance, before dropping it back down with a shrug. He'll tuck it into his jacket. No one's going to notice.
He looks up to see Bucky check his reflection in the window while buttoning up his jacket. When Bucky then drags the fingers of his left hand back through his hair in an attempt to fix the damage Steve's caused, Steve laughs fondly as he walks up to wrap his arms around Bucky's waist, kissing his cheek.

“Leave it,” he murmurs. “I like the disheveled look on you.”

“You like all looks on me,” Bucky counters with a smirk. Steve chuckles.

“Yeah,” he admits softly. “I do.” He plants another kiss at the ridge of Bucky's cheekbone, and then pulls back to button up his own jacket.

Once they no longer look as if they just came off the world's most exhilarating roller-coaster, they check the room one more time for incriminating evidence of their activities, before turning off the lights once more.

“You ready?” Steve asks, hand already resting on the doorknob.

“Yeah. No, wait.”

When Steve looks up, Bucky leans in, and Steve hums when the other presses a long, lazy kiss against his lips.

“There,” Bucky murmurs, smiling against Steve's mouth. “Now I'm ready.”

Steve just snorts out a laugh, and opens the door.

They sneak back out, and Bucky gives Steve's lower back a lingering little slide of his fingers as they part ways when Steve veers off towards one of the two bathrooms down the hall. Steve sends Bucky a smile when Bucky goes into the other one to wash his hands off, and then heads through his own door to give himself a second, more thorough cleanup.

When he returns to the party, mission completed, he sees that most of the guests have begun to drift out towards the enormous sundeck outside. He checks his wristwatch. Ten to twelve. Jesus, how long had the two of them been gone, exactly?

He pushes through the crowd and spots Bucky already standing out by the walkway, talking with Nat and Sam. Steve makes his way over there, and he gets a quick kiss on the lips from Bucky when he silently nestles himself in by his side.

“I got you a drink,” Bucky says, and Steve takes the glass offered to him out of Bucky's hand with a grateful smile.

“You two really need to tone that lovey-dovey crap down,” Sam decides firmly, and Bucky responds by, just as lovey-dovey-ly, flip him off.

It makes Steve laugh. It makes him happy to see how well Sam and Bucky have been getting on during the past week. Sam had come over for a beer and a movie the day after Christmas, and Steve swears, two hours after Sam set foot in the door, Bucky and he were getting along like peas in a pod. Or rather, like siblings in a very confined space…

Therefore, when Bucky raises his middle finger at Sam, Sam just laughs and aims a shallow kick at Bucky's right leg, and at that point, Natasha is already rolling her eyes at them both.

“Hey, hey!” Tony exclaims, appearing behind Sam's shoulder with an unopened bottle of
champagne in his right hand and Pepper in his left, followed by Clint and Bruce. “No illicit fighting, or I'll have you tossed off the roof.”

“What about legal fighting?” Steve counters, and Tony shrugs while wrapping his arm around Pepper's shoulder to give the side of her neck a tipsy, but affectionate kiss.

“Are we fighting?” comes a rumbling voice from behind their backs, and Steve sees Bucky's eyes widen in startled surprise when Thor slaps his palm down on top of his and Steve's shoulders from behind.

“No, we're not,” Pepper decides firmly while making a patient attempt to shrug Tony's advancements off, but Thor just grins.

“Come now, Pepper,” he argues cheerfully, “you know it's not a party unless someone gets a black eye.”

Steve stifles a snorted laugh when Bucky turns around to stare up at the giant blond man behind them, taking in the long hair, the braids, the beard, and – probably most of all – the way he's still clutching around the top of Bucky's shoulder as if he’s holding on to a boisterous teenager. Given that Thor is about two heads taller than Bucky, and about twice as broad, the visual of the metaphor isn’t too far from the truth.

“Thor, this is Bucky,” Steve introduces politely. “Bucky, meet Thor.” He gestures in between the two of them, and Thor’s face, if possible, lights up even further.

“I suspected so,” he admits. He releases Steve's shoulder and holds the hand out towards Bucky with a grin, still without letting him go. “It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Bucky.”

“Likewise,” Bucky responds faintly. He takes Thor's hand, gulping when his own more-or-less disappears within the firm clasp of Thor’s palm.

“How was it up north?” Bruce asks.

“Warm,” Thor informs him, not without disappointment. “We only had five inches of snow this year.”

“Only?” Sam asks skeptically, but Thor has already turned back towards Steve again.

“Thank you for the massage stick, by the way,” he says, loudly, causing both Pepper and Nat to quiet and glance towards him with quizzically raised eyebrows. “I've used it every day since I got back home.”

Steve sees Bucky turn away to disguise the wide grin on his lips by pretending to hide a cough behind the back of his hand, and Tony's lip twitches with poorly withheld amusement when Thor continues enthusiastically, “I especially like the ribbed surface.”

Behind Natasha's back, Clint lets out a giggled snort, and Thor turns to him with a confused frown.

“No, really,” he insists. “The texture really gets the kinks out. It’s very relaxing.”

“Speaking of relaxing kinks,” Pepper says under her breath while stepping up to stand by Bucky's side. “I do believe this belongs to you.”

She discreetly holds her hand out towards Bucky, dangling a single, black hair tie between her fingers. Before Bucky has the chance to take it, however, Tony has already snatched it away.
“You left it in the conference room,” Pepper explains, giving Tony an annoyed look when he tugs at the hairband, testing out the stretch of it.

Bucky sends Steve a terrified glance out of the corner of his eye, and Steve realizes that yeah, they just had sex on Bucky's new boss’ conference table, didn't they? He gives a short, nonplussed grimace, showing that he doesn't know what to do, and Bucky turns back to Tony, swallowing hard when Tony moves his gaze from the hair tie to glance at them both. Tony purses his lips thoughtfully, and then he raises his hands and unceremoniously fires the hair tie at Steve's face.

“I hope you didn’t fuck your boyfriend in my conference room, Rogers,” he reprimands, and Steve lets out an indignant squawk.

“I didn’t!” he objects, which is the god-honest truth. His defence is met with amused laughter from the rest of the group, but Tony just snorts at him, rolling his eyes.

"Do you know how much that table costs?" he asks. “The furnish alone is worth more than your apartment.”

“Well, it's very sturdy,” Bucky points out graciously, apparently having noticed that they're not in any trouble, and Steve chokes down an embarrassed noise as he whips his head around to stare at him.

“What?” Bucky asks innocently. “It is.”

In front of them, Tony throws his hands out to his sides and tips his head to the sky with an exasperated groan. “See,” he complains,”this is why I gave you guys a room.”

“Don’t worry,” Bucky quips back. “We’ll make good use of that too.”

At that, Steve can't help but laugh, but when his gaze falls on Pepper’s amused smile, he frowns.

“Wait a minute,” he says slowly, turning back towards Tony with a suspicious squint. “What were you two doing in the conference room?”

“Conferencing,” Tony answers flatly, shamelessly avoiding the question, but Steve doesn’t have time to push the subject before someone, somewhere begins to count.

Ten! Nine!

“Here we go!” Tony declares, holding up the champagne bottle over his head, and Steve smiles when he feels Bucky's hand once again slip around the small of his back.

Eight…! Seven…! Six…!

Isn't it funny, he thinks to himself while leaning into the touch, how some things turn out? The new year is quite literally just around the corner, and here he is, hugging the same man who he a mere month earlier had caught stealing his wallet right out of his pocket.

A bump to the shoulder, and a plate of fast food, that's how they had met. Strangers in a sea of strangers, and yet, somehow, they had still managed to find each other.

Five…! Four…!

As cliché as it may sound, stealing Steve's wallet had probably been a lot harder for Bucky to do than what stealing his heart had been. Just a few seconds. A blink of an eye, at the right place, at
the right time… And Steve hadn't even been aware of it happening.

He knows that it did indeed happen, though, because he feels damned near offensively good where he is, with Bucky's arm around him, his own hand resting gently against the other man's hip. He feels warm. Safe. As if his true purpose was always to be right here, with Bucky by his side.

In that way, he supposes that Bucky's not the only one who gained a home this Christmas…

*Three…!*

He turns to give Bucky a smile, and his heart flutters happily when Bucky smiles back.

*Two…!

“I love you,” he says softly, and Bucky's smile widens even further.

*One…!

“I love you too,” Bucky whispers back, and then the crowd around them explodes in a collective, deafening cry as the countdown ends.

*“Happy New Year!”*

The celebratory pop of Tony's champagne sounds loud and clear from somewhere in front of them, and when Bucky's lips press in firmly against Steve's own, Steve can already tell that this year is indeed going to be his happiest yet.

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**Chapter End Notes**

Happy New Year, my darlings, and thank you so, so much for reading!

So this one was a bit longer than previous chapters, but I figured you guys wouldn't mind :)

There will be a separate fic created for those future little snippet-fics about these two dorks I talked about before, so if you're interested in that and want to make sure you don't miss it, I suggest you subscribe to me here on Ao3 to get notified when it's up :)

You can also follow me on tumblr since I'll most likely be posting about it there as well.

I hope you all had a wonderful New Year's Eve, and that 2017 will bring nothing but good fortunes and happy times your way. Stay safe, warm, and kind, and I hope to see you guys around here again soon <3

Tons of love!

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