the lions

by Spacedog

Summary

It's not that life isn't good. The future—the present, as it stands—is great. The food is excellent. Messaging is instant. Movies are in 3D. Steve is only one medical miracle of many. Even the grime of New York City is nicer than the near-constant stink of the thirties. No, it's not that the world is any worse.

Steve is just lonely as hell.

or, the one where steve is still captain america, bucky is a hot librarian, and they fall in love, anyway.
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s not that life isn't good.

The future—or the present, as it stands—is great. The food is excellent. Messaging is instant. Movies are in 3D. Steve is only one medical miracle of many. Hell, even the grime of New York in the twenty-first century is nicer than the oppressive, near-constant stink of growing up in the thirties.

No, it's not that the world is any worse. It's far better than Steve could have ever hoped for. It's better than what he ever fought for.

The twenty-first century world is great.

Steve was just lonely as hell.

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Excluding S.H.I.E.L.D. co-workers and his superpowered Avengers colleagues, Steve really only has two friends, outside of the other senior citizens he runs into on his regular weekend strolls through Prospect Park.

One was a recently reformed ex-Russian spy with an unsettling sense of humor, emotional walls impenetrable as the Iron Curtain, and a habit of disappearing without warning or explanation for months at a time.

The other was about the closest thing one could be to normal, as far as superhero vigilantes go. He even had a stable, serious day job. The only caveat was he lived five hours away in Washington, D.C., and was fiercely loyal to his hometown—meaning he could only ever put up with Steve’s nonsense on long weekends or the occasional low-key reconnaissance mission.

It was because of one of those rare long weekends that friend two of two—one Sam Wilson, retired pararescue, current VA therapist, all-around great guy—was visiting Steve. It was nice, having someone over, filling the quiet spaces Steve had gotten just a little too accustomed to. It felt right. Steve's apartment was always too big and too empty without someone else in it.

Even with Sam visiting, Steve woke early, getting up long before dawn, before even New York City was fully awake. He dressed quickly, pulling on his favorite pair of joggers and his sleek athletic hoodie through muscle memory alone. Sam was fast asleep in his guest bedroom, snoring into his pillow, still probably exhausted from the drive. Steve smiled to himself when he saw Sam in passing, the door cracked open just slightly. As much as he wanted a partner, Steve wouldn't wake him—not because he knew Sam would refuse, but because he had a feeling Sam wouldn’t. Alone as usual, Steve peeled out of his apartment and into the still-dark streets, slipping into a familiar rhythm with each snap of his shoes against pavement.

Small as it was, Steve was grateful for his routine and the bare-bones structure that it offered. No matter how bizarre and surreal his work life might have been, he could always rely on that regular morning beat: the sunrise peaking over the skyline, Morning Edition as his background noise, and breakfast on the way home. He was even starting to recognize other runners on his routes. They weren't friends, but they were familiar faces. Stability. Distant comrades, of sorts, all united as
unofficial partners on those early-morning runs.

That was another plus of living in New York City in the future, another thing Steve could put on the mental tally he considered his unofficial *List of Good 21st Century Things*. If he wanted to go for a run, he could just step outside in some athletic shoes and go. No one would stop him, no one would look at him funny, and so long as he kept his routes messy and his pace steady, no one would so much as bat an eye. All he had to do was put his earbuds in, pull his hood up, and Captain America could melt into anonymity, if only just for a few precious hours. And after it all, after the seventy years of sleep and the alien attacks and becoming a *living legend*, those hours were precious, indeed.

Steve wraps up his run a little early with Sam visiting, and makes his way back to his apartment just a few minutes past seven-thirty, right as the work rush was just starting to get into full swing. He’d grabbed breakfast quickly on the way home, one of the first people in line when the corner bagel place opened, having quickly learned that showing up any later would mean he wouldn’t be home for at *least* another hour if he wanted to get breakfast. And he *would*. He barely has his shoes off and his earbuds out when his stomach growls loudly, sounding like an angry, demanding beast. Steve grabs one of his bagels and bites into it hungrily, taking out a huge chunk of bagel in one bite, looking just as monstrous and obscene as his stomach sounded.

One of the tradeoffs for a supersoldier metabolism: he either had to eat a ton, or he was always going to be hungry. It was just another part of his routine, another aspect of the strange reality he was coming to terms with.

"Lox and cream cheese for breakfast?" calls Sam's familiar voice from the hallway, sudden, but not an unwelcome shock. Steve brightens immediately, perking up as he turns towards Sam. "You really *are* a hipster, dude."

Steve just barely manages to remember to swallow his mouthful of salmon and cheese *first*, before he grins at Sam in his excitement. Manners, Rogers, he tells himself. No one wants to see that, especially this early in the morning.

"Look who it is! Conveniently just after I get home from my run," he says, tossing a smaller, less fishy bagel bag towards Sam, underhand this time. Steve learned from past mistakes. He still underestimates his supersoldier strength even seventy years after the serum, and he doesn't want bagel exploding all over his ceiling. Again. "Finally decided to wake up today?"

"Hey now. Be nice to me. Just drove in from D.C., I don't need to be running *anywhere*, thank you. What're you trying to do, getting me up before dawn, really. Get outta here," Sam says, as he peeks inside the bag. His demeanor changes instantly once he sees what's inside.

"Egg white and bacon on asiago?" Sam asks, looking like Steve got him a puppy. "Yup," Steve says, grabbing another lox bagel.

“I take that back. Rogers. You're alright,” says Sam. He takes a bite of the sandwich and all but *moans*. Steve raises his eyebrows at Sam, but he smiles at him, still, huffing out a little snort of a laugh as he does. When Sam speaks again, after taking a quiet little moment to chew slowly and thoughtfully, he’s waving his breakfast around like it’s the best thing he’s seen since the Starkphone. "That! Now *that* is a damn good bagel sandwich, right there."

"Got a box of coffee, too," Steve says, as if anything could compare to Sam's delight over egg white, bacon, and cheese. Sam is clearly having a romantic moment with his bagel sandwich, but he makes a happy little noise when he sees the coffee box.
"What did I do to deserve you?" he sighs, dreamily.

"Didn't go for a run, that's for sure," Steve says, pouring himself a cup of coffee from the box. It's strong and full-bodied. Not the watery stuff that needs sugar and cream and caramel-whatevers. As much as he loves sugary, creamy, caramel-whatevers, Steve misses a good, quality cup of ungarnished coffee. He takes mental note: go back to the bagel place more often.

Sam shoots him a look. "I was talking to the bagel, Rogers."

Steve throws his head back and barks out a laugh. It's short, and it's nothing like his full-on, chest-grabbing laugh from his time with the Howlies, but it's a full-body gesture, and it's real. It's been a while since he laughed like that.

It's been a while since he's laughed at all, outside of soft little huffs and warm, half-genuine smiles. "I'll be here all week. Well, all week until Tuesday," Sam says, bowing.

"Come on," Steve says, warmly, "let's sit down. Before one of us spills something."

They talk for a while. About work—real work, Sam's work; about Avengers business, about co-worker gossip and Steve's never-ending list of crucial hallmarks of pop culture he needs to catch up on. The Notebook of What I Missed makes a reappearance, and Sam appraises each update like he's The New York Times' top culture critic. Breakfast stretches into eight, then eight thirty, then early into nine. The box of coffee is half-emptied by the time they settle down into their chairs, finally, for the moment, having run out of things to say.

For a second, Steve feels at peace.

"Look, Steve, I—" Sam starts, voice going soft and serious, though not unkind. Steve's heart drops immediately. That voice he was using was his work voice. Steve knows Sam will never admit it, no matter how much it's so plainly true, but that voice is. It's the voice Sam only ever uses it when he wants to talk about uncomfortable truths.

Steve shifts uncomfortably in his seat, suddenly feeling under scrutiny. He tucks his notebook into his hoodie pocket, as if to grab that warmth that filled their conversation so recently and hoard it away, as if to wrap his heart with it and brace himself for what they both knew was coming.

"I'm not gonna mince words here. Nat and I—" Sam continues, "—we're worried about you, dude."

And this. This is an uncomfortable truth. It's an uncomfortable truth that's clear—blatant, even. But Steve doesn't want to talk about it. That's about the last thing he wants to do.

"Oh, is that why you came to visit me? Come on, Sam," he replies casually, brushing the subject off in expert Steve Rogers fashion, "You know me. I'm indestructible. You don't need to be worried about me."

"I came to visit you because I'm your friend, Steve, and I missed seeing you. This isn't the only reason I came to visit you," Sam says, his voice just on the edge between professional and tense. "But there's been some—concern. I do have to worry about you, Steve. That's the thing. You say I don't need to, but as your colleague and your friend, I do."

Steve opens his mouth to say something, but Sam continues before he can get a word out.

"Look, Steve. You've been taking a lot of risks lately. You throw yourself into things without thinking, use your body as a wrecking ball, you nearly got yourself killed taking down Hydra. If I
hadn't been there to catch you when you fell from the Lumerian Star—"

He trails off, the weight of *what if* hanging heavy in the air. He doesn't dare say what might have been. Neither does Steve. Not when he knows about Sam's history. Not when he knows about Riley. For once in his life, Steve bites his pugnacious little tongue and lets his friend speak. Sam takes a deep breath, heaving a huge sigh before continuing.

"I know you don't wanna talk about your feelings. I know you like to keep it all to yourself. Don't think I don't see it. Don't think Nat doesn't see it. But it's getting to the point, Steve, that these risks—they're getting to a point where we're concerned. We're getting to the point we think it might be something else."

They sit in silence for a second, parsing their thoughts.

"Sam," Steve says eventually, his voice low and serious, "Please understand this. I do what I need to do, I take risks like that, because people will die otherwise. They didn't experiment on me and make me this—this *unbreakable thing*—for nothing. I take these risks because I can. Because it's my responsibility to. It's why Erksine chose me for the serum—it's why Erksine *made me* this in the first place. I have to be willing to take risks to do good, Sam. If I didn't, I'd be another—I don't know, *dancing monkey*. Or worse, I'd be a lab rat. What's the alternative? *Who's* the alternative? You know I can't let it be you."

"I know, Steve. I know. But you need to take care of *yourself*, too. You've gotta do something when you're hurting. Natasha and I, both of us—I do mean both of us, as much as she won't say anything—we're worried about you. And we have no clue what we'd do if—if we found ourselves without you. In-field and off the job. *Especially* off the job, dude," Sam says, sounding like he's straining to keep his voice level, "Don't let your sense of duty and justice make you forget that you sometimes need help. If you're hurting, if this has been going on a long time—just recognize that sometimes it's your duty to take care of yourself first."

Steve sighs. It's quiet again, and this time, the silence lasts for a while. For a long while. Neither Steve nor Sam looks the other in the eye. Neither makes an effort to say anything. They both realize that they need time to compose themselves. They both need time to warm up to ideas, for their emotions to cool.

"Alright. Alright," Steve says, his tone conciliatory and—surprisingly, even to himself—full of exhaustion. Sam looks up at him carefully. He's holding his coffee in both hands, as a warm little tether to keep him from going tense. "Professional opinion, then. What do you think I need?"

"I'm not here in a professional capacity. But for starters, I think you need to open up more. To your friends. And—also—to a specialist who could help you. We can only do so much for you, Steve," Sam says, leaning back. "And along with that, I think you need to do things. Not for other people. Not because you have to. For you. You need—I dunno, a hobby."

A hobby. Steve turns the idea over in his mind. There's nothing *wrong* with getting a hobby. It sure as hell wouldn't hurt.

"Yeah. Okay. Alright. I guess I can take up a hobby," Steve replies.

Sam hums, voice intentionally level. "So is that a no to the therapy thing?"

"I—I had to go to therapy for a while, right after they unfroze me. Stopped going after a while, since I didn't think it was for me. But I'll check back on that. See if there's anyone they referred me to who didn't turn out to be a secret sleeper agent," Steve replies, suddenly feeling the full weight
of exhaustion on him at once.

"Well. That's a start. And I know some good people here in the city, if S.H.I.E.L.D.'s people don't work out for you," Sam says, relief bleeding into that professionally kind tone. "But for now, let's look at getting you set up with a hobby. So. What do you like to do?"

And isn't that the million-dollar question.

"Guh—I dunno," Steve says, feeling like he'd been blindsided. He rubs his face with his hand. "I mean. I like to box. I like to run. I like being active. Those are hobbies, right?"

"Okay, no. Not just because I know you're going to literally run me into the ground," Sam says, and there's a little smile there. It's tight. Their conversation is still underpinned by deathly seriousness, after all. But it's there. "But because you need an outlet outside of that, as much as I know you like to do those things. You need something entirely positive. Something that you haven't used to wear yourself to exhaustion before. Something that won't run the risk of being—"

"Destructive?" Steve asks, self-depreciating, in classic Steve Rogers style.

"—I was gonna say over the top," Sam says, "But that works, too."

Steve snorts, a little huff of a laugh. It's nothing like the comfortable bark of a full-body laugh from earlier, but it eases their conversation's tension, still. Sam, in spite of himself, in spite of how serious he's trying to be, smiles too.

"I'm serious, though. You need your own hobby, Steve. Something outside of being Cap. Something where you take care of you. And don't tell me working out isn't just another way to push yourself into exhaustion, because you and I both know it's true."

"I—okay. Fine;" Steve starts. He sighs, chewing his lip. "I mean. I guess I like to paint?"

The fact that Steve was an artist, once, wasn't included in most history textbooks. Most people didn't even pay attention to it. From what Steve could tell, historians saw it as more of a "fun fact" than anything of any sort of real importance, as important as it was to him.

But it wasn't unknown. There was even a little section about his art in the Captain America exhibit at the Smithsonian, wedged between a recreation of his first apartment and an exhibit about his childhood.

Somehow still, it feels silly to admit, like repeating his wildest, most impossible childhood dreams. Steve might as well be saying that he wishes he'd grown up to be a dragon or a Rockefeller, with how ridiculous he feels. Somehow, admitting he was superhuman had become easier than admitting he was an artist.

Sam doesn't seem to see it that way. He just nods, seemingly taking Steve's reply completely seriously.

"See, that's good. Now we're getting somewhere. What do you like to paint? Landscapes, people, abstract stuff?"

"Well—everything, I guess," Steve replies, ducking his head. "I mean. I wanted to be a famous painter, a long time ago. Did everything I could to save up to go to art school. Painted signs, taught lessons to rich ladies uptown, did little sketches in the park for change when the weather was nice and I wasn't sick, you name it. And then the war happened, and well. You know how that goes."
"So no art since before the war?" Sam asks, and his curiosity is completely earnest. Steve shakes his head.

"Not really. I mean—I bought a sketchbook, just as a thing to do, but. Haven't even filled two pages of it."

Sam pats him on the shoulder and smiles. "In that case—it's time you start."

"Yeah," Steve says, feeling a little less heavy and a little more hopeful at the same time, "Maybe it is."

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Starting again hit a snag very early on, because as it turned out, Sam knew next to nothing about art supplies.

His intentions were good. His heart was in the right place, and he'd done his best. But while Sam’s never-ending knowledge of music extended up to knowing the ins and outs of most instruments, even Steve knew, with his limited knowledge of art in the twenty-first century, that the paint that Sam showed him on their Target run wasn't going to cut it.

Which is how they end up at the Blick store on a sunny Friday afternoon, shuffling through the aisles and dodging tired-looking art school students who were desperately looking for last-minute supplies for their final projects.

It almost makes Steve jealous.

"Seriously?" Sam hisses quietly, as Steve picks out his brushes, "$23.99 for one brush? I can buy like, four packs of brushes for the same price at Target."

"You're complaining to the guy who grew up during the Depression," Steve says, "Don't think these prices ain't hurting me. But if I'm gonna want them to last, I gotta get stuff that's quality. You know?"

Sam huffs. "I know like, in theory, you're right, but this little thing of paint is almost thirty dollars."

Steve hums in response and goes back to looking at brushes.

Art supply stores, Steve concludes, are their own sort of gift; sanctuaries with fluorescent lights. He feels both curious and content in the Blick store. If it weren't for residual guilt from spending so much on things so unnecessary to survive, Steve would have bought a little bit of everything so he could try everything.

But that guilt was powerful to a guy who grew up sick and poor during the worst financial crisis in all of modern history.

When they go to ring out, Steve ends up spending what would have been several months’ rent worth on art supplies. As far as art supplies goes, he knows he's not getting off bad. But it's still a lot. It still earns a little pained noise when the cashier rattles off his total. He doesn't even look at the screen when he slides his card through the machine.

“You good?” Sam asks, once they’re outside of the store, having said their thank-yous and posed for the obligatory I can’t believe I rang up Captain America and the Falcon selfie. He has a small bag hooked around his elbow and carries some of the larger, lightweight supplies at odd angles,
clearly trying to figure out the best way to make their trek home.

“Maybe,” Steve sighs, trying to think about things other than how much he spent, before the guilt begins to bubble up in his stomach again. Instead, he forces himself to think about the act of making art again. He tries to remember back to the old days, when he wore his charcoals down to dust and when art school was a vague and attainable *almost*. He remembers how happy he was to *create*, even when he was painting signs, even when he was drawing dirty comics.

He thinks that maybe, he can be that happy again.

Sure, he still hurts now. And sure, the amount of money he spent was unprecedented. But he has a hobby now, a hobby that made him so happy before. It might not be his livelihood, but he has something now, when the ache cuts too deep and the world is too loud and bright.

And that's a win, if there ever were one.

"So," Sam says eventually, as they wait for the next train, having somehow maneuvered through the turnstiles with two medium-sized canvases in tow. His handle on them is still awkward, but he seems to have accepted it, and his voice is light. "You gonna paint me like one of your French girls?"

"Still haven't seen that movie," Steve says, grinning smugly when Sam groans and goes into a speech about *cinematic masterpieces*.

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It isn't until he starts blocking time only to make art that Steve fully realizes how much he's missed it.

His daily routine expanded. He runs in the mornings and gets breakfast on the way home. He listens to WNYC. He reports to Avengers Tower whenever he's called. And now, he paints, whenever he has the energy, taking an hour of the day just to *create*.

He's still sad. He's still lonely. He still misses his own time, his own world, and the people he accidentally left behind seventy years ago. But at the very least, he's got something to channel that frustration and loneliness into. At least he has a way to get it out that doesn't leave his knuckles bruised and his lungs burning.

Sam was right. He was doing better, marginally so, now that he picked up a hobby.

Therapy, he was still building up the courage to call about. He couldn't even *think* about the courage it would take to start going. Not yet. That would be in time.

But painting again, drawing again, *making* again—that, at least, Steve could do.

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"What do you know about Instagram?" Steve asks. It’s three and a half weeks after his first visit to the Blick store. They’re in her apartment, going over paperwork from their last mission over red wine and greasy Chinese food. Natasha turns to him, slowly, as if she was still processing what she heard.

"Why do you want to know?" she asks, innocently, but not without hesitation. "You don't seem like an Instagram sort of celebrity."
"I was painting in the park today, and some other artists saw. They really liked my stuff. Didn't even realize I was Captain America until about five minutes into talking to me," Steve says, "Said I should post on Instagram. Show off what I can do."

Natasha considers the idea for a second. She tilts her head upwards and to the right, gazing at a spot of nothingness in the upper right-hand corner of the room. She was considering the options, playing out the best and worst scenarios all the way through.

"You can," is what she settles on, eventually, "But you need to be careful about it. It's not all cat videos and Wikipedia out there."

"I wasn't under the impression it was," Steve replies, immediately realizing how foolishly self-confident he sounded as soon as the words were out of his mouth. "But I—I don't think I can do this without some help. From you."

She preens a little at that.

"Okay. Since you're coming to me here, in my home, on bended knee, I think I'll help you, Rogers," she says, holding out her hand. "Give me your phone."

Steve does so, tentatively. "Don't—don't do anything weird to it."

"I'm not, I'm not," Natasha dismisses, settling her phone next to his, "Just making sure it's secure. Then we can make your account."

He doesn’t understand what she does, quickly tapping away and pulling up a screen full of strange text. She’s smart as hell and clearly knows what she’s doing, and he doesn’t question her—but it would be nice to know what was happening. Almost as quickly as she started, Natasha is finishing up, re-pocketing her own phone and pulling away from the lines of strange, cryptic code on Steve’s.

"And there," she says, though she doesn’t hand it back to him. She restarts the device, and when the screen hums back to life, after the familiar Stark Industries logo, a new logo pops up, if only briefly: a smiling cartoon of a redheaded girl, her hair pulled back into a tight ballerina bun. His phone is protected now, tirelessly guarded by cartoon Natasha herself. "Safe and sound. Just don't follow any suspicious links or give your passwords and location to anyone."

“So I’m on Instagram now?” Steve asks. Natasha shakes her head.

“Installing it as we speak,” she says, “What do you want your username to be?”


“Good enough,” Natasha says, her voice flat. Steve can’t tell if she’s joking. He hardly ever can when it comes to these things. She finishes typing with a little flourish, handing Steve’s phone back to him with a newly-created Instagram profile page.

His profile is completely blank, but it brims with promise. There isn’t even a description there; just a placeholder for a profile image and Steve’s lonely username. sgr_art, simple enough for what Steve was wanting to do.

“Oh,” he says, “Neat.”

“Fill out your profile. Just a few words about yourself and what you want to do. A mission
statement. Then we put your art on there,” Natasha says, leaning in close and guiding Steve as he taps away on a concise little bio. “Oh, and don’t use your real name.”

“Not even just Steve?” he asks. She shakes her head. “Why not?”

“Just trust me. It’s an extra layer of safety. No one really uses their real names on anything anymore, anyway.”

He shrugs and fills his name in as Grant. It’s not like anyone would be any wiser, anyway.

Grant

Part-time illustrator. Brooklyn, NYC.

He re-reads that two-line bio. It feels distant, impersonal, and as much as Natasha made a point to be careful what he shares, Steve is uncomfortable with how robotic it feels. He shakes his head and goes back to edit it, deleting and revising the offending characters quickly.

Grant

Part-time illustrator, getting back in the game. Big fan of the Dodgers, coffee, and art history. Just a kid from Brooklyn.

That feels better. More like he’s a person—more like there’s a personality behind the screen. Steve looks to Natasha, and she nods.

“Getting the hang of it already,” she says, proudly, “Next thing you know, you’ll be selling watches and fancy juices and little leggings.”

“What?” Steve asks, and Natasha shakes her head, smiling at her own joke.

“Nothing, nothing. It’s a—you wouldn’t get it. Instagram thing,” she says. Steve thinks to ask more, but she pivots quickly. Almost as quick as Steve. “Post your first picture. Then I can teach you the ancient art of the hashtag.”

“Right, right. First picture,” Steve says, letting out a deep breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. “Not a selfie though, right?”

“Absolutely not,” Natasha says, swilling her wine about.

“Okay. Art. Not a selfie. Right,” Steve says, and it sounds so stupid, now that he thinks about it. He swipes through his photos, looking for his favorite piece he’s made in those short weeks re-discovering his flow; it’s the artistic equivalent of trying to put his best foot forward while painfully underdressed. Almost everything is unfinished or just dull—bowls of fruit, landscapes of the park, skylines. Just as he’s about to give up, he finds something promising: a sketch, messy and loose, but full of emotion and a good preview of his real work.

And the fact that it’s of Peggy doesn’t hurt.

“This one,” Steve says, tapping on the photo, the sketch of Peggy coming into full view, “This is the one I wanna post.”

“You sure?” Natasha asks, in that usual level tone of hers.

“Yeah,” Steve says, more of reassurance for him than for her, “I’m ready. Let’s do this.”
well, here it is. the cap!steve/hot librarian, civilian!bucky AU that no one asked for, but i wanted to write, anyway.

i wanted to wait until i was completely finished with this fic before i started posting, but because grad school is going to be hell on wheels this semester, and i probably won't have time to do much writing outside of papers, i decided to get to a point that i can start posting what i have done and then work on future chapters in my off time.

a few important things (this is going to be long, since it's the first chapter, but bear with me):

- first and foremost, i want to give a shoutout to emily, my writing partner and amazing, fantastic friend. this literally would not have happened without her, and it is just as much her baby as it is mine. thank you for all the support, for putting up with my nonsense, for being there for me both when i'm wrecked about grad school and when i'm wrecked over how thiqué sebastian stan is, and for being just generally great. thank you, thank you, thank you. for everything.

- this isn't my first attempt at writing a multi-chapter fic, but this is the first one of this size and scale. that said, because of above grad school nonsense, this fic won't have a set posting schedule. i don't want to make promises i can't keep, but i'll try my best to update fairly frequently.

- this entire chapter went unbeta'd, and just for time's sake, i'm keeping it that way. that might change, but for the time being, i think it's best to fly solo.

- again, no promises or anything, but this fic will probably end up in the 15-20+ chapter range. just. heads-up.

- the rating of this fic will change in the future, and i will be adding tags. be mindful of the changes that follow in upcoming updates.

- you can message me (about this fic, about your own local hot librarian, about beefy bucky's powerful thighs, etc.) on tumblr.

thanks for reading, everyone, and i hope that you will enjoy this fic as much as i enjoy writing/thinking about it.

bucky shows up in the next chapter, i promise.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

the arrival of bucky barnes (not with a bang, but a whimper).

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In true twenty-first century fashion, Steve's first friend outside of the Avengers, outside of super-spies and monsters and friendly old men, is an internet friend.

He does the Instagram thing for a about two and a half months, gaining a fair amount of followers within that short time. Steve's not by any means at Instagram famous levels—even he knows that he won't be getting that status any time soon, especially incognito. But it's a fair amount of followers, about two-hundred people, by Steve's count, not including all the bot and spam accounts.

Despite his good handful of followers, though, Steve hardly got regulars. It was rare to get anything close to a stream of likes. And he never, ever got feedback.

So he notices when one day, @imjamesbarnes starts liking everything he posts.

And he definitely notices when he gets a notification saying: @imjamesbarnes commented on your post.

Faced with the a wholly new frontier in social media interaction, Steve does the only thing he can do.

He calls Nat.

"Morning, Rogers," Natasha says, at 12:42 in the afternoon.

"Natasha. Are you busy?" he asks, already putting on his shoes.

"Mm. Depends. You going to be feeding me?"

Steve sighs. "If that's what I've gotta do."

"Great," Natasha says, "I'll meet you at the fish taco place I like in an hour and a half."

_The fish taco place she likes_ is in Manhattan, a short walk for Natasha, but a long walk and subway ride away for Steve. When he finally meets Natasha, an hour and a half later exactly, she's seated on the terrace, wearing an outlandishly large, floppy hat, with a pink drink and two menus in front of her.

"Oh, good, you're here," she says, not a care in the world. As if he wasn't entirely panicked on the phone. "Did you know they started selling grapefruit margaritas here?"

"I can see," Steve says, sinking into the empty seat across from her.
"So," she says, "What's ailing you, Steve? They finally cancel reruns of *I Love Lucy*?"

"You know that was way after my time," Steve sighs. Getting to the taco place was hardly a workout, but when he speaks, he feels exhausted. "No, it's Instagram, Nat. Instagram."

"Mmm. So what about it?" She asks, taking a teensy sip of her fluffy pink day-drink.

"Well, I—" Steve starts, when he sees the waiter coming. He all but hides behind his menu, still overwhelmed by [@imjamesbarnes commented on your post](https://example.com). Natasha orders for him, he notices through his swimming thoughts. For a second, he's distracted from his Instagram troubles, instead, wondering if she remembered how much an equivalent meal for him would be. The waiter takes his flimsy paper-and-plastic shield from him, and Steve tries to look friendly.

"Don't worry," Natasha says when the waiter leaves, "I ordered you like, four of the number threes. That's practically ordering catering."

"Oh. Okay, good," Steve says, feeling less than relieved. There goes that distraction.

"So, Instagram. What's up with it?" Natasha asks, going straight to the throat. Just like she does. She's not one for niceties, that one, and as much as he appreciates it in the field, it's moments like these when Steve is less than grateful for it.

"I—here," Steve says, pulling out his phone and going straight to Instagram, "It's weird, is this what people usually do? Is this person stalking me? Is this normal? What do I do here, Nat? They're just—there, suddenly."

She takes his phone, tapping around and skimming through his activity. She looks nonplussed, but she was hardly ruffled by *anything*. After a few seconds, she puts his phone back on the table, angled so they can both see the screen.

"It's not unusual. But it's not *nothing,*" she says, resting her chin in her free hand, "Let's see who this stranger is, shall we?"

Steve swallows, nodding. Natasha taps on [@imjamesbarnes](https://example.com)'s user picture—what Steve recognized as the Library of Congress, and in the foreground, a small figure, brown-haired and angled away from the camera—leading to their full profile. It doesn't look like any fake accounts Steve has seen before. There are pictures, multiple ones, that aren't LINK IN BIO or grainy, half-nude selfies that don't match the user image. No face, nothing identifiable, but real, consistent photos all the same.

"What's the bio say?" Natasha asks. She doesn't seem too bothered by anything. But she's Steve's Vergil to his Dante on this internet journey—she's probably seen the worst of it.

"Uh," Steve says, almost embarrassed to read it, but he repeats the profile word-for-word, anyway:

> **James Barnes**

> *Bucky, if you're nasty. Curator of books, mid-century illustrations, and the @martinelli_pl social media accounts. Brooklyn, NYC."

"Not a bot," Natasha says, as she continues to scroll.

"He's—he's a not a bot," Steve agrees, tentatively.

She levels a look to him. "And his message to you is—?"
"I haven't looked at it yet," Steve admits. "Did you read it?"

"Only saw it exists," Natasha replies coolly, "Didn't read it yet."

He eyes her carefully. She’s lying. It isn’t Natasha to have information in front of her and not read it.

"Okay," Steve says with a sigh, "Let me—let's read it."

He stares down the offending message, and it's so benign, now that he's actually reading it, that he feels embarrassed for all the theatrics. Was really that afraid of branching out and embracing being a young adult in a new century? Steve was starting to see where his friends' concern was.

"Sent two hours ago: Great sketch! Really love your style. I can see echoes of Leyendecker, especially in this. Followed by a grinning face."

"And? What do you think?" Natasha asks.

"I mean—Leyendecker was one of my big influences when I was first starting."

She blinks. It seems like she’s trying to say something, without quite saying something. "So—good?"

"Yeah. It's a big compliment," Steve says, "I always loved Leyendecker’s lines and the way that he portrayed emotions and dramatics. What this—this Bucky guy said, it's real nice. Real encouraging. 'Specially since this one was just a quick thing."

"Good," Natasha said, "I think you have a fan."

"But this isn’t— weird? This feels really sudden," Steve says, "Kind of. I dunno, intense?"

"Steve," Natasha says, circling her straw around her margarita, and there she is, using her letting you down easy voice. At least she’s being honest. "The entire internet is weird. Usually, when someone likes another person’s entire Instagram, they send a dick pic afterward, not genuine artistic commentary. You're getting off good if this is the worst thing that happens to you. Pardon the expression."

This gets a smile out of Steve. It’s a chagrined smile, but it’s a smile, still.

"So what do I do?" he asks her, feeling less panicked, but no less unsure.

"Thank him. Talk to him. Or ignore him. It's up to you," she says, taking a little bit of margarita in her mouth with the straw, like it's a pipette. "Who knows. Maybe this'll be the end of it and he'll follow your account in silence. Maybe you'll make a friend, or at the very least, someone you can talk art with. But like I said, it's up to you."

Steve sighs, his shoulders sagging. He feels overwhelmed and overexhausted. It was one thing putting his art on the internet, it was another thing trying to parse the minefield that was interpersonal relationships in the twenty-first century.

"Look, at the risk of being that girl, Steve, isn't this exactly what you wanted?" Natasha asks, "You wanted your art to get attention. And now you're getting attention. Good attention. So what's the problem?"

"I don't—I just," Steve says, "I dunno. I guess I feel like I don't know what I’m doing, and I don’t
wanna fuck it up."

“That’s all of us. No one gets it, Steve. You’ve just got a different learning curve because you’re a grandpa,” Natasha says seriously, though not without kindness. There was care there, though it wasn’t obvious—one just had to know where to look. “Again. This entire Instagram project and how involved or distant you are from any one internet rando? It’s up to you. Do what feels right to you.”


“You’re the one buying lunch,” she says with a shrug, a you’re welcome without saying as much. He smiles at her and she sips at the remnants of her grapefruit margarita loudly. It’s a silent understanding, unspoken appreciation and encouragement, respectively.

It’s not much by any means. But it’s more than Steve could have asked for.

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After his admittedly overblown moment of social media-induced panic, lunch with Natasha is business as usual. They catch up briefly, Natasha having just come back from an intel mission in Georgia—the country, not the state Atlanta’s in, Rogers, she clarifies with a little snort, As if either would surprise me anymore. It’s all shop talk and S.H.I.E.L.D. gossip between the two of them, neither of them bringing up anything Sam and Steve talked about in the Talk they had almost three months prior. When they part, they hug briefly—though neither of them the hugging type. As she pulls away, Natasha meets Steve’s gaze, lowering her head very, very seriously.

“Remember what I said, Rogers,” she says, seriously.

“Yeah. Yeah,” he says, “Thanks, Tasha.”

She nods. “Let me know if you need anything. I’ve got to go. Need to check up on Clint, make sure Bed-Stuy’s still standing.”

“Oh boy,” Steve laughs, “Good luck.”

Natasha nods once as a goodbye and takes off, disappearing into the mid-afternoon crowd in a blink. Steve watches the crowd, searching for a familiar shock of red and finding none.

Natasha never did go off the job.

Pulling his hoodie up, Steve catches the next train, ready to go home. As it pulls away from the station, Steve leans back in that garish orange subway seat, staring at @imjamesbarnes’ comment, at that innocuous little thing that caused so much concern. He feels like an idiot, now that Natasha talked him down from his panic. Even still, he finds himself hesitating, unsure as to how to respond.

Do what feels right, is what Natasha told him, which, usually, for Steve, would not be a problem. In the field, this would not be a problem. Steve was used to running into firefights without plans, surviving entirely through a combination of his gut and dumb luck. It was his historical legacy. One of them.

But when it came to interacting with other people—when it came to social media—Steve wasn’t sure about what felt right. He was totally lost.

The train nears Steve’s stop, and he sets an ultimatum for himself: he has to decide how, if at all,
he will decide to respond before the doors open. He can side-step the comment, or he can face it head-on, but somehow, he had to move forward.

Other passengers begin readying themselves for the train doors to open, bracing themselves for the familiar lurch and whiplash of the train coming to a stop. Steve takes a deep breath in, exhaling once the train settles, and *likes* the comment.

Moving forward it was.

Steve taps out his reply, then and there, almost missing his stop because of it. As he rushes to beat the doors, Steve’s anxiety has mutated into something complex; a Frankenstein’s monster hodgepodge of regret, anxiety, and excitement. He was fully in new, uncharted waters now. He replied to a stranger on the internet, under his new persona, not to argue about politics or semantics or mis-remembered history, but to talk about himself—to be honest and open for vulnerabilities, in one way or another.

He took the next step.

The reply that Steve left was simple, a thank you, followed by a repeat of what he told Natasha. It was neutral enough, open to interpretation as friendly or distant, and easy to take in either direction, if things went beyond that thread. Steve posts the reply as soon as he’s out of the station, and as soon as he does, he pockets his phone. He doesn’t want to overthink it more than he already has. When he gets back to his apartment, his phone chimes, a single notification across his lock screen:

@imjamesbarnes liked your comment.

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For a while, that single notification is the end of it. @imjamesbarnes doesn’t write back in response to Steve’s comment. After a day of no response, for all the anxiety it left him with earlier, the comment all but slips Steve’s mind. All goes back to silent equilibrium.

It’s only when Steve posts another picture of Peggy on Instagram—the full, finished painting to accompany the sketch that was his first post—that @imjamesbarnes shows up again.

@imjamesbarnes: Peggy Carter was one badass woman. You capture a fierceness and capable-ness in this really well

Steve swallows hard as he reads that comment. The thing is, something happened while he had been asleep. People began to forget how much of a powerhouse Peggy was. People were beginning to forget that she was the person that made Steve the legend he was. Fierce and capable didn’t even begin to cover it.

Seeing someone finally giving Peggy something *close* to the credit she deserved completely made Steve’s week. This @imjamesbarnes guy—he was alright.

Steve doesn’t call Natasha this time. He doesn’t panic. He doesn’t shut down. Instead, he *likes* the comment and taps out a reply, careful not to be overly sentimental while he gushes all over the comments.

@sgr_art: @imjamesbarnes, Thank you so much! Peggy Carter is one of the biggest influences of my life...I’m glad I got her incredible personality and history across. Seriously, thank you. It means a lot. :)
He rereads Bucky’s comment, smiling to himself. Whoever this @imjamesbarnes guy was, he had to be a good guy. Anyone who went out of his way to give Peggy the credit she deserved had to be. Before he knows it, Steve is on @imjamesbarnes’ profile again, for the first time since the first comment.

It’s a lot of pictures of coffee. A lot of pictures of coffee. But between the pictures of coffee are colorful stacks of books, each with a loving write-up about each title, and, as promised in his bio, mid-century illustrations. Most of the illustrations are from children’s books and pulp novels. Steve doesn’t recognize most of the pulp novel illustrations—the author’s name, A. C. Martin Ellis, doesn’t ring a bell—but he likes most of them, anyway. They’re all dime-store crime and spy novels, but the illustrations are always dynamic, and with their hard-boiled female leads, he has a feeling he would like them.

Peggy would have liked them, at the very least.

More than the pulp covers, it’s the children’s book illustrations that Steve recognizes. The Wizard of Oz. Winnie-The-Pooh. The Velveteen Rabbit. Tucked between the crime books and coffee shots, Bucky has posted photos of those illustrations, all early printings of the books and true to the original formats, formats Steve would recognize.

It was a good day for memory already, with his painting of Peggy now finished. But after seeing those illustrations those icons of his childhood, nostalgia hits Steve at full force. Before he knows it, he’s deep in the bowels of Bucky’s Instagram, having liked almost a third of it. It’s only when he reaches the end that Steve realizes what he’s done—the exact same thing that Bucky did, except significantly creepier. Bucky had a lot more pictures than Steve had, and Steve might not have liked all of them, but he liked a lot.

He considers telling Natasha. They could have a good laugh about it. They could talk about how maybe, somewhere in another part of Brooklyn, Bucky was having the same sort of reaction that Steve had earlier.

Ultimately, Steve decides against it. He’d dwelled on Instagram more than enough for one day. With a big stretch, Steve locks his phone, having decided now would be a good time to go for a long, long run—but not before scrolling up to the top of @imjamesbarnes’ profile and quickly, before he can overthink it, pressing Follow.

That way, they’re even.

Chapter End Notes

so originally, chapter two was much, much longer, but i divided it in half, and then i took the first half and divided it in half again. that first third of the "full" version of chapter two is what we have here.

a few things:

- a lot of people headcanon steve's art style as similar to jack kirby, but in my head, steve's art style in this fic is very, very similar to j.c. leyendecker's. i imagine if he never got the serum, steve would have had a major rivalry with norman rockwell because of how he portrayed americana.
- initially, @imjamesbarnes was just a placeholder handle, until i realized that bucky
absolutely would have an instagram handle like sebastian stan. they share that sense of humor in that way,imo.
- steve and natasha totally could have gone to brooklyn together and just parted ways when they were actually out of manhattan, i'm pretty sure.
- this chapter might have also been plotted out and started on during a sex and the city binge. cannot confirm nor deny.

as always, feel free to talk to me on here or on tumblr.
If there’s one thing that Steve quickly learns in his time following @imjamesbarnes on Instagram, it's this: *James Barnes contains multitudes.*

It’s an unseasonably nice Saturday afternoon, and the easing heat of the late-summer sun motivates Steve to set foundations for the long haul. To make *plans.* Steve Rogers, tucked into a familiar park nook on an unseasonably nice Saturday afternoon, is working on a *project.*

A Veteran’s Day project, to be exact. From his heart. One half tribute, one half catharsis.

The sketch starts off smoothly, lines coming quick and easy, shapes and faces quickly taking form. He’s done drafts of this painting before, on napkins, in pages of notes. It feels good to finally give it the adequate due it deserves. The soft scratch of pencil against canvas, the birds in the trees, and the muted, familiar sounds of the city—Steve at ease. Heaven might still be a far-off goal for him, but if a warm, sunny day in a city park is Limbo, Steve likes it just fine.

Or, he would. Making the jump from broad strokes and loose lines to detail is where the ease begins to fade. It’s when Steve starts to refine the sketch that he, almost immediately, hits a wall.

“This isn’t working,” Steve groans, mostly to himself. Nearby, an old man playing chess—a sometimes-friend, someone who understands what it was like to miss the old days without romanticizing the *Old Days*—looks over at him, sympathetically.

“If your art thing’s not working out, you should come and play a game,” he offers.

“No thanks, Arnie,” Steve says, slumping against a nearby tree. He pulls his phone out, sighing, looking for some sort of distraction. Something to get his brain and hands working together again.

“The radiation coming off of those will fry your brain,” says Arnie’s regular chess partner, staring intently at the board in front of him.

Steve nods, humoring the guy. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Don’t listen to him,” says Arnie, seriously. Then, he adds, with a laugh, “He’s just mad that he’s losing.”

Arnie’s partner curses, low and under his breath, and Arnie just watches him, waiting for him to take his turn. Steve sighs, turning away from the two old men to flick through his Instagram feed.

Steve scrolls through a deluge of coffees and pastries; it’s no surprise, considering his follow list is comprised almost entirely his favorite breakfast places. The beginning murmurs of hunger stir in the pit of his stomach, and he considers getting a falafel before heading home. Scrolling idly, Steve
Steve finds himself chuckling at the absurdity of the drawing, the concept, the fact that there’s not only a whole novel, but a whole series starring the characters in front of him. It’s all brought together with the snarky, self-deprecating caption accompanying the scene. He likes the post almost immediately, continuing to giggle to himself.

“Feeling better, Steve?” Arnie jokes, raising an eyebrow at him. His chess partner, still deep in thought, doesn’t look up. Instagram is clearly beneath him when winning is so within reach.


“Well, I’m glad.” Arnie says. He moves a chess piece, and his partner huffs. “You should share whatever funny thing you saw with my friend over here. He seems he could use it.”

“Nah, I’ve gotta head back. Besides, don’t wanna fry his brains, ‘specially if he’s losing as bad as it looks,” Steve jokes, as he begins to pack up his things for the day. “See you next week, fellas.”

With a wave, Steve gathers up his things and makes his leave. It was time to go. He’s getting hungry, the weather is starting to change, and besides—he doesn’t know how to begin to explain the objective humor of the phrase, THE SPACE TITTIES.

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After more than five years out of the ice, Manhattan has quickly become familiar territory for Steve. He wouldn’t have expected it, not when he was growing up young and poor in a very, very different New York City. The city still isn’t home for him, especially not in the twenty-first century, but he can say he doesn’t feel like a tourist anymore.

It’s a busy morning in Manhattan, with dense, workday crowds getting more and more congested as he nears Avengers Tower. Steve’s needed for their weekly intel briefing, set to start in an hour. He always arrives early, to get a run-down on everything before the rest of the team. It’s just one of his many duties as their stalwart leader.

On intel days, the second Steve is in the building, he runs on autopilot. Completely engrossed in
his phone, Steve is almost to the elevator when Bucky’s new post jerks him out of his weekday haze—he literally stops in his tracks.

It’s a photo of an old illustration from an old, old fairy tale—the heroine of the story, Gerda, on a journey to save her friend, sits barefoot in the snow, nothing but the dark of night behind her. In front her is a raven, hopping towards her, and she beckons to it, her hand outstretched and expression kind.

Steve has to blink a few times to make sure he’s not imagining it; that he isn’t so hyperfocused on getting to his meeting that he’s hallucinating an illustration from a century ago. When he’s still not convinced, he slides his thumb down, focusing on Bucky’s caption, instead.

@imjamesbarnes: W. Heath Robinson for Hans Christian Andersen’s Fairy Tales, printed in 1913. This is a contemporary printing (in moderate shape), but you can pick up reprints with the original illustrations online. One of my favorites. :) #realvintage #bookstagram #illustrations #martinellipubliclibrary

It isn’t that the illustration was particularly different or stunning or groundbreaking, though it was good. And it isn’t that the illustration was particularly unusual. Anything from THE SACRED REZNOR series had this fairy tale illustration beat.

It’s that Steve remembers the illustration. He remembers it personally. He remembers every line of it, every dot. He remembers the book it’s printed in, the copy he never wanted to return. He remembers every crease in the spine, every dog-eared page. He even remembers the librarian who took a liking to him, who never said anything about late fees, even when he kept the book months after it was due.

It’s strange, how much one image from one account can make Steve feel so much. For the first time, Steve feels compelled to leave Bucky a comment.

@sgr_art: I remember having a book with these illustrations when I was a kid! This takes me way back. The Snow Queen illustration is one of my favorites, too. You have good taste.

Sending a comment for the first time feels odd and unfamiliar, and Steve, if just for a second, questions if it’s the right thing to do. The anxiety of the situation at hand—at reaching out, at trying to make relationships with someone new, in a new way—is there. But it’s nowhere near the same level as when Bucky first followed him.

Steve pockets his phone once he finally makes his way to the elevator. His heart feels tender, having seen that illustration, more than a century from the last time. As he watches the city bustling outside, he feels a prickle of something bittersweet welling up in his eyes, glad, for once, for the long ride up to the restricted-access floors. When the elevator doors ding open, and he’s in a part of the tower that only Avengers are allowed in, Steve checks his phone again—just once, just briefly—and smiles at the notification on his screen:

@imjamesbarnes liked your comment.

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After that, things shift. Steve’s routine isn’t changed, and it’s far from upended. But it’s different. He has a distant acquaintance, a sort of surrogate closeness, where there used to be none. It’s less revolutionary and more a logical progression; the last step in a line of transition. From there, Steve comments regularly on Bucky’s posts. Never anything too personal, but it’s cordial. And Bucky,
for his part, does the same. They reach a good back-and-forth, a parry, a distant camaraderie.

It’s not close. Not like Steve and Sam, not even like Steve and Natasha. But it’s something.

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Veterans Day arrives before Steve knows it.

Captain America doesn’t get days off. Even if he did, Steve doesn’t know if he would take them. But Veterans Day is quiet, the combination of a three-day weekend and the creeping winter chill seemingly promising a moment of stillness—a moment Steve can take for himself.

Painting all day—with a pot of black coffee by his side and All Things Considered droning softly in the background—feels like a natural fit. It’s second nature to him, like a return to an instinct he had so-long suppressed. He remembers his trip to the Blick store all those months ago, the way he had been so reluctant to start again, and he wonders where the hesitation came from.

That was the problem with that nebulous, anxious uncertainty and mental fog, Steve supposes—it didn’t need a reason. But he was working on it.

Steve posts the finished painting at 11:19 PM, far later than he had planned. There’s a subtle shine, a casualty of the paint still being wet, but it’s posted, and it’s done—A painting of the Howling Commandos, all of them, laughing and grinning at the viewer. It’s a hazy memory, but it happened. It’s real. Steve doesn’t remember what led up to it, and he doesn’t remember what came next, but he remembers the moment—the way that Morita laughed until he cried, or the way that Jones had to explain the joke to Dernier.

The likenesses aren’t flawless, and there are definitely parts of the piece that are weaker than others. But when Steve steps back and looks at the full piece, his heart feels full. He feels satisfied.

@imjamesbarnes: Wow. Just wow. You know it’s like Peggy, these guys don’t get enough of the recognition they deserve. But I think putting them back in the center starts to fix that. Thanks for recognizing the people who don’t get the spotlight in history, for reasons that might not be entirely fair. It means a whole lot to a whole lotta people. Happy Veterans Day

And as if that wasn’t enough, to sign off, Bucky ended his message with a little American flag.

Somehow, this comment felt different. This comment felt like it didn’t just need to be liked and responded to in the public comment thread attached to the posts of his paintings. This one, Steve felt, required something far more substantial.

Steve slides his thumb over to the paper airplane symbol, still caught in his decision. With a tap of his thumb, he’s on a page he’d only visited once before, blank and open as the day he’d made his account. Typing @imjamesbarnes into the recipient box goes quickly—once Steve types the first
few letters, Instagram fills out the rest. It knows who he wants to talk to. It knows exactly where this was going, even if Steve was still unsure.

It’s quicker, easier, when Steve’s past that threshold. When Steve begins writing his message, words spill out, gracious and sincere:

@sgr_art: Hey, thanks for the comment on my Veterans Day painting. Thanks for commenting on all of my stuff, but this one especially. I’m retired Army, so your comment means a lot to me.

He stares at the message anxiously, and quickly, without any more spiraling thought, presses send.

All he can hope is that he won't regret what he decided to do.

His phone chimes in minutes. After text conversations with Natasha that take days to get responses, and Sam’s chronic habit of dropping conversations because he forgets to text back, the quick response—from a stranger on the internet, no less—surprises Steve. It’s a welcome change.

@imjamesbarnes: No problem! And hey, man, I meant every word of it. I'm a veteran, too

Steve raises his eyebrows. Wasn’t that a surprise. Not only was Bucky—a faceless stranger on the other end of the line—willing to have a conversation with Steve, but he was willing to open up about his own experiences, too. If it was some sort of bait, Steve took it, tapping out a response to Bucky as soon as he finished reading Bucky’s reply.

@sgr_art: No shit? What branch were you?

@imjamesbarnes: Army

The message he gets back is followed by a flexing bicep emoji. Steve grins. Bucky had personality, and Steve found himself charmed, letting the walls he was so careful to build up come down. Not entirely. Not even by any significant margin. He had to be careful, after all. He couldn’t trust just anyone. But the walls came down by a few feet, at least.

He types up his next reply just as quickly as he had typed up his previous one, just barely pausing to question if this conversation could be considered oversharing, before pressing send.

@sgr_art: Nice! What'd you do?

The response doesn't arrive immediately. Not like the previous replies had.

Five minutes stretches into fifteen, which stretches into an hour. At the hour-fifteen mark, Steve starts to get anxious once again, worrying what he asked was inappropriate for online small talk—worrying he asked too much, violated some unspoken norm of privacy, or if it was the internet equivalent of talking about marriage on a first date.

He considers amending his message, or apologizing for prying, but decides against it. Don’t make it awkward, Rogers, he hears Natasha’s voice say in the back of his mind, his shoulder-angel armed with a selfie stick.

Just as Steve is about to give up on the conversation, his phone chimes, pulling him back in.

@imjamesbarnes: Records, technically. I dunno, it’s hard to explain? It was a special thing, not really a standard post, I just sort of followed around some higher-level
Just how open Bucky is surprises Steve, especially considering that they are both hardly know one another. They comment on each other’s posts, sure, but they were hardly close. Bucky was either very friendly, very bad at oversharing, or didn’t care.

Whatever the reason, that openness changed something; they couldn’t be considered strangers now, not entirely, not with Bucky’s vulnerability shared between them.

@sgr_art: That’s awful. I’m so sorry.

@imjamesbarnes: Don’t be

This message, punctuated in the middle by a smiley face, somehow seems more intimate than Steve felt he deserved.

@imjamesbarnes: I knew what I was getting into. It’s over now, anyway. Can’t do nothing about it now

And ain’t that the truth, Steve thinks, as he types out a reply, careful as he can. If Bucky was going to open up to him, all but out of the blue, he deserves a careful, measured response. Anything else would be unfair. It would practically be voyeurism.

@sgr_art: Yeah, yeah. I understand. Believe me, there’s a ton I wish I could change. But you got to keep looking ahead, got to keep your eyes on tomorrow, like they say.

@imjamesbarnes: Damn right

@imjamesbarnes: Well, hey, this was fun, but I gotta turn in. Work tomorrow, you know

@sgr_art: Oh yeah! Don’t let me keep you.

@imjamesbarnes: Thanks, Grant. Really

To punctuate his message, an emoji—eyes closed, smiling, and blushing. It looked thankful, almost.

@imjamesbarnes: It was great talking to you

@sgr_art: You too, Bucky. Have a good night.

@imjamesbarnes: You too :)

Steve sits back, feeling an exuberant buzz in his chest and fingertips. That anxiety that racked him months ago is nowhere to be found. He talked to someone, privately, in real time. He took the next step.

A few days pass between that moment, that brief connection, and a conversation does not spring up between them again. All goes back to normal, for a while: Bucky posts a pulp cover illustration in that time—some awfully cheesy thing called, *I Was a Teenage Assassin!*, with a quippy little caption about high school—and Steve posts more of his messy, daily sketches.

It’s not quite friendship. Not yet. But it’s something close, something approaching it.

Symbiosis.
Steve, craned awkwardly to check his phone, smiles at the message. He’s dotted to the forearms in paint, so he grabs a rag and cleans up carefully before he checking his Instagram inbox.

Bucky’s message is there, but that’s not what gets his attention. What gets his attention is the photograph attached—in Bucky’s white-gloved hands is a fuzzy color photograph of one Peggy Carter, grinning wide and alive with a woman Steve doesn’t recognize. They’re standing in front of the Broadway theatre, though Peggy hardly looks dressed for it—she’s wearing a white blouse tucked into navy blue trousers, and her lips are that familiar gunshot red. The photo is signed, right in the right-hand corner, and Steve can recognize Peggy’s precise handwriting like it’s his own.

Angie,

You always know how to show a girl a good time. Until our next adventure.

With love,

Peggy

It’s not until his vision starts to blur and his eyes begin to sting that Steve realizes that he was holding back tears. His heart feels like he sunk flew the Valkyrie into it; like he’s trying to make sense of the aftermath of a crash. He misses her. Dearly. He thinks, for the second, of the almost of their lives, the path their converging destinies could have taken.

But he wouldn’t take this away from her. That smile was rare on Peggy, and he’s glad she was able to find it again. He’s glad she found joy while he was seventy feet deep in Arctic ice. He’s glad she lived a life.

Wiping eyes with the back of his hand, Steve takes a deep breath, and plots out an ever-careful reply.

@sgr_art: Wow. That’s real nice. This from the Martinelli?

@imjamesbarnes: Yup

@imjamesbarnes: It’s in one of our collections. It’s not public, not for now, but I thought I’d sneak a pic for you :)

As if the picture wasn’t enough, Bucky went out of his way to show him something. Steve feels that joyful tenderness exposed again. When he replies, his thumbs tap away slow, deliberate, and delicate—as if tone were a thing that he could project through the screen. As if he could show Bucky, wherever in Brooklyn he was, all the thanks in the world.

@sgr_art: Wow. No, I’m really touched. Really. Thank you.

There’s a pause—a lack of response from Bucky that almost echoes in its absence. Steve, suddenly, feels the need to reciprocate.

Want to see what I’m working on? Is what he eventually types out. Bucky replies within two minutes of him pressing send. Impressive, considering it’s the middle of a workday.

@imjamesbarnes: Hell yeah, I’d love to see what you’re doing
Steve laughs to himself. He forgot how nice it felt to have someone he could so readily share his art with. He steps back, snapping a picture of the half-finished underpainting on his canvas.

It’s a self-portrait, though not entirely—the figure in the painting is Steve, but in the body he occupied before the serum, the one he so often forgets no longer belongs to him. In the painting, self portrait-Steve is turned away from the viewer, angled so his bony shoulder and back are clear, but his face is nowhere to be seen. In front of him is stark darkness, and in the corner of the painting, he looks very, very small.

Of all the self-portraits Steve has ever done, it’s one of his favorite yet.

@imjamesbarnes: Oh holy shit

@imjamesbarnes: That’s amazing!

Steve grins to himself, feeling his face heat with the beginnings of a blush.

@sgr_art: Thank you! I’ll probably finish underpainting by the end of the week.

@imjamesbarnes: :o :O

@sgr_art: You want I keep you posted?

@imjamesbarnes: Yeah! I LOVE your art

That last part might have been obvious, given Bucky liked almost everything he posted, but Steve still felt an immense joy at knowing he had a fan.

@sgr_art: Will do, then. All I ask in exchange is you keep posting bad pulp novel covers. And the classic illustrations and Peggy Carter stuff, too, but mostly the bad pulp covers.

Steve ends that with a smiley face emoji. He means it.

@imjamesbarnes: You like those?? I would do those for FREE. But you know, you give me an offer that good, I cant turn it down. You’ve got yourself a deal, pal

Instead of punctuation, what Bucky sends back a string of grinning faces, a few art-related emojis, and a thumbs up or two. Steve can only keep smiling, feeling warm and soft, knowing that he doesn’t just have a follower—he doesn’t even just have a new fan.

He has a friend.

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The two of them quickly become close, quickly falling into a rhythm.

Bucky almost always sends a message over first, almost always a hello—through a plain good morning, through a story about work, through a bad joke. Steve, as Grant, responds in kind, sharing the ins and outs of his day that he can. It’s not much, considering the layers of secrecy and half-truths he has to apply to his life, but he shares. It would feel selfish not to.

And so, Steve’s routine expands again: wake up, run, get breakfast. Go to Manhattan, if need be. Do whatever Avenging business needs to be done. Make art, when he can. Take a walk in the park on the weekends. Joke around with Natasha and Sam, if they’re around. Talk to Bucky.
It’s not glamorous. He still has more bad days than he would like to admit. He still hesitates on the therapy situation. But he feels better. His life seems better. It feels stable. It feels right.

And as soon as Steve is used to it, as if by law of the universe, it gets upended.

Instagram, in dramatic fashion, crashes.

Not by any incompetence on the part of developers. No, this was more insidious. This crash, Steve learned, in an early-morning press conference in Avengers tower, was only part of a larger attack—a cover-up, perpetrated by the smoldering, splintered remains of Hydra.

In the public media outcry over Instagram, some Hydra goons attempted to breach private, restricted databases from several US agencies. It was barely a calculated move; it was a desperate power play, a grab at something close to greatness—the work of the zealous, dedicated few who still carried the flag of a scattered empire. They who, even with Alexander Pierce dead and exposed for his lies—wanted to continue championing Hydra’s standard operating procedure: cause chaos, instill fear, and extend a promise of security with one hand, a loaded gun in the other.

In social media spaces far removed from Steve, there is chaos. The entire internet all but has a meltdown. While celebrities and civilians alike sit on their hands, powerless to do anything but grumble, Steve leads a team to a small suburban town in the mountains of Georgia.

Hydra, under the banner of S.H.I.E.L.D., was a force that could start wars and destroy lives at the drop of a hat. This splinter group was far from that. Tony traced the origins of the attack within an hour and a half. Taking them down, putting them in custody—even with all the black-market Chitauri tech they pilfered—took half that time.

What was really going to waste Steve’s night was the paperwork.

There’s a thick ream of forms on his lap, statements and legalities and things he needs to sign off on, things he can’t send to the legal office because they’re for his eyes only. Being the team leader had its perks, but they sure as hell weren’t paperwork in a Helicarrier.

Just as he’s through what must have been the twentieth sheet about weapons use alone, one of Steve’s belt pouches chimes wildly, all his updates coming at once. He pulls his phone out, unlocking it with one hand—fingerless gloves, so useful—immediately going to Instagram. Like a passenger pigeon, flying home.

In the time since the attack, Bucky sent him two messages—both sent just over an hour prior:

@imjamesbarnes: Well, that was something

A string of eyeroll emojis. Steve could relate.

@imjamesbarnes: What’re you working on? Anything big happen in your life while the entire internet was down?

Steve snorts.

“You wouldn’t fuckin’ believe,” he mumbles to himself.

“Excuse me?” says a voice besides him—Bruce, Steve discovers, and he shakes his head.

“Nothing,” he says, laughing it off awkwardly, “I’m just, uh. Just—messing someone.”
Bruce nods, going back to his book. Steve throws himself back into his conversation with Bucky, in part, because he doesn’t want to explain who he’s talking to. Or what he’s doing on Instagram. Not to the entire team.

@sgr_art: Didn’t get to draw a single goddamn thing. Work was killer.

@imjamesbarnes: :( :( :(.

@imjamesbarnes: Bad day all around, then?

@sgr_art: Yeah. But it’s been worse.

@imjamesbarnes: You’re quite the optimist, Grant

He punctuates his message cheekily; with a little winking emoji.

@imjamesbarnes: Well hey, in case this happens again, here’s my number so we don’t have to rely on Instagram. You never know what’s gonna happen these days, we might as well have a contingency plan :P

And in plain text, there it is: Bucky’s cell phone number, something that could easily identify him. Something that ties him to the real world. It’s a step beyond anything they’ve been doing. It’s a step towards deeper long-distance, cyber-intimacy. Steve measures the tone of his response carefully.

@sgr_art: Ha. You’ve got that right. Thanks for this.

@sgr_art: I’ll text you.

He knows he should consult Natasha on this, or at the very least, it would be a good idea to. But somehow, he doesn’t see it necessary, not with Bucky. He feels that Bucky is trustworthy—that even though he’s never met him face-to-face, he can trust him.

That he’s safe.

He copies the number down carefully, in the corner of some Avengers paperwork first, then into his phone. For a second, Steve considers stepping back, realizing that this is where the road diverges into two explicitly different paths. As he’s typing it, Steve realizes that he could very well never send that text. He could very well come up with a viable excuse. He doesn’t have to do this.

Steve presses send, anyway.

ME [10:09 PM]: Hey there, Sacred Reznor. Your turn now. Any space adventures you’ve got to regale for me?

There is a pause. An indeterminate amount of time that feels like an eternity. And just as sudden as it fell down upon Steve, it passes. His phone chimes, and when he checks the notification message on his lock screen, he feels anxious—but he also feels relief.

UNSAVED NUMBER [10:15 PM]: Grant!

UNSAVED NUMBER [10:15 PM]: :O :O :D

Steve grins, excited at Bucky’s energy. He saves Bucky’s number into his phone, entirely aware he’s solidifying their friendship several degrees further.
ME [10:16 PM]: That’s me.

He follows that up with a smiling emoji. It pales in comparison to the grin he’s sporting in the real world.

BUCKY [10:19 PM]: Okay but actually

BUCKY [10:19 PM]: *I do have another Sacred Reznor story for you*

BUCKY [10:20 PM]: And lemme tell you, Grant

BUCKY [10:20 PM]: This one? It’s a fuckin DOOZY

With a grin, Steve pays attention, a captivated audience if there ever were one, as Bucky goes on a long, winding spiel about his adventure in reading another title in *The Sacred Reznor* series—twenty-page, angsty, blue alien sex scene and all. After that, they keep talking—about their lives, about little pleasures and everyday annoyances and personal, genuine dealings—it makes the trip back to the city feel like no time at all. Steve is still smiling to himself when the Helicarrier lands back in New York, his paperwork having gone completely ignored.

He’ll have to take his work home for the night. He won’t be able to do any art to wind down from the scuffle down South.

Somehow, he doesn’t mind.

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Texting Bucky was a turning point.

From that first text on the Helicarrier, everything snowballed. They were close before, but after that first text, Bucky became a pillar in Steve’s life. He never met the guy. Never heard his voice. He doesn’t even know what Bucky looks like. But somehow, Steve found it so much easier to talk to Bucky than he could any number of people in his life. Somehow, screen-to-screen, Steve let himself show his vulnerabilities.

On a snowy mid-January day, Bucky texts Steve: *Plans for today, or painting and staying in?*

And did Steve have *plans*. Congress, in a rare moment of productivity, had some sort of committee hearing, and for whatever reason, they needed Steve. Or they needed Captain America, Proud Leader of the Avengers.

At least he could finally spend a good three-day weekend with Sam.

ME [12:20 PM]: I’m actually in the airport right now, headed to D.C. for the weekend.

Not entirely. He’s standing on the roof of Avengers tower, waiting for one of Tony’s many private vehicles to take him and Natasha to Washington, but it’s close enough to the truth to count.

BUCKY [12:20 PM]: :O

BUCKY [12:20 PM]: What’re you doing in DC?

ME [12:21 PM]: I’ve got some stuff to do there for work, but I’ve got a pal who lives in the area, so I’m going to try to take some time off, spend some time together. Catch a movie, that sort of thing.
BUCKY [12:21 PM]: Ooh

BUCKY [12:21 PM]: Well, have fun :)

ME [12:22 PM]: I’ll try to. He worries about me a lot, though. Last time he stayed at my place, he ambushed me about going to therapy.

BUCKY [12:23 PM]: Least he cares.

BUCKY [12:24 PM]: So

BUCKY [12:24] Stop me if I’m prying

ME [12:25 PM]: No, it’s fine. Go on.

BUCKY [12:25 PM]: Do you go to therapy, Grant?

The question is simple. And he has an out. But it still stops Steve—it’s still the equivalent of breaking glass. Had it been any other person, Steve would have brushed the question off. But this was Bucky. Steve could open up to him. He could trust him—even if he didn’t know Steve was Steve.

ME [12:31 PM]: I used to. For a few months a couple years back. Not anymore, though. My friend says I should start going again.

BUCKY [12:31 PM]: Oh okay

BUCKY [12:31 PM]: Again, stop me if I’m crossing a line

BUCKY [12:31 PM]: Do you agree with him?

Steve swallows. There he was, looking the future, looking the truth, straight in the face—and now, it was time to choose. He always knew how he would answer the question, had he ever been asked it. He knew how he felt all along. But he’d just never confronted it.

Maybe now was time.

ME [12:36 PM]: I think so. Yeah. I think I should, but…I don’t know.

BUCKY [12:36 PM]: I know

BUCKY [12:36 PM]: It’s hard, it’s really hard

BUCKY [12:37 PM]: Therapy did a lotta good for me when I got back. But it’s hard working up the courage to start. Don’t force yourself to go if you’re not ready, but I’ve got your back if you wanna go again

BUCKY [12:37 PM]: And it’s real brave of you just to consider the option, too, you know

That honesty, that kindness, it’s nothing new for Bucky. Yet even still, Steve is surprised at the support. For a second, Steve feels painfully guilty—he feels undeserving of someone so kind.


BUCKY [12:41 PM]: I’m here for you, bud
Me [12:41 PM]: Thank you.

ME [12:45 PM]: I have to get on this flight, but...really. Thanks. You don’t know what that means to me.

BUCKY [12:46 PM]: It’s what friends do ;P

BUCKY [12:46 PM]: Lemme know when you get to DC safe, yeah?

ME [12:47 PM]: Will do. Talk to you soon.

A Stark Industries pilot—Harold Hogan, his ID says—waves hello to Steve and Natasha. He’s later than scheduled, but Steve doesn’t mind. Pocketing his phone, Steve climbs into one of Tony’s flashy, compact planes, thinking about Bucky’s words the entire time.

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The snow, it turned out, was worse in the Capitol than it was in New York. The fluffy flurries that blanketed the city had turned into a full-blown snowstorm once they’d passed through Pennsylvania. What should have been less than an hour’s flight turned into four—even given the Stark Industry name printed on the plane’s side.

But Sam—foolishly friendly Sam, who offered to drive Steve and Natasha from Regan National Airport—got the worst of it. If the flight to D.C. wasn’t great, the drive to Sam’s townhouse was bad.

Steve owes him, big time.

“Here we are,” Sam sighs, “Home, sweet home. Nat, you’ve got the guest room, and Steve, you—you—shit.”

“You alright?” Natasha asks, already working on getting her boots off.

“Yes, it’s just—I forgot the air bed at my parents’ house,” he says, sounding like a defeated man. He takes a deep breath in through his nose, and sighs a heavy, weary sigh through his mouth. Steve wonders if that’s something Sam started using because of his real job. “Back into the snow.”

“It’s okay, Sam. You don’t have to. I can sleep on the couch,” Steve says with a shrug, clearly clueless to the ordeal it would become. Sam looks personally offended at the mere suggestion.

“You are not sleeping on my loveseat, Steve. Even if it wouldn’t make my mom furious if she ever learned I let Captain America sleep on the Norsborg, you wouldn’t fit. It’s a loveseat.”

“I’ve slept on small couches before, Sam. This ain’t too different,” Steve argues, “Come on, we can get it tomorrow morning. You’re tired.”

“I’m getting the goddamn inflatable mattress, Steven,” Sam says, and the way he says it, that’s the end of it. “You two just—you know your way around the place. Feel free to grab a beer or something from the fridge. We can order some pizzas when I get back.”

“Want me to come with?” Steve offers. If Sam wasn’t going to stop, Steve could at least lend a helping hand. Sam shakes his head.

“Not unless you wanna be trapped at my parents’ place for the weekend,” Sam says, in the chagrined, loving way that only sons of good parents could.
Steve smiles, trying to hide the wave of grief that overtakes him for a small, sharp second. He misses his own mother, all of sudden—but it passes. “Okay. Alright, Sam. Tell your Ma and Pa I said hi.”

“I’ll use those exact words,” Sam says, already halfway out the door, “You two be good.”

“No promises,” Natasha says, bootless and peeking into Sam’s fridge.

“Take care,” Steve says with a nod, and with that, Sam’s off.

“You want a beer?” Natasha offers, as Steve pads over to the couch, the source of all that contention. He slumps against the upholstery, pulling his phone out.

“I’m good,” Steve says, typing out a message to Bucky, “Thanks though.”

ME [5:43 PM]: Finally in D.C., about three or four hours late, but I’m here, and I’m safe.

He settles his phone on his thigh, and he clicks Sam’s television on, less to watch, and more to have something to stare at. There’s a game on, some college basketball teams he doesn’t recognize. He lets his mind wander, damn-near completely blank, as he watches the game, feeling the exhaustion of a disastrous flight sink down to his bones. Just as Steve comes back to reality just enough to focus on figuring out where the leading team is from, his phone chimes, and he finds himself more alert all of a sudden, his brain switching gears almost instantly.

BUCKY [6:07 PM]: Lol. How’d the flight go?

ME [6:08 PM]: Good, once we were in the air. Spent more time on the runway once we landed, though.

BUCKY [6:08 PM]: Boo

BUCKY [6:08 PM]: At least you’re in DC now.

ME [6:09 PM]: Yeah. True. As soon as my friend gets back, I’m probably going to eat something. Then maybe try to get some rest. Early day tomorrow, unfortunately.

Steve rubs his face, and when his phone chimes again, Bucky’s replied, first, with a string of thumbs-down and red X emojis, then, with an actual text.

BUCKY [6:09 PM]: Booooooooooo

It does, Steve starts to type out, though Bucky will never read that reply.

“Who are you texting?” asks a quiet voice, just as Steve is about to press send. He nearly jumps out of his skin.

“Shit,” he breathes out, and there’s Natasha behind him, her head tucked against the armrest of Sam’s loveseat, watching in on Steve texting for God knows how long. “Don’t fuckin’ do that, Natasha. Jesus Christ.”

“You kiss babies with that mouth?” She asks, making her way to sit next to him, drawing her knees up close to her chest.

“You kiss babies with that mouth?” She asks, making her way to sit next to him, drawing her knees up close to her chest.

“Not for long, if you do that again,” is how Steve replies, “What were you doing watching me text?”
“The real question, Rogers, is *who were you texting.*”

“I—“ Steve starts, “Why does it matter to you?”

She dodges that like a pro, moving to perch on the opposite armrest. Making herself comfortable, even as Steve was not. “Clearly it wasn’t me. And considering this person replied within the hour, I doubt it’s Sam. So—who is it?”

“It’s—a friend.”


“Well, what?”


“It’s not like that. And it’s none of those people. You—you wouldn’t know him.”

“What’s his name?”

“Uh—James.”

“James who?”

“James—Buh—“ Steve starts, knowing he’s already sunk. Panicked, he pulls the first name he can think of, skimming the top of his head for a fake identity. “James Bond.”

“James Bond,” Natasha repeats, slow. She is *not* having it. “The fictional British secret agent.”

“Oh,” Steve says, and he can feel the way his face burns with shame. No wonder the name came so quickly. “Is that—is that what it was? I knew the name sounded familiar, what a weird coincidence—“

“Cut the shit, Rogers. What’s the guy’s real name?”

Steve sighs, clearly caught. That’s what he gets for trying to out-lie a super-spy. “James Barnes.”

Natasha blinks.

“He—he likes going by Bucky—“

“—If you’re *nasty,*” Natasha interrupts, eyes wide and twinkling. And when it came to Natasha, if her eyes were twinkling, it was never with *childlike wonder.* Her grin stretches ear-to-ear, and Steve suddenly feels his entire frame tense—not with shame, and not entirely with embarrassment, but with *something.* Pressure under scrutiny. The interrogation blues.

“So, how did you get his number?” Natasha asks, resting her chin in her hands. They both might have gotten out of an air travel debacle that was about three hours too long, but she looks like she’s having the *time of her life.*

“We talked. And then, when that Hydra cell took down Instagram, he sent me his number, just in case it happened again—“

“Wait right there,” Natasha interrupts, “You were talking. Through Instagram.”
“Yeah. We were. That’s the only social media I have—“

“No, I know that, Rogers. You were in private correspondence.”

Steve feels his cheeks burn red. At least it isn’t the full-body blush.

“Yeah,” Steve answers, careful. “He said a really nice thing about one of my paintings, so I messaged him.”

That doesn’t seem to help. Natasha grins big and bright, looking like that was the best news she’d ever heard. The only time Steve ever sees anyone look that delighted is when Stark has surprise giveaways on daytime talk shows.

It’s exactly then—as Steve is realizing that he’d gone from enjoying a moment of peace to becoming proverbial prey—that Sam comes back, a paper grocery bag and his inflatable mattress in tow. He sighs, once he sees Natasha sitting on his armrest, but knows trying to get her to stop is a lost cause.

“What’s going on in here?” Sam asks, plopping his keys onto the counter. He sets the paper bag down, but the mattress—rolled up nicely, like a bedroll—comes with him. “I was only gone for like, an hour. There is no way I could have missed all that much.”

“Steve literally slid into some guy’s DMs, Sam,” Natasha replies, her voice brimming with delight.

When the room changes mood, it’s palpable. Sam takes a moment to process what he just heard, confusion and surprise clear in his eyes, before plopping in the recliner next to the couch. “Huh. Nevermind.”


“He’s—he’s a great guy. He’s funny, and he’s kind, and he really likes my art,” Steve says, “We talk. Not, you know, over the phone or anything, but we talk. We—we text. It’s nice.”

They both look at him, silent. Contemplative, maybe. Surprised, definitely.

“And yes, I call him Bucky.”

“And he calls you—?” Natasha asks. Her tone of voice is still light, but Steve’s still trying to figure out what concern looks like on her. He thinks this might be it.

“Grant. I mean, I couldn’t tell him who I am. Can’t say I’m Captain America, just wanting to have a normal life,” Steve replies, “But I’m—I dunno, mostly. I’m honest with him. Mostly.”

“I can’t believe you’re Catfishing someone, dude,” Sam says, and Natasha snorts. Steve has a feeling he’s missing out on a joke, and makes a note to figure out the context of that one.

“So, what do you talk about? You looked pretty glued to your phone there,” says Natasha.

“Art. Books. Coffee places around Brooklyn. How the day’s going. I dunno, we just talk about things, you know?” Steve says. “I—we talked about therapy today. He told me what it’s like to go.”

Sam looks at Steve carefully, before speaking. His tone is softer now. Steve doesn’t know if he feels comfortable about it. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Steve says. The remaining exhaustion from the flight was gone, but he doesn’t follow up.
He's leaving it at that.

“Well,” Sam says, “That’s good.”

“Just don’t start sharing anything too personal with the guy. Don’t get too nasty with Mister Bucky, if you’re nasty,” Natasha jokes, in that deadpan way of hers—a way to ease the tension, to bring things back to something light. Steve sends her a little smile.

“You know, you haven’t put your bags in the guest room yet,” he says, “Don’t think our arrangements are set in stone.”

“Take the guest room from me and you’re in for another seventy-year sleep, Rogers,” Natasha says, and she’s smiling, but Steve isn’t naïve enough to think she isn’t capable of it.


“Yeah,” Steve says. What he has in that moment isn’t a revelation, per se. But he feels closer to a breakthrough, still. “Yeah, me, too.”

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It takes some time before that breakthrough really comes into its own, but slow and careful, it does. Steve, with all the battle-tested, Greatest Generation bravery built into him, makes an appointment for himself. He seeks out help.

When Steve finishes up that first session, the person he goes to right after isn’t Natasha, though she’s in town. It isn’t even Sam, who, as a therapist, would be the most logical choice. It’s Bucky.

Steve doesn’t stop walking, once he’s out of the therapist’s office. He just tries to keep walking, keep moving, until he’s somehow seated in the back car of a subway train. It’s painfully empty. Looking at the garish orange seats is like putting a heat lamp between his eyes. It makes Steve feel sick. Instead of resting his head, instead of closing his eyes, he follows his subconscious. He does what it tells him to do. He pulls out his phone, and taps out a message, not to Natasha or Sam or any of the Avengers—but to Bucky.

ME [12:41 PM]: Just got out of therapy.

The reply is instant.

BUCKY [12:43 PM]: How’re you feeling?

ME [12:45 PM]: Like my insides have been cored out by an ice cream scoop.

Bucky sends a string of sad emojis, a little gesture of solidarity.

ME [12:46 PM]: But...I want to go back. I think I feel sick, but in the good way. I think.

BUCKY [12:48 PM]: It gets better. It did for me. The first session is usually one of the hardest

Steve sighs, still feeling like he’d had the wind knocked out of him. The walk to his apartment from the station wasn’t long, but as soon as he’s in his apartment, Steve all but collapses. All he
wants to do is sink into the soft, comfortable leather of his couch and sleep. Instead, he taps out a response to Bucky. It takes an almost-herculean amount of energy just to get the letters down.

ME [1:12 PM]: Yeah?

BUCKY [1:13 PM]: Yeah. Not to be a total cliché, but it gets better

Steve sighs. He sure hopes so.

ME [1:18 PM]: That’s good to hear.

BUCKY [1:18 PM]: But Grant? Even if it sucked, I’m really proud of you.

BUCKY [1:18 PM]: It’s not easy to take that first step. You were brave to do this. And you’re brave, even still, for deciding to keep going. You’re a real hero, and I’m proud, Grant. I’m proud

Seeing that message—especially in his tender, fragile state—broke a dam in Steve. His heart felt like it was flooding, like the murky uncertainty of the post-therapy hurt was draining. There’s a familiar fuzziness and sting in the corners of his eyes, and he swipes the back of his hand against his face, wishing—not for the first time—that he could hug Bucky, that they could meet. That they could make their friendship more real.

ME [1:27 PM]: Bucky?

BUCKY [1:27 PM]: What’s up?

ME [1:27 PM]: I’m really glad I have you.

Steve doesn’t wait for the reply on that one. He just clicks his phone locked, sets it on his coffee table, and—feeling less raw, less like an open wound—goes to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

aaaah wow. this semester is definitely a doozy. i’m going to try to update when and where i can, though. don't think this work is abandoned.

so, some things:

- i actually love marco rudy's art in the "bucky in space" arc. he's one of my favorite marvel comics artists. i just had a few (several) problems with the story. sorry. also, alien tittays.
- same thing about high school au/runaways!bucky.
- w. heath robinson is more famous for his wacky machine illustrations, but he did some fantastic fairy tale illustrations before those. you can actually read the book that brings bucky and steve together here, courtesy of the university of florida.
- arnie and his chess partner were almost charles and erik but i don't go there. also, check out all those cameos. kudos to you if you can catch them all.

last thing: raz (phoenixgryphon on tumblr) is amazing, and offered to draw hot librarian!bucky art. here's some process stuff.
thanks again, everyone! see you when i see you. : >
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

there's nothing like spring in the city.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s early March when Steve’s routine veers again, the familiar path of his day taking an unexpected turn into uncharted waters; into something different and unexpected and new.

Steve has been following the official Martinelli Public Library Instagram account ever since he and Bucky became regulars in one other’s lives. Knowing Bucky’s own Instagram presence, it’s clear that he’s the one running it—even if he didn’t outright state he was the account’s curator in his Instagram bio, Steve has a feeling he would know it was him. The official Martinelli feed is little more than a cleaned-up, professionalized version of the snarky rambling about book covers and shots of classic illustrations Bucky posts on his personal account.

The Martinelli account usually updated twice a day, excluding the days Bucky had off and the odd unremarkable day when even he couldn’t think of something exciting. It was a predictable, simple, lighthearted thing that Steve could expect on his Instagram feed, just another one of the little cogs in the machine that kept him from breaking apart. Art supply runs and cold-brew coffee. Dogs in the park and Werther’s toffees. Bucky’s little attempts to bring the Martinelli into the twenty-first century; stability. These were a few of Steve’s favorite things.

On that early March day, just as the city was just starting to warm up, something changes. Riding in on the coattails of a warm, first-day-of-spring breeze, came something new—a signal to revolution, a landmark opening the door to a new world:

A selfie. By a teenage girl.

Specifically, an intern at the Martinelli Public Library—Kamala Khan, Bucky’s unofficial favorite. Grinning wide and sunny on the Martinelli’s Instagram was a welcome surprise; like the first day of spring, bright colors and electric energy and all.

@martinelli_pl: Hi, Instagram! We’re shaking things up this today! Intern Kamala (@skadoosh) will be taking over the account for the day for an insider’s look at intern life at the Martinelli (and to give your regular narrator a break :P). Check out our feed and our Instagram story all throughout the day today for more real-time intern updates! #martinellipubliclibrary #internlife #bookstagram

It’s not what Steve expected on his walk home, but it’s a welcome surprise. With a giant iced coffee and Blick bag in one hand, Steve readies himself for a day working on art—a reward to himself for finishing mission paperwork without having it sent back for bureaucratic revisions.

Time passes by in a warm haze, the scratch of charcoal against paper and Billie Holiday’s familiar croon acting as a soundtrack to his afternoon. By the time Steve needs to flip his record over, he’s already got enough drafts for his new painting to feel comfortable getting the foundations on
canvas. He decides to do just that—but not before checking Instagram.

His feed, as always, is almost all coffeeshop fodder: pastries and colorful lox and avocado bagels and fancy drinks, with delicate designs in foam. Steve takes a sip of his own drink. It's now less iced coffee and more water with coffee. He finishes it, anyway. Waste not, want not.

Just as Steve is about to get back to his work, he catches an update from the Martinelli at the end of his timeline. He skims his eyes over the picture, looking from Kamala to the other figure in the picture, glancing down at the caption for context—and he stops.

@martinelli_pl: A rare sighting of your narrator in the wild! #shelfie #boyswhoread #martinellipubliclibrary #confirmed.

Bucky.

She means Bucky.

Steve blinks, and scans over the image again, this time, taking in every detail.

In the foreground of the image is Kamala, grinning widely at the camera, but she is pulled to the side, clearly not the focus of her own selfie. Instead, the focus of the photo is the scene over her shoulder; the star of the photo seems hardly aware it was taken.

Bucky—or who must be Bucky—is half-obliterated by his monitor, clearly engrossed in some serious library work. Kamala has circled him with a thick red line and added a few arrows pointing to him, perhaps in overkill. Thankfully, it doesn't obscure any of Bucky. Not that it would change much. The picture Kamala posted reveals quite little; Steve can only see Bucky from the bridge of his nose and up, but even that little glimpse of him makes Steve's heart flutter.

It's a confirmation, a comfort to put the ghosts of Steve’s greatest fears to rest; proof that Bucky is, in fact, a real person—not some scam artist preying on poor, lonely men on Instagram, and sure as hell not some algorithm meant to mine information from him.

It feels like a milestone, like a big step, like their relationship evolved into something with the snap of a selfie.

Steve breathes and pockets his phone again, taking some time to open up one of the windows before getting to work again. It feels right to let the spring breeze in; to get some air.

Even as he begins to copy his sketch onto the canvas, Steve can’t stop thinking about Instagram. He can’t stop thinking about Bucky—about his realness.

Eventually, curiosity gets the best of him again. His sketch only half-done, Steve checks Instagram. Kamala has since updated the Martinelli’s Instagram Story, judging by the sunset-colored circle surrounding the Martinelli’s logo at the top of his feed. Steve taps on it, hoping with almost-obsessive curiosity for a better glimpse of Bucky.

The first few pictures and videos on the Martinelli’s Instagram story are Kamala continuing to go about her day, exploring the library in a peppy, behind-the-scenes tour of life at the Martinelli. She introduces some of the Martinelli’s other staff—a bookish-looking intern named Miles; Nancy, one of the self-described “tech girls” in charge of the servers; Dolores, the head librarian. Bucky had featured each of them on the Martinelli’s Instagram before, in passing. Never through video—never in their own words. But they were familiar faces.

Then, an unfamiliar face. Someone new. Someone previously unseen— the man behind the
He’s shy, the text on the video reads, followed by a chain of emojis: a few blushing emojis, a grinning emoji, and most puzzling, a monkey covering its eyes and grinning. What the See No Evil monkey had to do with the situation, Steve couldn’t decipher, but of his immediate concerns, that was somewhere near the bottom, given Bucky.

"Say hi to the internet!" Kamala’s voice says, from behind the camera. Bucky glances up briefly, flicking his eyes up towards the camera and smiles, coy, into his long, fluffy-looking hair.

"Hi, internet," he replies, not taking his eyes off his notebook, but smiling, nonetheless. It’s a notably perfect smile, even ducked into his hair. Steve takes particular interest in that.

The video ends, and for a split second, Steve feels his heart ache with disappointment before he realizes he has many, many more parts to the Instagram story before it ends. Hope springs up in his chest again, mixed with scathing self-reflection. Why was he suddenly so fixated on his internet best friend? Why was he so disappointed at the prospect of not seeing the rest of his face, when he’d been content just knowing that Bucky existed for weeks and weeks before? His best friend was real, and he looked to be around Steve’s age. No big deal. No need to be desperate. Steve takes a deep breath, trying to reason with himself, trying to calm down—as the next video loads up.

"Tell them who you are and what you do!" says Kamala, apparently jumping off from where the previous video left off.

Bucky sighs, but he’s still smiling, and the line of his shoulders doesn’t speak to anger or excess tension. He’s clearly not annoyed by her. If anything, he seems charmed—chagrined, in the way big brothers are. He looks up at the camera, his hair swooshing as he does, and he adjusts his glasses—glasses!—before he speaks.

"My name is James, and I do what you’re doing, usually," Bucky says, his voice low and soft, and like nothing Steve has ever heard before. “And—I guess, other librarian stuff. As you can see.”

"Like what?"

“I’m currently writing down interlibrary loan requests,” Bucky replies. His cable-knit sweater looks soft. It reminds Steve of peaches. “Then I’m going to go hunting for them.”

"Is it fun?" Kamala asks from the other side of the camera.

“A delight,” Bucky says, sarcastic enough to be charming but warm enough for that sarcasm to be sweet, before going straight back into his work.

The video ends there. That glimpse of Bucky—those few precious seconds—were short, far too short. Immediately following it is a still photo; another selfie of Kamala, the words, There you have it! Libraries: fun for everyone! in bright white text bracketing her face. Steve is almost ashamed at how disappointed he is—not because he’s seeing Kamala. But because he’s not seeing Bucky. Bucky, with his soft, flowy hair and big glasses and pearly, perfect smile.

Steve sinks deep into his favorite armchair, feeling like he’d been caught in a whirl. He hadn’t felt that emotional about Instagram since he first started posting, all those months ago. Of all the things Steve expected, of all the revelations and surprises he’d learned to reasonably expect from his line of work, he could never have predicted this.

Bucky is real. Steve’s first twenty-first century friend outside of the Avengers, outside of other military men, outside of the walled city that was the social circle that Steve used to restrict himself
to, is real.

But more important than that, more important than anything—Steve’s first twenty-first century civilian friend is cute.

Steve takes a deep breath and taps out a quick message to said twenty-first century friend, trying hard not to charge head-on; trying hard to stop himself from texting Bucky, WHY DIDN’T YOU TELL ME YOU WERE CUTE.

It’s much more of a struggle than Steve could ever admit.

   ME [4:42 PM]: So…I liked your cameo in the Martinelli’s Instagram story today.

Steve’s phone pings quickly. In spite of his best efforts to keep calm, as soon as he hears that chime, he scrambles to check his messages; a Pavlovian response, amplified now by a factor of a thousand. Amplified now, because Bucky is real, and Bucky is cute.

   BUCKY [4:43 PM]: Oh god you saw it
   BUCKY [4:43 PM]: Did I look as awkward as I felt
   ME [4:44 PM]: You were fine!
   BUCKY [4:45 PM]: BUT WAS I
   BUCKY [4:46 PM]: The reason I’m never on the feed is because I get uncomfortable when I know I’m being filmed
   BUCKY [4:46 PM]: And because I’m the most AWKWARD MAN IN THE WORLD

More than anyone, Steve can sympathize with that. Not that he can tell Bucky the extent to it—telling him the panic he felt at the first few USO shows would be a little telling—but he sympathizes.

   ME [4:50 PM]: Nah, I know how you feel. But you were fine. Really.
   BUCKY [4:53 PM]: I don’t believe it, but thank you

Steve sends him a string of thumbs-up emojis and goes about his own work, until his phone pings again. Bucky’s reply is somehow both simple and cryptic, a single image of a green frog doll, lying facedown on the ground and on fire. It shouldn’t be funny, but Steve finds himself laughing anyway, tossing his head back and giggling at the sheer absurdity of it.

   ME [4:58 PM]: Ha!
   ME [5:00 PM]: I mean it, though, Bucky. You were fine.
   BUCKY [5:00 PM]: \:/
   ME [5:00 PM]: Would I lie to you?
   BUCKY [5:01 PM]: You wouldn’t, but I still don’t believe you \:///////
   ME [5:02 PM]: Well, then I guess we’re just going to have to agree to disagree, bud.
   ME [5:03 PM]: Now get back to work. Weren’t you supposed to be getting some books
for some nice people? ;)

BUCKY [5:03 PM]: Yeah I GUESS

BUCKY [5:04 PM]: But hey. thanks again, Grant

BUCKY [5:04 PM]: Even though I still STRONGLY DISAGREE

ME [5:06 PM]: Any time, Buck. Any time.

With a heavy sigh, Steve clicks his phone locked, and tries to stop thinking about Bucky. With his phone burning in his pocket, Steve tries to get back to work.

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Ever since catching a glimpse of Bucky, something changed in Steve.

Maybe he was just becoming more used to life in the digital world. Maybe Steve was finally learning how to trust.

Or maybe it was just his crush. Maybe he just had it bad.

Whatever the reason, Steve knew one thing—he didn’t want to be incognito anymore. He didn’t want to keep hiding his face, his life, his name, from Bucky, his best friend, after Sam. He wanted to go to coffee with Bucky. He wanted real-life closeness. He wanted physical connection.

He wanted to meet.

That urge to meet was a seed, its roots cutting deep, back to the days where their relationship was young. But there it was, now fully bloomed, having sprung up at the first glance of sun—at the first glance of Bucky’s realness—like dandelions springing up from cracks in concrete.

Steve doesn’t last long after that first glimpse of Bucky. He only holds off for so long, the measured self-restraint he’d so-finely cultivated over his ninety-plus years of life buckling under the weight of a want—to reach out, to deepen those ties, to have someone.

It’s two and a half weeks between then when Steve’s ironclad will finally breaks. It’s late March, and April is still impossibly far away; the last ebbs of winter, typical upsets, brought a late cold snap on the city, and even Steve—whose serum-enhanced metabolism has him running hot all year—finds himself shivering at the sudden temperature swing.

ME [12:19 PM]: Made the stupid mistake of going out for my run without my fleece jacket this morning. :(  

BUCKY [12:23 PM]: GRANT <:O

BUCKY [12:23 PM]: Are you alright?

ME [12:25 PM]: Running in nothing but leggings and an Under Armour Henley wasn’t fun, and I don’t get cold easy. I’m making a huge pot of coffee and not leaving the house until April.

BUCKY [12:25 PM]: GOOD

BUCKY [12:25 PM]: What’re your plans? Gonna paint something?
ME [12:26 PM]: Yeah, maybe get something started. Or catch up on reading. Haven’t really done that in a while.

BUCKY [12:26 PM]: Nice :D

ME [12:28 PM]: Yeah, it is.

Steve knows what he’s doing. He realizes it before he even begins putting words down. For a second, he considers going back, walking their conversation back to the safe zone. Back to what was comfortable, back to something that didn’t teeter over the edge of a dangerous new world.

He considers all this, and considers it all quite seriously. But in the end, Steve presses send anyway.

ME [12:37 PM]: I was actually thinking I could start going to the library again. I haven’t been since I was a kid. I’m trying to make more time for myself and I think reading again will do it.

Which wasn’t entirely a lie. Steve was being honest when he said he wanted to get back into reading again. He was just overplaying how dedicated he was to going to libraries again, rather than how much he wanted to connect with a very specific librarian.

BUCKY [12:40 PM]: COME TO THE MARTINELLI

BUCKY [12:41 PM]: We can tear the shit outta the bad pulp novel collection we’ve got and I could show you all the comfiest places to read :O

Bucky’s enthusiasm sparks something warm in Steve’s chest. Good to see the feeling was mutual.

ME [12:47 PM]: Actually…I would love that. Plus, it’d be great to finally meet you. Let’s do it!

BUCKY [12:48 PM]: Holy shit, really?

ME [12:48 PM]: Why not? :)

BUCKY [12:50 PM]: Right yeah okay!!!! Let’s do it!!!!!!!!

ME [12:50 PM]: How does next week sound? Maybe…Wednesday? Around two, three?

BUCKY [12:51 PM]: Next Wednesday at two?

ME [12:53 PM]: If that works for you.

BUCKY [12:54 PM]: Totally!!!!! I’ll be sure to be around the circulation desk. Just lemme know it’s you :)

ME [12:54 PM]: Yeah. Yeah, of course.

BUCKY [12:55 PM]: :D <3

The little heart makes Steve smile, wide and full. Maybe he’s looking for something that isn’t there—maybe he’s looking just deep enough. But for a second, Steve thinks that heart is a sign—one that Bucky’s fondness and his crush on Bucky are one and the same.
BUCKY [1:07 PM]: Shit gotta run

BUCKY [1:07 PM]: Got a gaggle of kindergarteners coming in

BUCKY [1:07 PM]: But I’ll see you on Wednesday!!!! I’m excited to meet you!!!!!!

ME [1:08 PM]: Me too, Bucky. :)

Steve watches as his screen fades to black before pocketing his phone. Anxiety and excitement tingle at his chest and in the tips of his fingers in equal measures. In just a few characters, he’d successfully pushed them both over the edge, plunging face-first into something completely different—into the real world. Into a new frontier. A new reality.

Unknown territory, yes. But if Steve could wake up seventy years into a neon-bright future and survive, he could do this.

Chapter End Notes

things are happening. both in-fic, and in my life. so it goes, you know. i finally found a chance to breathe, so here’s this.

some notes, per usual:

- i had a lot of trouble trying to choose who to make the martinelli's main intern, because i didn't want it to be anyone already in the MCU (such as darcy or jane) and i didn't want it to be anyone who would have, theoretically, a direct connection to someone already in the MCU (such as kate bishop). so, my daughter. there she is.
- there are two lists that i keep for this fic: foods (because i don't wanna repeat anything) and bucky's ridiculous library boy outfits. i'm seriously considering posting on polyvore again.
- the revolution is a teenage girl, i'm telling you.

see you when i see you, everyone. again, catch me on tumblr if you need me.

next up: steve and bucky, in the flesh.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

in like a lion.

Chapter Notes

a word of caution before we start: this chapter deals, somewhat more than previous
chapters, with anxiety and anxiety attacks. the next chapter deals with it significantly
less.

please take precaution with regards to your own state, health, tolerance, and other
factors that might impact your own wellbeing, and act however you feel is best.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steve bounces through that next week in a euphoric haze. For once, the ever-constant lowgrade
anxiety buzzing in the back of his skull ebbs, and Steve drifts, as if in a dream. He's walking on air
—high on the excitement of the prospect of meeting Bucky. Of making their relationship more real.

But as with all highs, coming down is the worst part. Steve Rogers—the Greek tragedy of two
centuries, Icarus with a shield—crashes. Exactly twenty-nine hours and four minutes before he and
Bucky made a date to meet, in the middle of a story about some presumably-extinct Australian
species, Steve is struck—blindsided—by the weighty implications of their meeting; by the gritty
necessities of reality.

As much as going incognito had helped in forming his and Bucky's ever-close, internet-only
relationship, it created a clear problem. Keeping secrets, withholding parts of the truth—it was a
ticking time bomb.

Bucky was going to meet Steve, face-to-face. In the flesh. But more than anything, he was going to
meet, communicate with, and be intimately close to Captain America. The second Steve would
walk into the library, the entire illusion would shatter. Grant would be gone.

And that revelation, that implication—the potential attention and danger and the sheer weight of
that association—was not something that Steve could just dump on Bucky all at once. At best, it
would overwhelm the guy. It would throw into question their tenuously intimate relationship.

At worst, Steve could lose him.

With the full depth of uncertainty and panic and crash weighing down on him, Steve, instead of
quitting, instead of heading home, instead of following his comforting-familiar, tenuously-
constructed routine, keeps running. He doesn’t stop for coffee. He doesn’t stop to eat. He hardly
stops to breathe. He just runs, and runs, and runs, until all of New York—loud and chaotic and
jewel-toned—turns into a sick, fuzzy gray haze. He runs until his heart pulls a ache in his chest,
until he’s half-sure he’s exhausted all the serum. Until he’s convinced he’s run himself small
Steve is far from home by the time his run disintegrates into a walk. He’s somewhere on the Upper West Side, surrounded by million-dollar apartments and designer bags and beautiful people. He doesn’t stick out one bit, but he sure as hell doesn’t feel like he belongs. As much as he doesn’t want to head back—as much as going home would force him to face the immense difficulty of the situation he has drawn himself into, wandering around the Upper West Side wasn’t going to make things better. It was time to be brave, to drum up that Steve Rogers courage, and go home.

Of course, courage is a nebulous thing. And Steve Rogers, in the very fabric of his soul, is a courageous man. Without even a second thought, he can lay his life on the line to save the ones he loves. To save the world he loves.

But Steve Rogers is not a folk hero. No matter what mythology might have sprung up around his name in the years he’d been asleep, Steve Rogers is not the twentieth century's Paul Bunyan. He’s a human being. An enhanced human, but a human, nonetheless. And Steve Rogers, like all human beings, courageous as he may be, cannot be brave all the time, without question. Even he stumbles. Even he needs help. Even he has attacks and runs through half of New York City in a semi-dissociative haze.

Which is why, at 2:03 PM, twenty-three hours and fifty-seven minutes before he’d planned on meeting with Bucky, Steve seeks out help.

At 2:03 PM, twenty-three hours and fifty-seven minutes before he made plans to meet with Bucky, Steve Rogers, bravest person of the twentieth century, calls Sam.

Steve is curled up in his favorite armchair, focusing on the sound of the ringing tone on the other end. He hasn’t changed out of his workout clothes—dark blue Nike leggings and a black Under Armour zip-up—and he pinches his sock-clad toes around the armrest nervously, like a cat flexing its paws.

Just as Steve is about to hang up—just as he’s about to resign himself to a lone life of anxiety—Sam picks up. Just in time.

“Hey Steve. What’s up?” says Sam’s familiar voice. It doesn’t completely drain Steve’s tension, but after hearing Sam’s voice, it ebbs.

Steve takes a deep breath. “Hey, Sam. I—uh. Yeah, I’ve been well. Hey, what are you up to? You busy?”

“A little bit,” Sam answers. It’s his work-way of saying like you wouldn’t fucking believe.

“Oh.” Steve says, feeling deflated again. Of course he would be. It’s the middle of the afternoon on a weekday. Only Steve, with almost a century’s worth of backpay, had the luxury of wasting the first half of his Tuesday.

“You need to talk?” Sam asks.

Steve swallows. “Yeah, I—uh. I need some advice.”

There’s a silence on the end of the other line. Contemplation. Steve counts the seconds in agony. He knows Sam would never be so judgmental. He knows Sam would let him down easy, even if he were to say no. But he feels like he’s in front of a tribunal, anyway. All rise for the trial of Steve Rogers: his crime? Taking up too much of his best friend’s time.
“Gimme like, an hour and a half. And no FaceTime. As popular as you are, people are gonna keep popping in if they see we’re FaceTiming,” Sam says, eventually.

“Thanks, Sam. You’re a lifesaver. Seriously.”


“Talk to you soon.”

Steve tries to make the most out of the hour and a half he is waiting for Sam to call. But it’s tough. He tries to sketch. He tries to make coffee. He even tries to read a little, but nothing manages to hold his attention for more than five minutes. Eventually, he settles on watching television, curled up in that familiar, comfortable recliner again, the very same recliner he pulled himself into the first time he caught a glimpse of Bucky, and he waits for Sam’s call, absentmindedly watching how rubber bands are made as a calming Canadian narrator drones on.

Eventually, Sam calls—ten minutes earlier than Steve expected—and he answers the call before even the second ring.

“Hi,” Steve says, “Thanks again for talking to me.”

“Hey, no problem,” Sam replies. It sounds like there’s something in his mouth. He’s probably on his lunch break. A late one, too. Things must have been non-stop for him to push lunch into the mid-afternoon. There comes that guilt again. “So what’s your emergency?”

“How do you know I have an emergency?”

“You sound like you have an emergency.”

“Oh,” Steve says, almost surprised. Sam knows him well. Maybe he doesn’t need to make new friends, after all, he thinks, for the briefest of moments. Maybe these friends, were enough, distant in location and emotional availability as they are.

But he wants to know Bucky. He wants it.

“So, I uh—I’m doing it. I’m going out and meeting people. Well, meeting a person. But I’m expanding my circle. Just like my therapist and you and Nat and everyone has been telling me to do. But—I just—how am I even supposed to do this? How the hell am I supposed to tell people I’m Captain America?” Steve groans. He puts on his phoniest show voice and practices it—the worst-case scenario. “Hi, I’m Steve, I like baseball, art, and also, being friends with me puts you in the public eye since you’ll be dating-slash-hanging out with-slash workout buddies with the leader of the Avengers. You might even get abducted! Wanna get coffee sometime?”

“Honestly?” Sam says, “That’s pretty much how you have to do it.”

Steve frowns. “Is that how you do it, Sam?”

“I mean—I don’t go up to people in bars anymore, and I don’t just slide up to people and say, Hey, babe. I’m the Falcon, in case you didn’t know. Want me to take you for a ride? And I definitely don’t bring up the abduction thing. Don’t do that, Steve,” Sam says, “But you know, I just tell ’em. Just lay out the reality of being with you. Friends or partners or otherwise.”

“And it goes over well?” Steve asks, “Seriously?”
“I mean, like I said. I don’t do a whole lotta casual sex anymore, or anything. And my experience is gonna be different from yours. But I will say if you’re going in for something built on respect and you make it clear you’re looking for a serious friendship—or relationship, whatever—usually, people are understanding about it.”

“I dunno, Sam—“

“Look, like I said, it’s only my experience, and I can’t say yours is gonna be identical. It’s probably not gonna be, since you’re Captain America. But that’s not necessarily a bad thing. Especially since it sounds like you’re already know this person, or you’re being set up with this person. Just be frank and be honest, and don’t put up with shit if it doesn’t feel right. You should be fine, Steve. You’re already all of those things.”

“Thanks, Sam. Just—thanks,” Steve says, huffing out a breath. “I owe you one.”

“I’ll put it on your tab,” Sam jokes. “Who are you meeting, anyway?”

“Just—someone I’ve been talking to. Someone I’d like to be friends with.”

“Friends?” Sam asks, and Steve can hear the way his eyebrows raise from the other end of the line. “Just friends?”

“Yeah. Friends. I mean it,” Steve says. Friends where one thought the other was really, really cute, and where one would like nothing more than to smell the other’s hair. But friends, nonetheless. Steve conveniently forgets to tell Sam this.

“Where’d you meet this almost-friend?”

“Uh—you know, just—common interests. That—uh. That sort of thing.”

“Hmm. Yeah. Okay,” Sam says, clearly suspicious of Steve’s answer.

They sit in silence for a few seconds without either speaking or hanging up.

“So. Uh,” Steve says, awkwardly cutting that silence. “How’s work?”

“Ugh,” Sam groans, “Don’t get me started.”

“Rough?”

“Rough doesn’t begin to cover it. They should really rename D.C. Bureaucratic Asshole City, at this rate. Today made mission paperwork look like a sunny vacation in Miami,” Sam says, almost groaning.

“Want me to call you out on Avengers duty for a weekend?” Steve asks. He’s joking about it, but if Sam said yes, he would do it. Right then and there, he would do it. He has the power to—just one of the perks of being team leader. Not that he ever does it, but it’s a good option.

“Nah, this stuff has to get done,” Sam says, “But thanks. Maybe next month.”

“Well, if you need help or anything, lemme know. It’s the least I could do.”

“Thanks, Steve. Seriously.”

“No, Sam. Thank you.”
Another silence. Another comfortable lull.

Sam breaks the silence this time. “Well, I’ve gotta go. I need to finish up a few things before I can leave. But Steve?”

“Yeah?”

“Good luck.”

Steve smiles. “Thanks, Sam.”

As he ends their call and clicks his phone off, Steve—twenty-one hours and fifty-three minutes away from his meeting with Bucky—can only one thing:

_I sure as hell need it._

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Steve Rogers stands in front of the Martinelli Public Library at one-fifteen. Exactly forty-five minutes from their scheduled meet-up. Exactly forty-five minutes and fifteen feet away from an excited, expectant Bucky.

The library is small, tucked between Avengers Park and a row of classic Brooklyn brownstones, right at the end of the street. Small as it may be, it's a nice, classic prewar building—red brick, lots of windows, and because of its proximity to the park, just the right amount of crawling ivy. It's picturesque. It almost looks like coming home. Steve can see why Bucky loves working there so much. He would work here too, maybe, in another life.

But the welcoming exterior of the Martinelli is only a small comfort for Steve, still feeling a swirling mix of anxiety and anticipation in his gut. Courage is a nebulous thing, indeed, and standing outside the Martinelli, standing at the threshold between keeping things safe and familiar and pushing into the unknown, Steve was starting to question whether he was qualified to be the Avengers’ _brave leader_, after all.

"You can do this,” Steve says to himself, trying to push the loop of _Bucky will see you and he will leave you because your entire relationship is built on half-lies_ out of mind. “You can do this. You can _do this._"

With a deep breath, Steve pushes himself forward, willing his body to move. Steve walks on, his hands still tingling with anxiety, but moving forward, still. He feels young and small and fragile again. Not that it never stopped him from doing difficult things before.

The library is quiet when he enters, and it almost feels like he’s intruding, but there’s an abundance of natural light that makes the almost-silent library seem less crypt-like; less like some sort of cathedral to reading, and more comfortable. Almost homey. It’s even set up like someone’s home, with eclectic couches and worn reading tables and a colorful playhouse set up in the children’s area. Being in the Martinelli brings Steve back to a time when he was young, when he first visited a library, all those decades ago; to yellowed hardback books and spending afternoons reading, to weeks spent in bed, reading stories of heroes from centuries long since passed.

Steve smiles to himself, the buzz fading, if only slightly. Entering the Martinelli feels like he’d been invited into someone’s house. Like he’d been invited over for dinner, while his mother was at work. Suddenly, Steve finds himself aching for a time he was smaller and sharper and didn't have to worry about dodging paparazzi and watching for danger whenever he went places. Maybe then this would have been easier, if he'd come with less baggage attached, and fewer difficult
introductions to do.

He scans the mostly-empty library quickly like it's a battlefield; like it's a mission—just another way to reconceptualize this task, this moment, to make it easier to tackle. It's not long before Steve catches a glimpse of Bucky sitting at the circulation desk, lit up by the early afternoon light filtering in from the windows in thick, hazy beams. He's resting his chin on his left hand and he's got what looks to be a half-eaten granola bar in the right. His head is tipped just slightly; just so—in deep contemplation of whatever book he's engrossed in. Taking the scene in from a distance, from a position as a passive, neutral observer, is like looking at art. It's like standing in the Met and being the only person in the Baroque gallery. It’s like walking in on Caravaggio in his studio, like unearthing a lost Klimt.

There goes the battlefield.

With a deep breath, Steve walks slow and steady to the circulation desk, shoulders thrown back and head high, exuding the confidence of a man marching his troops to war. Focusing, anxiety and apprehension be damned, on his mission. He walks with intent, his eyes laser-focusing on Bucky—who, for his part, seems buried in something. He’s just about to introduce himself, just about to reveal himself as Bucky’s internet friend, when Bucky jerks his head up, looking at Steve.

"Can I help you?" Bucky asks, not unkindly, closing his book—a thick ordering catalog of children’s books, it looks like—softly.

When Steve gets a good look at Bucky, an actual, straightforward look at him, suddenly, all that confidence, all that Captain America stage-swagger, is gone. Steve takes one look at Bucky and suddenly he's fourteen to the day and tripping over his own thoughts, completely incapable of any sort of coherency.

Not that it's entirely his fault. Bucky is gorgeous. It's like a kick to the gut when they make eye contact.

His hair is tied back in a messy little bun, loose wisps of hair framing his face. There’s a vaguely delicate, refined look about his features, a sharpness to his bone structure that hints to the fact that maybe he could find work as the face for some international designer, if he'd cleaned up a little. It's something that’s somehow made so much more endearing by the thick, horn-rimmed glasses perched low on the bridge of Bucky's nose. He's got a jawline that could cut glass, a dimple in his chin, and what must be the bluest eyes Steve's ever seen.

The blurry pictures and half-focused videos of him on Instagram really don't do him justice. Not at all.

"Uh—" Steve starts, fully aware he's already floundering. "Hi."

Bucky furrows his eyebrows for a second, tilting his head just so, a question half-formed as he looks over Steve. But just as he is about to ask, something dawns on him. He shifts entirely, seeming to put the pieces together. Realization is completely evident on his face, and his mouth—perfect, beautiful, kissable mouth—parts, if just slightly.

"Captain Rogers," he says, and it’s not exactly what Steve is expecting.

For all the panicking that he did over Bucky realizing that Grant and Steve and Captain America were the same person, Steve slowly realized that never would have happened without self-disclosure. He never told Bucky what he was going to wear. He never told Bucky what to look out for. The only time that he posted anything close to a picture of himself was a faceless self-portrait
of a body that was no longer his own. Of course Bucky wouldn't expect that Steve would be there for him.

When people look at Steve, they see Captain America. Not Steve, not Steven, and sure as hell not whoever Grant would be.

Sharp as he was, Steve's anxiety got the better of him. He overthought it; played into a worst-case scenario that simply would not happen. There was no way Bucky would ever come close to putting two and two together. Not unless Steve told him first. The panic of the previous day would not be the sudden horror that Steve expected. No, that would come later. That would come when Steve chose to play his hand. Revealing who he was—the actual act of meeting a friend—it wouldn’t be immediate. It wouldn’t be sudden. Whenever it would happen, it was up to Steve. It would be up to Steve to come forward, to come clean. That knowledge is somehow both complete relief and completely devastating.

"I'm—uh—I'm assuming you're here because you want something to read," Bucky says, pulling Steve away from his runaway thoughts. It's surprisingly coherent as far as civilian encounters go. He's smiling softly; it makes Steve melt.

"Uh—something like that," Steve replies, trying hard not to blush, either out of adoration or out of sheer embarrassment.

Bucky nods. "You need—suggestions? Or anything?"

"That would—" Steve starts, and he can feel himself smiling, too. "That would be nice, yeah."

Bucky nods and leans back in his chair to look at someone at the other side of the library. Steve takes that as an opportunity to admire the flamingo-print button-up Bucky is wearing underneath a comfortable-looking blue cardigan. It’s a fun shirt, he thinks, and not at all surprising, considering Bucky's Instagram.

Thinking about Instagram shakes Steve out of his charmed haze. He should tell Bucky now that there’s a natural lull. He shouldn’t string him on, pretending he’s a stranger.

It should have been easy. But the words just aren’t coming.

"Hey, Dolores, could you take the circulation desk for me?" Bucky calls out, his voice low, but still carrying through the library, "And if someone comes asking for me, just tell 'em I'm with someone. Tell them to hang out near the offices, and I'll be there in a second."

"Sure thing," Dolores replies. “I’ll tell your friend to wait for you while you’re taking care of Captain Rogers.”

Steve opens his mouth to say something, to tell Bucky—The person you’re waiting for is me, the person you’re wanting to see is right here—but the words die a silent death in his throat. Steve Rogers, most courageous man of the twentieth century: he can jump out of airplanes without parachutes, he can even resign himself to death, but he can’t even open his mouth to introduce himself to his best friend. He can’t even reveal his lie.

It was awful. It was embarrassing. He had to get some of that warbird courage back.

"Thanks! You're the best," Bucky calls out with a grin, pearly white and toothy and perfect. It's like watching the sun come up. Steve feels something soft and warm unfolding in his heart for the first time since he'd sat beside Peggy. It creates a tension in his chest, two opposing strings, tugging at his heart. Attention and guilt. Puppy love and shame. Courage and anxiety. All because of one
handsome librarian and his stupid-perfect smile and the prospect of losing him when he learns he’d been deceived.

Steve is in deep.

“So,” Bucky says, standing from his seat at the desk, and Steve is blindsided again. Bucky is tall, almost as tall as Steve. In a few quick strides, he’s by Steve’s side. They’re not close enough to be touching. But they’re close enough.

*He is in so deep.*

Bucky smiles at him again, and *God,* can Steve watch that smile forever. "Where do you want to start?"

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As it turns out, Bucky is really good at his job.

Steve didn’t come in with a contingency plan. He barely came in with an A-Plan, other than *I just need to talk to him in the real world, I just want to make our relationship more than just online,* and that was a complete non-starter. But by the time that they circled back to the circulation desk, Steve had an armful of books on recommendation from Bucky, and he was genuinely excited to start all of them.

It didn’t hurt that getting those books meant he got to follow Bucky around for a good fifteen minutes. Nor did the fact that they were a solid guarantee that Steve would see him again.

“That should get you started,” Bucky says, settling back into his chair behind the circulation desk. “It’s a good cross-section of twenty-first century lit, nonfiction and fiction and everything in between. Or at least, it should be good enough for you to figure out what you like and what you don’t like.”

“Thank you,” Steve says, “Really.”

“Hey, it’s no problem. Just one more thing before I let you go,” Bucky says, and for a second, for the smallest, tiniest second, Steve thinks Bucky realizes who Steve is—not Captain America, living legend, but Steve, Grant, the guy Bucky has been talking to for the last few months. His friend.

For the briefest second, Steve thinks, he won’t have to start their offline relationship by admitting he’d withheld the truth. Maybe, Steve thought, the onus wouldn’t be on him.

“Yeah?” Steve asks, his voice noncommittal—trying not to get his hopes up.

“Gotta get you set up with a library card,” Bucky says, and though he knew it was unlikely, though he knew that the chance for Bucky to put two and two together were beyond slim, Steve feels his heart sink.

“Oh,” he says, “Right. Yeah, yeah. Let’s do that.”

Bucky taps away on his computer, oblivious to Steve’s on-and-off emotional struggle. “Do you have an e-mail you’re comfortable giving me?”

“Uh, yeah, it’s, uh—srogers@shield.gov.”
“That’s a first. Guess you can’t use Yahoo,” Bucky jokes. “What about your phone number? Just in case we end up doing an interlibrary loan for you, or something.”

And there it was, another chance to admit it to Bucky—to tell him who he was. Another chance to lay it all on the line. Steve considers it—he considers giving Bucky his private cell number, and seeing if he puts two and two together. Just as the area code is about to slip out of his mouth, Bucky pushes the conversation on.

“We can skip that one, if you can’t, or if you don’t want to share,” Bucky says quickly, just the slightest hint of panic at the edge of that professionalism. Too much time has passed in silence, and Steve’s hesitation over coming clean, must have come across as hesitation for something else. “Now, that just leaves us with one last formality—I’m gonna need your birth date. Could you confirm that for me?”

“Yeah,” Steve says, with a little smile, “July fourth, nineteen-eighteen.

“So, Captain Steve Rogers, born July fourth, nineteen-eighteen, can be contacted at srogers@shield.gov, all that sound right?”

“Yeah, yeah, that all sounds right.”

“Well, Captain Rogers,” Bucky says, swiping a red and blue plastic card through a magnetic strip reader. His computer lets out a chipper beep, and he pivots in his chair, holding out the card to Steve, “You’re officially a card-carrying patron of the Martinelli Public Library. Can I scan your first batch of books?”

“Yeah, of course,” Steve says, sliding the books over to Bucky’s side of the counter. As he takes them, scanning them one-by-one in a quick, steady rhythm, Steve takes in the shining silver metal of Bucky’s left hand—not for the first time that day, but for the first time at depth. As soon as he notices, Steve averts his gaze, quick as he could; almost quick enough to get dizzy. He might have been a coward, but he wasn’t going to be rude, too.

“Alright,” Bucky says, sliding the small tower of books back to Steve. They wobble precariously, almost ominously. “That should be it. These’ll be due in exactly a month.”

“No stamps, huh,” Steve says, offhand, “I dunno if an old guy like me can remember to return it on time, without that nice little card in the back.”

“You’re funny,” Bucky says, and he doesn’t laugh, but he’s smiling, anyway.

*God*, is it a good smile. Steve stands there, watching Bucky, watching the way the light hits him. It lasts maybe for a moment. Maybe for a blink. Maybe for an eternity. He thinks about telling Bucky everything right then and there, spilling his lies and insecurities right there, leaving nothing back, like a broken dam. Like a fresh wound.

“Well—uh. Thanks for stopping by. Was a pleasure meeting you,” Bucky says, breaking that warm, dreamy haze. Steve can tell he’s starstruck, but having met many, many starstruck people, he can tell Bucky is at least genuine. “So—uh. I guess we’ll see you soon?”

“Yeah,” Steve says, his heart thrumming in his chest—more so in anticipation than anxiety, if only by halves. “Yeah. You—you will.”

Bucky smiles. Just one more time before Steve heads out the door, a gift better than all the books in all the world’s libraries combined. Just one more perfect moment of stillness before he’s back in the world, and the white noise of the city hits him again at full force.
As if on cue, the guilt of not telling Bucky seeps back into Steve’s stomach, more intense the further he got from the library. The second he rounds the corner, Steve’s phone buzzes loudly in his pocket, damn-near intense enough to burn him. He doesn't need to look at the message to know who it is. He doesn't need to look at his inbox to know what it says. Steve unlocks his phone anyway.

**BUCKY [2:13 PM]: YOU WON'T BELIEVE WHO JUST SHOWED UP TO THE LIBRARY.**

"I have an idea I will," Steve says to himself, sarcastically. Self-depreciatingly. Of course, he doesn't articulate that. Not to Bucky.

**ME [2:15 PM]: Yeah?**

Bucky's response is almost instantaneous.

**BUCKY [2:15 PM]: IT WAS CAPTAIN AMERICA**

**BUCKY [2:15 PM]: He wasn't in the uniform and I definitely think he wanted to stay incognito so I didn’t ask him for a picture or anything**

**BUCKY [2:16 PM]: BUT IT WAS DEFINITELY CAPTAIN AMERICA! I TALKED TO CAPTAIN AMERICA!!!!!**

A string of emojis follows; a few American flags, a little grinning face, a variety of red hearts. Steve is simultaneously charmed and tremendously guilty. It was becoming an increasingly-common feeling.

**BUCKY [2:19 PM]: God, I hope he liked me. I hope I didn't make a total idiot of myself**

Of course, he didn't, Steve thinks. He couldn't have been more infatuated with Bucky if Bucky had actively tried.

**ME [2:20 PM]: I'm sure he liked you. You're a nice guy.**

He adds a little smiley emoji. It feels like a joke.

**BUCKY [2:22 PM]: I wish you could've seen him. Should've asked him to stay to meet you, but he seemed in a rush. Avenger business, I guess**

**BUCKY [2:23 PM]: Kamala is going to be so excited when I tell her**

**BUCKY [2:23 PM]: I should text her right now and tell her**

**BUCKY [2:25 PM]: Oh wait, she’s probably in class right now or something**

**BUCKY [2:25 PM]: Damnit. Guess I’ll just wait until the next time she comes in since she’s doing “important” things like “education” and “setting up a bright future for herself” :P**

Steve suddenly feels sick, struck by yet another wave of guilt at being too chickenshit to actually **talk** to Bucky. But there was no way he was going to go back in, less than fifteen minutes after he’d left, and confess he’d been lying to him the entire time. Instead, Steve takes time to retreat—to regroup and figure out a new strategy. As he texts Bucky back, Steve taps out his response quickly,
not even taking the time to reread it before pressing send.

ME [2:32 PM]: Fuck. That reminds me. I actually don't think I'll be able to make it in today.

With a loud groan, Steve rests his head against the building, wondering how difficult it would be, given the serum, to slump onto the sidewalk and die. Bucky was gushing about how much of a hero he was. But Steve was starting to doubt if he even deserved that title. He couldn't even admit to Bucky that he'd been there to see him. He couldn't even admit to Bucky that he was just in.

He was a coward. For the first time in his life, Steve could say that this was the fight he backed down from. That all it took was a pretty boy to make him turn from the First Avenger to a coward.

Steve puts his phone away and begins the short walk back to the subway station. He feels the buzz of Bucky's reply in his pocket, but he can't bear to look at it. Not immediately. He knows how disappointed Bucky will be; he knows, generally, what the reply will say. But he just can't look at it—not with the guilt of knowing that he did show, and he lied about it, all so he could make a hasty retreat. Steve gets on his train without looking at his phone. He spends the bulk of his trip building himself up enough to read Bucky's reply—and when he finally reads it, he can hardly say he's surprised.

BUCKY [2:33 PM]: Oh. Bummer :( 

BUCKY [2:34 PM]: Is everything okay?

BUCKY [2:57 PM]: Hey. Let me know if everything is okay, alright? I'm here for you, man

As if the guilt couldn't get any worse, as if he couldn't just disappoint him, Steve had to go and worry the guy. He taps out a message of reassurance quickly. He at least had to do some damage control. Whatever that meant, given the circumstances.

ME [3:23 PM]: Everything's good. Just had a bunch of stuff come up at once.

He presses send and pockets his phone. His stop is coming up, anyway. As soon as the carriage doors open, he leaves the station in a rush, hoping to get home as soon as he can, trying to ignore the buzz in his pocket. Steve manages about three blocks before he checks his phone again.

BUCKY [3:30 PM]: Oh okay. Good

BUCKY [3:33 PM]: Just let me know if you need me, okay? I mean it, I'm here for you

God, what a good guy. Steve didn’t deserve him.

ME [3:55 PM]: Yeah. Yeah, of course. Thanks for caring about me, Bucky. I don’t know what I would do without you. :)

ME [3:56 PM]: Now get back to work, don't want you getting in trouble because of me.

BUCKY [4:00 PM]: It's DEAD, Grant. No one wants to be in the library when it's a day like this. Not even I wanna be in the library on a day like this. And I WORK HERE

BUCKY [4:00 PM]: Besides, how am I supposed to go on with the rest of my day after I’d met CAPTAIN AMERICA?? Not possible. I am no longer in my body right now.
They should just let me go home now because this is the high of my life

Steve feels warmth creeping at his cheeks, quickly spreading into a full-body blush.

ME [4:01 PM]: I think Captain America would want you to go back to work. :P

BUCKY [4:06 PM]: Yeah, FINE. I guess you’re right. I don’t like it, but I GUESS you’re right

Bucky’s text is followed by a line of little laughing monkey emojis. The internet equivalent of a playful punch in the arm, or that fantastic grin of his. Steve, in spite of his guilt, feels himself grinning too, ear-to-ear.

BUCKY [4:11 PM]: Talk to you later, though?

ME [3:11 PM]: Always. :)

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As much as he would rather crawl into bed or onto his couch and sleep, Steve decides it’s time to push on. In spite of a nagging urge in the back of his mind to curl into himself, Steve decides, it’s time to regroup. It's time to do the bravest thing one could do: self-inspect. Steve Rogers, in spite of how much he hated himself for his own fears, decided it was time for contemplation.

With his head still spinning and his heart still thrumming, Steve puts on his favorite record, pulls out his charcoals, and tries to sketch. He begins to block out shapes—not of any particular face or any particular object—just shapes for the sake of shapes. Something to help him clear his head. Something to help him breathe.

As he sketches—contouring nebulous blobs and fractured grids—Steve thinks back to Sam’s advice the day before, the advice he’d so-easily forgotten, no matter how fresh it was.

If he wanted Bucky in his life—and he wanted Bucky in his life, more so after meeting him in the real world—he had to be frank. He had to be honest. He had to be open.

More than anything, he had to speak to Bucky.

But speaking to Bucky—revealing the truth, revealing that their entire friendship was built off half-lies and obscured truths—it was a massive breach. Steve, who had been lied to before, Steve, who had fallen prey to the manipulation of his trust—of all people, knew that. Steve, who laid his life on the line to take down Hydra-in-S.H.I.E.L.D., knew that. He knew that there was a very real possibility that Bucky would leave him, and with good reason. There was a very real possibility that Bucky would leave their conversation and never come back. And Steve—still fragile as bird bones, even after the serum—wasn’t sure if he could bear that conversation face-to-face, in the flesh.

Steve chews his lower lip, a middle-ground solution suddenly clear. Maybe he had to stop rushing headfirst into things. He didn’t need to fall face-forward into knowing Bucky; he could keep that physical distance but still officially meet him. All he had to do was call Bucky. All he had to do was open up FaceTime.

It was easy enough. He could introduce himself to Bucky, he could reveal his truth to him, without having to risk being so close, only to be rejected. He could keep that distance and negotiate their relationship without his body clamping up and betraying his intentions. They could establish their relationship, the risks, and their hopes—and then they could take it into the real world, afterward.
If there was going to be an afterward.

All Steve had to do was gather up a little bit of courage. All he had to do was move forward.

Steve glances out his window. It’s just past sundown. The sky is tinged a deep maroon, slowly fading into blue-black as the minutes tick on. Steve dusts his charcoal-stained fingers on his pants, a bad habit of his that even his brief time in art school couldn’t break. He couldn’t not speak to Bucky, especially now that he’s a card-carrying member of the Martinelli Public Library.

Especially now that he found a good middle-ground solution.

It was still an hour before the Martinelli closed. Bucky wouldn’t be free for a while. Steve, to keep himself from changing his mind yet again, begins to make himself dinner. That, at least, would be a task, a mission, something to focus on. A short-term goal, before he made the plunge. Dinner, for a supersoldier, would take long enough to prepare, anyway.

He falls into a rhythm. Rinse, chop, and roast vegetables. Slice, season, and sear steaks, repeat. It’s enough to feed a small battalion, or a single supersoldier. Steve might not necessarily the best at making it—he sure won’t be a chef any time soon—but steak and vegetables is one of the few things he knows how to cook. Steak and vegetables, and asparagus tarts, and cabbage soup, and apple cake. The latter two, thanks to his mother. The former two, thanks to Natasha and a weekend spent binge-watching Food Network.

By the time Steve finishes cooking, the city has fully embraced the night. As he eats, Steve can see people from the neighborhood in their own regular routines—young people heading to trendy, local bars, professionals coming home, the odd elder couple going dancing. Maybe Bucky is among them, somewhere in Brooklyn. Maybe he’s riding the subway home from work, flipping through that thick librarian’s catalog again. Steve glances at the clock—almost ten, almost two hours after the Martinelli closes—and taps out a message. His moment of faith—or something approximating it.

ME [9:51 PM]: You home?

Steve steadies himself, taking in a deep breath, pacing from his bedroom, to the kitchen, and back again. He knows this is an opportunity to back off from this friendship, to keep it at arm's length, to keep the wall of internet anonymity standing strong. He knows, if he wanted, he could double back. But he also has the need to be open and honest to Bucky, especially after running into him and not saying a thing. It isn't even a question as to whether he should or not. He will. He has his response typed up and ready to go before Bucky even replies.

BUCKY [10:00 PM]: Just got in. What's up?

ME: [10:01 PM]: You got FaceTime?

Steve watches the screen intently as Bucky types up a response. He feels that familiar tension welling up in his hands again, pooling in his chest, in his throat. He might fight aliens and killer robots and destroy fascist sleeper cells regularly, but those three dots floating in that neutral gray chat bubble are somehow the most terrifying thing Steve has ever seen.

To add insult to anxiety, Bucky's response is almost comically short when it comes.

BUCKY [10:05 PM]: I do

BUCKY [10:05 PM]: Why?
BUCKY [10:06 PM]: You okay?

Steve sighs, and the words come to him slow. Painfully slow. And when he types, he is careful and deliberate, taking time to press only all the right keys. Even still, when he finishes, when Steve rereads his text to Bucky—his Sunday confessional from a wholly different kind of screen—he almost can't bring himself to press send.

ME [10:11 PM]: Yeah. I'm okay....Look, I have something to say. I actually did make it up to the library today. But I didn't introduce myself to you. And I'm really sorry I didn't. I feel AWFUL about it. But...I have some things I need to tell you, some things I think we should get out of the way ahead of time. I think it's best we do it face-to-face. Just over FaceTime...Would that be okay?

He can't take it. Steve throws his phone onto his bed, pacing nervously around his room as he waits for Bucky's response. He thinks of what might come next, what Bucky might say. Any number of scenarios could play out. Bucky might say yes. Given that, he might recognize Steve as Captain America and be upset. Rightfully so. He might feel betrayed and want to cut things off entirely—and that would be the last thing Steve wants to happen, but not something out of the picture entirely. He might say no. They might end up back at square one. Steve doesn't know if that would be better or worse.

Bucky, Steve thinks, his heart all but beating out of his chest, might not reply at all.

Steve is jerked out of this train of thought, pulled out of strategizing for the worst-case scenarios, when his phone chimes on his bed, the happy pinging almost mocking in its lightness.

BUCKY [10:26 PM]: Yeah. That would be okay.

Steve takes a deep breath and types out one last response, one last message as Grant, before plunging headfirst into digital uncertainty.

ME [10:27 PM]: Okay. Just give me a second to get ready.

Steve settles down to FaceTime with Bucky, the ringing of the connection tone painfully slow. Absentmindedly, Steve begins bouncing his leg and drumming his fingers against his desk. The anticipation is almost too much. It feels like his cells are vibrating out of his body. Suddenly, that dull, ominous connection tone cuts out. Steve, too, stops, his jittery leg and impatient hand going still. The screen fades—from Bucky's profile picture, to black, and finally, to their connection—and Steve heaves out a deep breath.

Even over their connection, even after a day of work, even looking frustrated and upset and ready to tear Steve a new one, Bucky is still so, so handsome. All Steve can do is smile.

"Hi," Steve says, as Bucky's lips part open slowly. His demeanor shifts entirely, disappointment giving way to confusion, clear as day on his face. "It's me."

Chapter End Notes

hey everyone, still alive. barely, but still alive. i understand that it's been a while since i've updated. things in my life got pretty rough - i made a post about it on my tumblr, if you're interested in the details of that. rest assured, i'm still finishing this fic. if i will
abandon this work - which i don't plan on doing - i will make a post about it. but i have big plans for this fic, just understand that my life is in an extremely unstable place right now.

on that note, a few things about this chapter:

- i’ve been yelling for a million years about this amazing bucky that comedicdrama (here is their tumblr) made for this fic, during the beefy bucky birthday exchange. i’m seriously so obsessed with it. give them attention and love and everything because holy shit, every time i look at this i get butterflies. this bucky is so #dreamboy ♥♥♥
- also: check out this beautiful, soft bucky having some time to himself in avengers park by the always-amazing phoenixgryphon. i bet he's thinking of his dream boy, captain america.
- soundtrack for writing this chapter is tacocat, specifically, "spring break up." don't think on it too much. seriously.
- here is the npr story that steve is listening to. again, don't think on it too much.)
- and here is the bit of how it's made that steve was watching while waiting for sam's call. it's a great show to watch when you have anxiety. or when you need something to fall asleep to. in case you need either resource.
- i almost wrote in steve forgetting his metrocard, but i decided it was unrealistic for any reasonable new yorker to have their wallet but forget their metrocard. also, this probably won't come up in the fic, but in the same style of other limited-edition metrocards, i’m 100% sure there are avengers metrocards out there in the world. steve didn't get any of them, but tony absolutely did. clint, too, but he lost it. poor guy.
- finally, in case you're under any sort of impression that james "bucky" barnes, hot librarian extraordinaire, has any sort of reasonable fashion sense, the flamingo shirt he's wearing is basically a tackier version of this shirt from the marc jacobs spring 2015 collection. imagine this flamingo shirt except cheaper, under a cardigan like this asos cardigan, and you've got the bucky barnes #lookbook. hot librarian couture. etc.

i've gotta meet puppies. see you next time, everyone.
"What. The fuck."

Bucky stares at Steve, sharp-eyed and unblinking; intense on the screen as he would be in the flesh. He’s close—painfully close, just on the other end of that screen—but so distant, so unreachable, so untouchable, at the same time. He could be a short subway ride away. He could be within walking distance. He could very well be next door. Or he could be far-off, lost somewhere in the vast expanse of their shared city.

Emotionally, Bucky is just as indiscernible. Despite his sharp, colorful language, his expression is just on the edge of neutral. Clearly confused, but otherwise, entirely unreadable. It makes Steve’s heart feel like a wild thing, desperate and afraid and thrashing against his ribcage, bound to break out of his chest. But, rabbit-hearted and nebulously brave, Steve pushes on.

"I—uh. I took a look at some of the books you recommended earlier,” he says, feeling a blush creep onto his face. It’s a minor effort, staying calm. “They seem really good. You have—you have really good taste.”

He holds up one of the books Bucky recommended, a thin non-fiction thing about space travel, meant to act as the companion to another, fictional book about Mars. Steve hasn’t really started on it. He’s barely opened the thing, but it does look interesting. Not that Steve would lie to Bucky about that. He’d done more than his fair share of lying to the guy already. It was time to move forward, this time, with nothing but the truth.

“Holy shit,” Bucky says, his voice quiet and eyes laser-focused on the book in Steve’s hand. Proof of reality. Proof of Steve’s lies. His voice isn’t deadpan. It’s not angry. But it’s not excited, either. The way Bucky speaks isn’t filled with joy, but it’s filled with something. Maybe everything. Maybe that’s why he was so hard to parse—maybe he was just as unsure of how he felt as Steve was. “Holy shit.”

Steve ducks his head bashfully, or painfully, or nervously. The churning sea of emotions in his gut really make it hard to tell if he’s flattered or if he’s hiding his face in fear of what comes next.

"So. Yeah, um. This is me. Grant. Well. Steve. I actually prefer Steve. It’s uh. Nice to meet."

Bucky stares wide-eyed at the screen for a few seconds, not saying anything. Steve feels his pulse pick up, his heartbeat thrumming nervously, anxiety telegraphing into his wrists. He wants to bounce his leg, to drum on his desk, to do something physical to channel the anxiety out of him. He wants to wear himself out. He wants to do something to fill that void, to release all the pent-up energy generated by Bucky’s weighty silence. After about twenty seconds of quiet tension, he can’t take it anymore. "Look, I just—I’m sorry, Bucky, I—"
“You’re Captain America.”

Steve blinks. The way Bucky says it—the way he breaks his own silence—doesn’t seem mad, but it doesn’t seem entirely forgiving, either. “Yeah, I mean—sometimes. That’s my call sign. But really, I prefer Steve.”

“My internet friend is Captain America. I’ve been talking to Captain America this entire time,” Bucky says, all but echoing himself. “I was waiting for you. I saw you. But I didn’t realize you were you. So I helped you out. I helped you. I was just barely keeping cool trying to impress you, Captain America, and when you left, I turned around and totally gushed about you. To you.”

Steve cringes. “Look, I didn’t mean to—I wanted to—I’m. I’m not proud of that.”

“God,” Bucky groans, and here it comes, Steve thinks—the end of the only semi-normal friendship he’d ever had. He prepares for the death blow, for Bucky’s mercy kill. *Here lies the friendship of Steven Grant Rogers and James Barnes. It lived a short, wonderful life, and died a slow, painful death. It leaves behind, for Steve: all his lies, and one broken heart.*

“Bucky, I—I’m really sorry about doing that. I am. I—I was just—you’re just so—“

"My dad had pictures of you in the study the entire time I was growing up. He made sure we knew all about you,” Bucky says suddenly, interrupting Steve’s sputtering, flailing attempts to explain himself. Steve blinks, completely unprepared for that. He doesn’t have a response to that. How could anyone respond to that? At least Bucky continues speaking, saving him the embarrassment of trying to turn that into something he can respond to.

“There are pictures of me, dressed up as you, from ages three to eleven. I had a poster of you in my bedroom. I was struggling to be professional with you. And then when you left, I freaked out like a teenager about you. To you. Oh my God.”

Bucky, seemingly consumed by his own anxieties, groans, low. He buries his face into his hands, his hair going all messy. It really doesn’t make sense to Steve—he expected something more explosive, something more of a clear break-up. It’s probably one of the last things Steve could have predicted Bucky doing.

It’s also probably one of the cutest things Steve has ever seen.

“I—” Steve starts, “I’m sorry?”

Bucky peeks up at Steve out from behind his hands. Steve flushes. Maybe that was the wrong kind of response. Maybe he’s invited the final goodbyes into this conversation. Maybe he should have just stayed quiet.

Too late now.

“No, no, I mean—I really am sorry. I just—I didn’t—I didn’t think we would get to where we are, and—I—yeah. I should have told you who I was a lot earlier. I should have told you that I’m Grant and Grant is me. That was—that was really, really shitty of me,” Steve says, looking Bucky straight in the face. “But I wanna make it better. I still want you in my life. If you’ll have me. If you’re willing to take that risk.”

Silence. Stillness. Those sharp, stunning blue eyes, staring straight back at him. Like a one-man firing squad.

Steve continues.
“I mean. It’s not a walk in the park being friends with an Avenger. There is a risk. There’s the public spotlight. There’s the danger. And I can’t tell you that I know how it’ll play out. I really—I haven’t had any friends outside of you, and a couple guys my age—you know. My real age. And I guess, too, some of the other Avengers, but even then, most of ’em are work friends, and I’m not nearly as close to them as I am you—and I—"

He stops, sharp and sudden, as realization dawns on him, going silent the second he realizes he’s rambling. Worse, rambling and oversharing. It’s an anxious habit—something that the serum and stage weren’t able to train out of him. With a deep breath, he continues on, finding his focus again. This isn’t about him. Not entirely. This is about Bucky. This video call—this FaceTime session—is not for his own sake. It’s for Bucky.

Steve, above all, remembers to reiterate that.

“Shit. You’re pretty much my best friend, Buck,” he says, trying not to go pink as he says it. For the first time since they started, he finds himself compelled to look away; to break that contact, if just for a second. “I wanna let you know that. I wanna let you know me. Not just the guy I am on Instagram, but all of me. But I’m not gonna subject you to something you didn’t sign up for. That’s—that’s all I wanted to say. Other than, you know. I’m sorry. For everything. I—I didn’t wanna hurt you.”

Bucky looks up, shaking his hair out of his face. There’s something in the way that he looks at Steve, from across the screen, all endearing and tumultuous and sharp, all at the same time, that Steve can’t read. On the internet, over texts, Bucky was easy. He was excitable, understandable. Steve had gotten used to the contours of their relationship.

But in person, he’s something else entirely. His fun, strange, friendly personality translates, but with slight differences and added surprises. Bucky, in the flesh, is a puzzle box, a labyrinth, a mystery wrapped in big, comfy sweaters. It’s like starting all over again; like finding him, once more, for the first time.

And Steve is up for the challenge, if only Bucky will have him.

“Okay,” Bucky says, eventually, taking a deep breath. Deep as a chasm. Like unshouldering a very, very heavy weight.

He doesn’t continue. Not immediately. Steve doesn’t make a sound. It’s clear that Bucky is building up to what he wants to say, finding the footing to say what he needs to say. Steve, at least, gives him that distance. He lets Bucky have that space.

“First of all, yeah. Yeah. I was mad when I learned you’d ghosted on me. I was mad as hell. You can’t just abandon a guy like that. So don’t forget that,” Bucky says, once he’s gathered his thoughts. Steve feels that churning in his stomach again, storms of guilt wrecking his insides. There was no safe harbor from hurricanes of your own making. He tries not to think about it as Bucky continues. “Second of all—I was mad as hell, and I’m not gonna say what you did was okay. It wasn’t. But—I forgive you for it.”

Steve blinks. For a second, he thinks that he’s misheard Bucky, or everything unfolding in front of him is only how he hopes it could be. It’s only when Bucky continues speaking that Steve realizes that he didn’t mishear him; that everything that’s happening—Bucky’s reaction and all—is real.

“I get it. I get where you’re at. You had your reasons to lie, and reasons to keep secrets, and you made mistakes with those secrets. As mad as I was—mad as I still kind of am—when you told me you’d visited the library without even so much as saying hello, I get it. So I don’t wanna break it
off. Because I want you in my life, too. I want to get to know you outside of Instagram, too. You made a mistake. But you and I—we—we can move on.” Bucky says, steady, calm, and far more forgiving and friendly than Steve could ever have expected. Far more than he would have ever afforded himself. "You're my best friend, too, Steve. Hell, I'm probably closer to you than I am the people at the library. So I guess, what I’m saying is, I forgive you. I'm not happy about what you did, but I'm forgiving you. Okay?"

Steve nods, swallowing hard. He feels light—like all the guilt, all the self-doubt, all the accumulated lies of all those months of friendship had begun to ebb. Like he was finally beginning to breathe for the first time. “Yeah. Yeah, that’s okay. Thank you. Thank you, Bucky.”

“You're my best friend, too, Steve. Hell, I'm probably closer to you than I am the people at the library. So I guess, what I’m saying is, I forgive you. I'm not happy about what you did, but I'm forgiving you. Okay?”

The revelation of my friend Grant is Captain America seems to have stripped all the heat—all the potential explosiveness—out of the situation, and that forgiveness has Steve feeling light, but when Bucky finally poses that question to him, when he looks Steve straight-on and makes Steve confront his own failures, Steve feels no less guilty.

"I dunno,” Steve replies, his words trailing into a sigh. “A few reasons, I guess. Anxiety. Apprehension. The potentials of it all. Not thinking everything through before running headfirst into this. I mean—we've talked about this vaguely, but I have a lot of baggage that comes with me, Bucky. Besides the whole, American icon, leader of the Avengers, almost died in the Arctic, born 'bout a hundred years ago thing.”

This is the first time Steve has ever told anyone any of this. People have heard bits and pieces, sure. His therapists—former and current, for one. Sam and Natasha, in the few short years of their odd friendship, have heard enough to piece things together. But this is the first time Steve has admitted everything to anyone, all at once. This is the first time Steve has let himself be this open; the first time he’s let himself be this exposed. He’s still not sure what to make of it. The feeling of catharsis, the very specific freedom that comes with allowing himself to be vulnerable and exposed, was going to get some time to get used to, at the very least.

“And, you know,” Steve continues, trying to parse vulnerability. Trying to parse truth. Trying to parse openness and transparency. It leaves him feeling serious and heavy again, as much as it frees him. What a complicated feeling. “Some of the baggage is new stuff, stuff I'm still trying to begin to figure out. And some of my baggage is holdovers from the ‘40s that I'm still dealing with. And I'm gonna be dealing with, probably for a long, long time. So—yeah. That’s kind of why I left you hanging. I really didn’t mean to. I just kinda—couldn’t stop myself. Not an excuse, but you know. Now you know.”

If he’s going to be honest with Bucky, he might as well be honest about everything. As much as it makes him want to run; as much as it makes him want to retreat, as heavy and as serious and as paradoxically light as it makes him feel, Steve decided—he’s going to be honest. He’s going to be open now. About everything.

"There’s, uh," he continues, “There’s also the fact that you kinda blew a guy away, but that’s—uh. That’s another conversation entirely.”

Steve watches Bucky carefully, feeling both relieved and overwhelmed for letting out the full truth. Part of him thinks that he should have kept some things to himself; that maybe there were secrets
that he couldn’t—shouldn’t—share, even with this new start and new commitment. But when Bucky looks at him, miles or minutes away, Steve doesn’t feel like he’s made a misstep. Bucky opens his mouth to say something, but closes it, looking coy. *Smiling*. Teeth and all. Steve, in his infinite relief brought about by that smile, takes that as a win.

"But look," Steve says, barreling forward, pointedly *not* acknowledging that he’d all but admitted he thinks Bucky is *cute*, “I really *do* feel like shit for doing this. I should’ve just been upfront with you when I showed up. I shouldn’t have strung you along.”

"Hell no, you shouldn’t have," Bucky says, seriously, but not threateningly. Not anymore, at least. Not like he was for the few seconds before he realized what was going on or who he was talking to. Steve doesn’t know if that leverage—that identity—is an advantage or not. “Abandoning a guy is a really, really shitty thing to do, Steve Rogers.”

"And I know it was. Is. Which is why I wanna make it up to you. Or start making it up to you, at least," Steve says, "You gonna be free tomorrow? We can—I dunno, grab a cup of coffee, or something? Not as the neighborhood librarian and Captain America. But as—you know, me and you. Bucky and Steve."

Steve looks up, and Bucky is smiling again. It’s smaller this time, less surprised, but no less brilliant. For the second time in their conversation, Steve feels compelled to look away. As if staring directly at Bucky, like staring directly at the sun, will be blinding.

"I've got a half-hour lunch break at noon, if that works for you," Bucky offers.

"Noon? Yeah, noon works. I'll bring you coffee, meet you at the library, and we can walk around the park," Steve says, trying not to think of it as a date, or at least, trying not to think of it as *romantic*. "It'll be fun."

"Yeah," Bucky says softly, "Yeah, it will be."

They smile at each other, silent, but not awkwardly. All the anxiety of the past few days, has, slow but steady, begun to dissipate, and Steve feels warm, the same sort of warmth that he felt after one of their long text conversations, except brighter, stronger, *more*. Amplified, by an incomprehensible, indescribable amount.

Eventually, as much as he wishes he could enjoy it forever, Steve breaks that warm, halcyon silence. "I should—I should let you go. You probably need to get some sleep. Gotta be out, bright and early."

"Ugh, don't remind me," Bucky groans, resting his face on his desk dramatically, "The only reason I even manage to show up is because by the time I’m out the door, my bloodstream is *pretty much just coffee*. And it's been *so* dead these days. It's *always* dead 'round this time, but this year especially. I'm thinking of picking up a language, or knitting, you know. Something to do when I’m not working with the collections, when I’m at the front desk."

“No shit,” Steve laughs. “I dunno if that’s the best use of the library’s time, Bucky.”

"Mm, yeah. Okay. I guess you're right," Bucky says. “Guess the best I can do is wait with bated for *Captain America to rescue me.*”

“Dunno if there’s a box on the mission paperwork to check for *unbearable boredom*, but for you? I’ll make it work,” Steve jokes.

“If anyone can make it work, it’s you,” Bucky says, grinning that perfect grin again.

"Well. Right. I'm gonna call it a night. You should, too. Go to bed, Bucky. I mean it this time," Steve says breaking that stillness. His voice is stern, almost like his *Captain America* voice. But teasing.

"Fine. You're right," Bucky says, playfully defeated. He hums, and looks like he's considering Steve. Not like prey. But like one considers art, or a sunset, or a particularly beautiful day. "Well. It was nice meeting. Again. For the first time."

"Yeah. It was," Steve says, feeling light. Happy.

“Meet you for real tomorrow?” Bucky asks.

“Yeah. Absolutely. I'll—uh, I'll be there tomorrow with coffee. Noon, on the dot. No chickening out this time," Steve says, and he beams when that's met with a soft, short laugh. While he wishes he could keep this conversation going, he's excited—not terrified—of meeting in the morning. "So, um. Good night, Bucky."

Bucky smiles softly, his head tilted into the crook of his elbow. It's a beautiful thing. "Good night. Steve."

As their call ends and the connection fades out, Steve sits at his desk, feeling happy and content in a way that had, somewhere along the way, become almost foreign to him. It's only when he gets a text from Natasha, a good morning, all the way on the other side of the world, that Steve realizes he's been staring, at his screen—completely, overwhelmingly smitten.

Chapter End Notes

after last chapter's cliffhanger: a resolution, a way forward, or something resembling it.

some notes:

- first, thank you for all the sweet vibes from everyone. i tried to reply to everything, but just generally - thank you so, so much. all those words of support and good vibes mean more than words could ever say. thank you.
- that said, everything is still happening too much for me. again, as i said in the first chapter, i can't promise any sort of unified posting schedule, but i will try my best to update fairly regularly, and i'm planning on finishing this fic. so, yeah. life is still life, but this fic is still going along strong.
- better news: happy national library week, everyone! and national bookmobile day, too. [here's some fun stuff about national library week, on the npr tumblr](https://twitter.com/npr/status/1250141620867399424). bucky would probably celebrate national library week extensively. i imagine he would have events lined up — going to schools with books, having a "library card registration drive," hosting events at the martinelli — and he would post using every possible filter and hashtag and social media tag imaginable. he definitely wouldn't be in front of the camera for the [video challenges](https://twitter.com/npr/status/1250141620867399424), but he'd try to talk to everyone else working at the martinelli about it.
- bucky dressed up as captain america is probably one of my favorite images in the world. (buckycap in general is one of my favorite things in the world, but that's neither...
here nor there). expect more of that image in the future of this fic. i know there's a particular thing i want to write relating to it, but i don't know if i can fit it into the events yet to unfold. but we'll see ;)

- the two books mentioned in this chapter are mary roach's packing for mars and andy weir's the martian. i haven't read packing for mars, but i've read mary roach's stiff, and i really enjoy her nonfiction writing style. i'm still working on reading the martian, but i really enjoy that book, too, and i think that it is a good jumping-off point for someone who's interested in getting back into reading.

- i chose those books partially because i was familiar with them, partially because they're popular, partially so i could laugh at my own joke about bucky and chris beck from the martian, but also because i think it's a good logical jumping-off point from bucky's interest in cheeseball pulp novels. so. yeah.

- la sera's "break my heart" is the unofficial writing background music to this. it's probably a lot more thematically-similar to the contents of last chapter's writing music, if only slightly.

that's all i've got for now. i'm probably going to go back and make some minor edits to the previous chapters (for readability, clarity, and to avoid unintentionally using the same phrases nine billion times) at some point, so keep an eye out for that. see you all when i see you, and thanks again for the support and good vibes!!
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

new york, in bloom.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Even as the promise of coffee with Bucky looms in the not-too-distant future, Steve still finds himself defaulting to his post-run routine. Find a breakfast place—something local, avoid Starbucks if possible. Grab breakfast. Grab coffee. Text Bucky.

With a giant bowl of oatmeal, a black coffee, and a copy of the New York Times, Steve, comfortably tucked in a back corner booth of a local diner, taps out a message—his little way of saying good morning.

ME [9:22 AM]: Quick question.

BUCKY [9:22 AM]: I’ll try to give you a quick answer :P

Steve smiles to himself. After their talk the night before, he can hear those words in Bucky’s voice—the tenor, the pitch, the slight drawl of his native New York accent—clear as a bell.

ME [9:24 AM]: What kind of coffee do you want? You want sugar and cream? What about flavor pumps?

BUCKY [9:29 AM]: Surprise me ;)

ME [9:30 AM]: Not helpful. Give me some specifics here.

BUCKY [9:30 AM]: Seriously, I’ll drink whatever

Steve frowns.

ME [9:31 AM]: I just don’t want to give you something that you’re not going to want, or that will make you sick.

BUCKY [9:35 AM]: Anything’s good, really. Long as it’s got caffeine in it, I’ll drink it. Just show up :)

That narrows it down to death before decaf, but not by much. Steve chooses not to worry too much about it—trying to pry a specific order out of Bucky would just stress both of them out. He just had to play it cool, play it natural, and things would work out on their own. Even if he got something Bucky hated.

At least, that’s what he was trying to tell himself.

ME [9:36 AM]: Alright, alright. But let a guy down easy if you hate it, yeah?

BUCKY [9:38 AM]: And lie to an American legend? Pretty sure that’s a federal crime
Bucky follows up that message with a chain of emojis, little smiling monkeys. Steve grins at this, tapping out a quick message before digging into his oatmeal. Couldn’t let it get cold, after all. No one—not even Steve, who grew up on boiled cabbage and liver loaf—was fond of cold, clumpy oatmeal. Now that’s something the future never found a solution for.

ME [9:40 AM]: But lying to your pal, Steve Rogers, isn’t. Don’t see a problem there.

Attached, a small string of different smiling emojis. Not nearly as many as Bucky usually attaches, but enough.

BUCKY [9:40 AM]: Dunno if that’d hold up in court :P

ME [9:42 AM]: I’d vouch for you!

BUCKY [9:42 AM]: That’s……actually really reassuring

BUCKY [9:42 AM]: Lol

ME [9:45 AM]: Any time. :) 

ME [9:45 AM]: Anyway, see you in a few hours?

BUCKY [9:45 AM]: See you :DDD

Steve smiles, feeling bubbly and warm and grounded, completely independent of his hearty, homey breakfast. The two-plus hours until their meeting would pass by in a flash; noon—and Bucky—would be there before he knew it. Steve, working on a time crunch, pockets his phone, folds up his copy of the *Times,* and finishes his breakfast quickly; fast as only a supersoldier with plans could. By the time he leaves the diner, having left a tip many, many times the cost of his breakfast, it’s late into the morning, and the city is sunny and warm and beautiful in its infinite chaos, as if the world was just as exhilarated by Steve’s day as he was.

Of all the spring mornings Steve spent living in New York City—his life before the war included—this morning, with all the hopes and potential and warmth held within, had to be one of the best.

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When Steve arrives at his apartment, right in time with his usual routine, he immediately throws himself into getting ready, into making himself presentable, for Bucky.

He *could* go in his running clothes. It would be a last-ditch option, if it came down to it. After all, Steve is *more than familiar* with how great his leggings make his ass look. But his clothes stink of sweat, and he knows would feel frumpy and unprepared and underdressed, especially in comparison to Bucky’s fun, soft sweaters and comfy, semi-professional cardigans. Especially given the simple fact that Steve, enamored with Bucky already, wants to make the best impression of his life.

With that weight settled square on his shoulders—displacing the world’s responsibility, if only briefly—Steve rushes through half his wardrobe, going through every single button-up and shirt and tight, flattering pair of jeans he owns. His mission is clear and locked in sight: find the perfect outfit for his first *official* meeting with Bucky. Nothing too formal. Nothing too casual. This was his first real chance to show Bucky who he was, his first real chance for Bucky to get to know Steve. Not just *Captain America in a pair of slacks.* His Dodgers shirt and a pair of worn, faded, boot-cut jeans was a little *too* familiar. Any number of his crisp white button-ups and khakis wasn’t familiar *enough.* The neon blue polo that Tony bought him, the one that cost about half as
much as his rent check—that wouldn’t see the light of day. Eventually, after what felt like hours of intense scrutiny of his own fashion sense, Steve settles on something, just the right mix of comfortable and stylish. Friendly, but not sweatpants friendly. It’s simple. It’s nice, even by twenty-first century standards. Even by his standards.

Nice. But not nice enough—Steve thinks, as he taps out a message to his favorite twenty-something superspy—to forego the ever-important second opinion.

   ME [10:19 AM]: Yea or nay?

He quickly snaps a photo of his outfit—a light blue denim button-up tucked into dark blue jeans, all brought together with his favorite dark blue baseball cap—and sends it to Natasha. Ninety-something or not, Steve had the mirror selfie down to an art. Even she granted him that. And Steve was damn proud of it.

Natasha takes longer than usual to reply. She’s still far quicker than Sam, quicker than most people, but there’s an unusual delay there, something that speaks to her position, somewhere across the Atlantic, thousands of miles away, relying on outdated tech in the middle of nowhere.

   NATASHA [10:27 AM]: Unbutton the top button. Roll up the sleeves. And ditch the hat. You look like you’re running for Senate in a red district.

Frowning, Steve taps out his reply.

   ME [10:27 AM]: That bad?

   NATASHA [10:32 AM]: You look like you’re going to a county fair.

   NATASHA [10:32 AM]: You look like you’re about to give a speech on small-town values.

   NATASHA [10:33 AM]: You look like you went to Princeton. Or Stanford. You look like you pledged Mu Chi Upsilon. And you LIKED IT. You look like KING fratboy, except grown up and working in government because his dad's the governor.

   STEVE [10:34 AM]: Alright, alright, I get it. No hat.

   NATASHA [10:38 AM]: What is this for? Is this for A DATE?

Steve snorts. He wishes. Natasha sure is good at her job. She knew. She had him pinned down immediately. Not that he would ever admit that to her. Not yet.

   ME [10:38 AM]: No, Nat. I’m not going on a date. I just want to look nice, is all.

   NATASHA [10:41 AM]: Sure. Let me know how it goes))))))

   ME [10:41 AM]: Good-bye, Nat.

   NATASHA [10:46 AM]: Goodbye, grandpa. Good luck on your date. Mission report tonight))))))

He shakes his head. Natasha. That Natasha. Nonetheless, he does as she suggests, and yeah. Steve never considered himself as having a face for politics, not even during the USO tour, but even he realizes the baseball cap, with the rest of his outfit, makes him look like the democratic frontrunner in an election year. He pulls it off quickly, putting it back on his dresser, next to his aviators and a
neatly-piled stack; of half the books Bucky sent him off with.

With the cap gone, Steve smooths down his shirt, leaving his bedroom with one last cursory glance at his outfit. It’s about as good as he can manage—as good as he can hope to look, for a not-date—so Steve leaves his lingering doubts to the wayside, and decides to consider it a win.

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At noon on the dot, Steve Rogers arrives at the Martinelli Public Library for the second time in his life, a bag of giant, near-fresh muffins in one hand and a tray of hot coffees in the other. He’s buzzing with nerves, but this time, filled with just a fraction of the anxiety he felt the day before.

"Hey," Bucky says in welcome, almost as soon as Steve’s inside. It seems that Steve’s the only patron in the library—at the very least, the only other person on the entire first floor. Bucky was right. It was dead.

"Didn't turn tail this time," Steve says, proudly, "And I brought coffee, just like I promised. Caramel macchiatos. This place makes the best ones. Puts Starbucks to shame."

““You don’t say,” Bucky says, one corner of his lip turned up in a lopsided smirk, looking at Steve with an expression that stirs something in Steve. Barely a minute in, and he was already halfway to swooning. Steve continues on, making a very concentrated effort not to stare.

“I—uh, even got muffins, too. There’s banana nut, blueberry, and double chocolate. Your pick.”

Bucky beams at him. He’s in another comfy sweater again—this one, looking like a kaleidoscope exploded on him, but only on his top half. It’s truly an eyesore. God, is he charming. "You have no idea how much that means to me right now. You are perfect, Rogers."

Steve buzzes in elation, those few words bringing back that soft, sudden warmth. Hearing Bucky so casually say his name again is novel and exciting. He can’t wait to hear it again. He can’t wait for it to become such a regular part of his life.

"You wanna get outta here, then?” he asks, trying hard to temper himself. It’s a struggle just to keep himself from bouncing out of his shoes in sheer delight. “Go on that walk?"

"Yeah. Yeah, just let me tell Dolores I'm going on lunch," Bucky says, "Be right back."

"Oh! Right," Steve says, "This third coffee’s for her. You know, for being a good sport last time, letting you show me around."

“You know, we were both just—doing our jobs,” Bucky says, but when he looks up at Steve, he looks fond. Charmed, even.

“Yeah, I know,” Steve says, trying very, very hard to will away a blush. “But still. Thought I’d get her something for the trouble.”

Bucky grins at him. It makes Steve feel warm and soft all over again. So much for that strategy. "Just for the trouble, yeah? Should I be jealous?"

"Well, Dot’s not the one I'm taking out, so I'd say you're good," Steve replies, sending Bucky a smile back.

“Dot,” Bucky snorts, as he stands, stretching a little as he does. “You really are ninety, aren’t you?”
“Hey,” Steve says, stern. Playful. Not a hint of that Captain America tone. “You want this coffee or not?”

“Alright, I get it. Gotta cut the shit. You’re ninety-something, but you’re not old,” Bucky laughs, amicably. Steve holds the tray of coffees just barely out of Bucky’s reach. Not cruelly, but in a way that does earn him an amused, chagrined smile. Giving each other a hard time. Just a natural extension of their friendship. “Now, can I please have my coffee?”

Steve sets the tray on the circulation desk, handing Bucky his coffee. “I suppose. But watch it, Barnes. You’re on thin ice.”

“Will do, sir,” Bucky says, taking the third cup, and oh, does that shoot off something fuzzy and dangerous in the back of Steve’s brain. He shoves his own cup—warm, perhaps still too warm for safe drinking—in his face, swallowing down hot, syrupy coffee in an attempt not to say something too forward. Something he might regret.

Bucky doesn’t seem to mind—or even notice—Steve’s crisis of charm. He just walks off, two coffees in hand, far more energetic than any librarian Steve had ever seen. He watches Bucky until he’s out of sight, until he hears a far-off Dot! and the soft, low murmur of a friendly conversation between coworkers.

With Bucky gone, that rush of excitement comes back. Steve is all energy again, rocking from the balls of his foot to his heels, his coffee sloshing around as he does so. Briefly, he takes some time to look over the circulation desk. It’s nondescript and far from personal—there’s a stack of post-its and notecards, a few black and blue binders, a cup of pencils and pens, a still-wrapped cookie dough Quest bar, and what looks like a list of times taped next to the keyboard. Steve didn’t know what he expected. It’s not like the circulation desk was Bucky’s permanent office, and it could hardly have been a doorway to his soul. He sips his coffee, feeling disappointed nonetheless, trying to keep himself from snooping too much.

Luckily for him, Bucky comes back not long after, smiling to himself, one less coffee in hand.

“Ready?” Steve asks.

“Always,” Bucky says, that smile shifting into a brilliant grin.

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A walk in the park is a welcome escape from the controlled chaos of Steve’s life. The sun is warm on Steve’s skin, but not over-warm; not like the sticky-hot of mid-June. Not like the oppressive heat of standing in the sun with his helmet for hours on end. There’s a soft breeze cutting through the air, a content sigh between the half-budded trees. Avengers Park is calm—even peaceful. It’s nothing like the fire and smoke, the battle armor and bullets of missions and ops.

And it’s perfect.

For once, Steve got to fully enjoy springtime in New York City. And with Bucky, in the flesh, keeping him company. There wasn’t much that could top it.

“So,” Steve says. They’re taking their time walking through the park, though Bucky seems acutely aware of the time crunch he’s in; as they walk, he begins to pick at one of the muffins, his coffee seemingly long gone. “I guess you know my deep, dark secret,”

“And what’s that?” Bucky asks, unwrapping the muffin Steve gifted him with the same care one would offer ribbon-wrapped birthday presents.
“That I’m masquerading as a normal, average, everyday guy on Instagram,” Steve replies, bashfully, even still. Bucky shrugs.

“If that’s your deep, dark secret, then you really are that straight-laced golden boy all those Tom Hanks movies made you out to be,” he jokes. Steve laughs, a short, sharp bark of a laugh. As if.

“What about you?” Steve asks, and he knows he’s being forward with Bucky. Maybe even overly so. Just about the second the words come out his mouth, Steve realizes that he’s taking a very straightforward approach to relationship-building. But he can’t help it. He wants to know everything about the guy. They might have shared deep, dark secrets with one another online, but Steve still wants, more than anything, to get to know his best friend better. To start to disentangle the mystery of who is James Barnes, really?

And, almost painfully, intentionally vague in response, Bucky simply shrugs.

“What about me?” he asks, before taking his first, wolfish bite out of his muffin, half of it gone in less than a second. The poor thing never stood a chance.

“ Anything you wanna share?” Steve asks, his tone light and lilting. “Secret identities, fake names, or anything? Anything compare to my original sins?”

Bucky levels a look at Steve, unreadable, but not unkind. He seems very, very serious, if only for a split second, as if considering Steve. As if watching a target. Soon as that seriousness comes, it’s gone, replaced by a slow, warm smile and the most infectious laugh Steve has ever heard.

“You’re gonna have to find that one out for yourself,” he says, slow and honey-smooth and warm as a spring afternoon. Steve laughs. That there—the simple, one-line response—is a challenge. It’s raising the stakes, a sly motivating force, a come and get me with a wink and a nod.


“Good,” Bucky says, that cute chin of his, tilted up, playful and ever-so-defiant.

“Good,” Steve echoes, and God, is Bucky charming like that, looking up at him, all coy smiles and sly looks and not a hint to whatever secrets, whatever unknown contours to his personality he might have. It was more than charming. It was more than exhilarating. Even exciting didn’t begin to cover it.

"So, uh, you from Brooklyn?” Steve asks, after a second’s pause. Bucky, through a mouthful of blueberry muffin, hums an affirmative.

"Yeah,” he says, before swallowing. “Yeah, born and bred.”

"That’s great,” Steve offers, “Your folks in the area?”

"Nah,” Bucky says with a shrug, “Dad moved Ma and my sisters down to Indiana. Work stuff. Haven't seen 'em since I graduated undergrad."

"That's a shame," Steve says, and he means it. If any of his family were still around, if he had any family left, they'd never be able to get rid of him.

"Eh. Is what it is," Bucky says with a casual shrug. "Dad's from Indiana, and he was pretty happy about getting assigned there again. Said he's never braving another New York winter again in his life. Not that Indiana's all that much better, but whatever. I FaceTime 'em once every few weeks.
Keep in touch. The oldest of my younger sisters, Becca, we follow each other on Instagram. She's really the only person who ever comments on anything other than you."

“Oh, wow. So you two, you and Becca. You're close?” Steve asks. God, he's starting to sound like his therapist.

Bucky shrugs, taking his rapid-fire questioning in stride. “As much as we can be. She was born when I was getting outta middle school. We’re practically different generations. But I love the kid, you know.”


“Nah. You’re good,” Bucky laughs, picking at the muffin a little.

They settle on a bench, well-shaded and deep in the heart of the park. Steve continues to sip at his coffee, content to have Bucky close to him, damn near knee-to-knee. They sit there for a moment in silence, enjoying each other’s company. Enjoying each other’s closeness. It’s something they couldn’t do over text; something that, as far as Steve’s concerned, means they’ve already taken their friendship to a whole new level. He looks over at Bucky, briefly. Just to make sure he’s happy. Just to make sure he’s telling the truth—to make sure having just as good a time. It doesn’t look like anything to the contrary.

Steve lets out a breath, not a sigh of relief. Something closer to contentment. The breeze picks up again, and he takes a sip of his coffee. It’s not as warm as it was. Neither is the bag of muffins at his side. But Steve doesn’t care. A little lukewarm coffee and muffins aren’t going to distract him from enjoying the park, his company, and the relative stillness.

“You can ask about it, you know,” Bucky says, suddenly. A ripple in a pond, a crow’s call. A break to that stillness, though not as hostile as either.

“Excuse me?” Steve asks.

“My arm,” Bucky says, matter-of-factly. Like he isn’t talking about an integral part of his body.

“Was I staring?” Steve asks, feeling guilty. In spite of his better manners, in spite of himself, he must have been, his traitorous gaze subconsciously lingering far too long on Bucky’s prosthesis. His Ma must be turning over in her grave.

“I’m—I’m sorry if I was—”

“You’re fine, Steve,” Bucky says, amicably. He’s laughing, even, or something close to it. “You’re better than most people.”

“I just—I don’t wanna be rude.”

“You weren’t staring. And you’re not rude. Like I said, it’s okay if you wanna ask. ‘Specially if I’m the one offering. Okay?”

“Okay,” Steve replies, but in spite of his affirmative, in spite of Bucky’s willingness and reassurance, he still feels like he’d overstepped; like somehow, inadvertently, he’d crossed a line. He tries not to sigh.

Another silence. This one, loaded. Awkward. Maybe Steve was worse at this transition into face-to-face, flesh-and-blood friendship than he’d thought.

“So—uh. What about you? You got any questions for me? I know this is—probably a lot, being
friends with, you know. Someone in my position,” Steve says, “So—anything you wanna know, I’ll try to let you know. Within reason, I mean—so. Uh. What do you wanna know?”

Bucky shrugs. “I dunno.”

“Nothing? I mean, seriously, nothing is off the table here,” Steve says, “I wanna be completely transparent and honest with you now that we’re starting over offline. You’ve got a right to know anything you want to. You’re my friend.”

Bucky chews his lower lip for a moment, just slightly. Just so. A nervous tic, or something like it. Steve thinks it’s adorable.

“I mean—just. What was it like for you?” Bucky asks, eventually.

“What do you mean?”

“Becoming Captain America. Growing up down here, back in the day, then getting picked up by the SSR. Becoming the first supersoldier. What—what was that like?”

Steve sighs. “It was—I dunno. It was kind of surreal. Being this kid who grew up skinny and sick and pickin’ fights pretty much wherever I saw the chance to, I always thought I wouldn’t really amount to anything. Then I get the serum, I run my ass into bigger fights, and, well. Now I’m here. Not responsible for everything. But a lotta things. A whole lotta important things.”

He can feel Bucky’s gaze on him. “That’s a lot for one man.”

“Well, hey, I mean. I’m just doing what I’ve got to. It’s literally what I was made for—if I’m not gonna do it, who will, you know?” Steve half-jokes, with a shrug. He sounds so arrogant, he thinks. Assuming the world wouldn’t keep turning without him. As if it hadn’t, for all those decades. “Not to say there wouldn’t be heroes, just. Risking my ass to protect and defend the things that need protecting, that’s my purpose. My actual, biological purpose. I was made this way to do that, I signed up to get poked and prodded and turned into what I am now to do that, and not really anything else. Guess that’s the downside to it all, you know? Other than Schmidt, whose atoms are rightfully scattered through time and space, if Thor’s to be believed, the serum made it so I’m a subspecies of one. I’ve gotta do what I was made for, ’cause I’m the only one of my kind.”

“You don’t know that,” Bucky says, quiet, soft. Perhaps in an attempt to be comforting.

“Yeah, I guess not,” Steve says, with a shrug. It was a possibility. Unlikely, but it was a possibility.

They sit in silence for a little bit—this one, far more comfortable than the one before. It feels right. Steve feels the compulsion to take Bucky by the hand, then and there. It would be so easy, if he just were to reach out. If he were to work up the bravery and gall that it would take to do that.

And if Bucky weren’t face-first into a fist-sized blueberry muffin.

"Muffin good?" Steve asks, realizing he hasn't even touched his own food, save for the coffee. Bucky makes a little noise, a verbal nod, of sorts.

"I'm so hungry," he says, once he's swallowed the last of his muffin. "Sorry if it was, uh. Gross. Talking with my mouth full and wolfing it down, and all."

Steve laughs. "You're not gross. Gross is gonna be me, eating both of these muffins and getting a sandwich on the way home and still being hungry by the time I get back. Supersoldier metabolism.
It's a hell of a thing."

"Mmm," is what Bucky says, sucking a crumb off his index finger. Steve tries not to stare. He really, really does.

“It is what it is. Can come in handy, if I’m gonna be up all night. You know,” Steve says, maybe a little cheeky maybe a little flirty, sending a little smile over. He tried not to stare. He tried to resist. But even he had his limits. Even he was allowed a little fun. Even if he was bad at flirting. He was already cringing at himself for even halfway attempting. Bucky blinks at him, understanding quickly washing over him, and he shakes his head.

“Does the rest of Brooklyn know Captain America’s a cheeky little punk, or is it just me?” he asks, leveling an amused look at Steve, and God, Steve’s heart does flips. If someone could weaponize that smile, they would have a very dangerous asset on their hands, indeed.

“Nah,” Steve says, “Not all of Brooklyn takes the time to know me like you do.”

“There’s loss,” Bucky says, and Steve starts to feel the familiar, creeping warmth of a blush. He couldn’t tell if Bucky was flirting with him, too, but that friendliness made him feel good—better than good, even, all the same.

One more silence, one more comfortable lull. Steve could have stayed like that until sunset, had it not been for Bucky suddenly realizing that he had somewhere to be.

“Shit—I gotta get back,” Bucky says, standing from the bench, “But—I really liked this. I really, really liked this.”

“I’m glad,” Steve says, following in suit. “It’s the least I could do to make up for—you know. Everything.”

Bucky shrugs. “Like you said, we’re starting over. And this was really, really nice.”

“I’m glad, Bucky. I’m really, really glad,” Steve says, and he’s smiling now, too.

They stand there for a while, mutually content and comfortable, neither really wanting to be the one to say goodbye. And then, Bucky says, damn-near out of the blue—

“Can we do this again sometime?”

And in a moment, as if in a flash, New York—that vast, sprawling, confusing, wonderful city, they both call home—feels condensed; in a moment, alone there with Bucky, in the spring sun, Steve feels like New York City is entirely, solely theirs.

“Yeah, of course,” He says sweetly. Hearing Bucky ask that—hearing, Can we do this again sometime?, a promise for another moment like the one they just shared—it’s like the sunrise and fireworks and Christmas all wrapped up into one, and Steve feels his heart flutter hummingbird-quick in his chest. He’s smiling, and all he can hope is that Bucky feels the same.

“Does next week work?” Bucky asks, tentatively. "Tuesday, ‘bout the same time, maybe?”

“Yes, yeah. That works,” Steve says quickly, not even stopping to think if he was free. He would make it work.

“Great,” Bucky grins at Steve, just before they part ways. “I’ll see you next Tuesday.”
Steve’s trip home feels almost impossibly pleasant. The two muffins Bucky left him are decadently sweet and soft. The subway station smells, uncharacteristically, not too much like piss. He’s all but skipping down the street, grinning at the world like he’s in an old movie. As he sits, waiting for his usual order from the bánh mì place on the way home, all Steve can think about is how he’ll tell Natasha on their call later that night—if he’ll tell Natasha on their call later that night. When it came down to it, nothing really changed between Bucky and himself. Not substantively. Their relationship—their friendship—was strengthened, is all. But God, did it feel like a revelation. Maybe, then, it was too early to tell Natasha. Maybe it was too early to tell anyone yet. As much as he would love to hire a skywriter, as much as he would love to tell the entire city.

Steve considers all the possibilities, all the potential outcomes, all the strategies of telling his friends he was infatuated long after leaving the bánh mì place, four sandwiches bagged up and one in-hand. He wasn't cooking that night, not if he didn't have to. As he makes his way up to his apartment, chewing on a mouthful of grilled pork, cilantro, and daikon, Steve’s phone buzzes, and he nearly drops his sandwich—and his keys—reaching for it.

It’s not Bucky. It’s the furthest person from Bucky. It’s Tony, reporting on a successful mission. Steve shoulders his way into his apartment, reading over the text carefully as he toes off his shoes and tosses his keys in the dish by the door. Once he’s put his food down, Steve taps out a quick response—Thanks for the update. Call in S.H.I.E.L.D. for holding and we’ll brief tomorrow at 0800 hours sharp. Good work, everyone.

He pockets his phone, not waiting to see Tony’s response. He doesn’t have to. Steve knows what it’s going to be. Instead, he starts on his sandwich again, skimming over the mission files Natasha sent over one more time before the next day’s briefing, still buzzing, even as he rereads work dossiers, over the fact that he and Bucky hit it off so well. Still buzzing with the satisfying knowledge, the unbelievable truth, that Bucky wanted to see him again.

By the time Natasha calls, it’s early evening New York time. Steve is working on filling out his sketchbook, his laptop propped open on the edge of his coffee table as he begins to capture that afternoon’s scene.

“Hey, Nat,” Steve says, continuing to sketch, laying out broad, smooth strokes of charcoal on bare pages.

“Hey to you,” she says. It doesn’t look like she’s in her usual safe house; the sheets and pillows look more comfortable, the lighting looks less stark, and she has a plate of chocolate-covered strawberries on the duvet, right next to her laptop. “You look busy.”

“You look comfortable,” he replies. ” What time is it over there?”

“Mm, 'bout one. Almost two,” she says, before biting into a strawberry.

“Mission go smoothly for you, I’m guessing?” Steve asks.

“Mm-hmm,” she hums, clearly savoring the chocolate. “Got good intel, and we’ve got the regional leaders of Hydra in custody. Bruce, Tony, and Wanda are on their way back with them, they should be in the air by now. I decided to stay behind and catch up with one of my sources tomorrow. I’ll probably be back by the end of the week.”
“Tony texted me things went well earlier, but when he says ‘This went okay,’ I always wonder. I’ll send you the briefing notes tomorrow afternoon. Let me know if you have anything to add to them,” Steve says, “And I’m glad everything went well.”

“Just glad to be out of the sticks. Maybe I should move. I think the Upper East Side’s spoiled me.”

Steve laughs. “I don’t think anything can spoil you, Natasha.”

“You say that, but given that my building has a doorman, a pool, and I live within walking distance of some of the best museums in the world. I might fight you on that one.”

“Speaking of,” Steve says, pivoting. “Almost stopped by your apartment the other day.”

“You should have. I don’t trust Clint not to feed my cat the same things he feeds poor Lucky,” she says, “Or check my mail, for that matter.”

“Now I feel guilty for not checking in.”

“Don’t. I’ll just make my lawyer do it from now on and kick Clint’s ass when I get back,” Natasha says, with a sip of red wine, pulled out from somewhere off-camera. She was deadpan all the same, and might very well have been joking, but Steve believed her. Hell hath no fury like a woman subjected to a week of her cat’s pizza farts. “Barton aside. What were you doing on the East Side?”

Steve shrugs, trying to keep his face level. “Just went for a run.”

She eyes him carefully. It’s not a lie. Just not the entire truth. He was getting good at those. Or at least, he thought he was starting to, anyway.

“You and your dumb supersoldier workout routine,” she says, rolling her eyes, “Just go to spin class for a week and then quit six lessons in like the rest of us.”

“Sorry,” Steve laughs, throwing his hands up in mock-defense.

“Don’t make empty apologies, Rogers. It doesn’t suit you,” Natasha says, pointing a strawberry at Steve.

“Alright, I won’t, Nat,” Steve says, “Not to you.”

She shrugs, before biting into said strawberry. “That’s all I ask, Rogers. All I ask.”

A beat. A silence. Natasha never was the one to make empty conversation, and Steve tried his best not to push her to. They both appreciated that.

“Well, hey,” Steve says, eventually, “I don’t wanna keep you too late.”

“That’s thoughtful of you.”

“Yeah, well, I try to be. Thoughtful, I mean.”

“Mm,” Natasha hums. “Still haven’t told me what the outfit was for.”

Don’t tell her about Bucky. It's not the right time. Not yet. “I just—I wanted to look good, ‘s all.”

She eyes him, carefully, clearly wanting to push back. Clearly wanting to get to the bottom of things. But somehow, for some reason, she doesn’t. Instead, she just hums, nodding the smallest of nods, and leaves it at that. If Steve knows Natasha at all—which, he thinks he does, even through
all the biting sarcasm and dense, emotional walls—he knows that this isn’t the end of it. She hasn’t dropped the thread. But she’s letting it settle for a while. She’s giving it time to branch out, before she cuts down to the root. He almost wishes she would press him more, now.

“Steve?”

“Yeah?”

“You seem—happy. Whatever you’re doing, keep it up.”

Steve smiles. He'll tell her about Bucky. He'll tell her everything about him—but not yet. It is, after all, only their first-ever real date—and it wasn’t even that. Instead, he just nods, sincere. “Thank you, Nat.”

“Good night, Steve.”

“Sleep well, Nat.”

The call ends, and Steve shuts his laptop. He sketches a few lines more, just a few more details of Avengers Park, before he stands, dusts off his hands, and goes to his dresser—this time, to pick out something to read for the rest of the night.

Chapter End Notes

so, it’s been a while. a lot’s happened in my life since the last update. a short, but not at all comprehensive list includes: having a health scare because of my roommate situation, going to a social worker, getting offered a new apartment in the middle of talks with a social worker, packing and moving my entire life within three days, going to new york two days after moving in to my new place, staying a week in the east village with my best friend/cousin/platonic soulmate, getting fleet week-ed (full on carrie bradshaw-style), coming back to the biggest workload i’ve ever had to deal with, cat-sitting for ten days, finishing work that i needed to finish and sleeping for 20 hours, and fucking off to disneyland because i live in southern california and that’s something i can do now?? which is just #wyld to me??? also my good pal halfmoonsevenstars was in town, and it's summer of heroes, so i can't just pass that up lol.

anyway, needless to say, i haven't had much time to write fic. but as i’ve said before, i haven't given up on this fic. i have chapters whose implications i’ve just barely started seeding in these seven chapters that i’ve already started fleshing out. i plan on seeing this thing through. and i mean it. <3

some notes, as is the usual:

- the outfit that steve wears is this chris evans outfit, except with the shirt tucked into his pants. so a little bit of a tighter cut/style to show off les tiddés.
- bucky’s sweater is this garish thing, except a boxier/baggier/comfier fit, and slightly brighter versions of those colors. imagine that sweater, but from the ‘80s.
- liver loaf was 100% a legit meal from the great depression era. i know that liver loaf is a real meal in some places in the contemporary US, but given how much boiling and how little seasoning was done during the depression, i imagine steve’s memories of
liver loaf would be pretty damn awful.
- i don’t have a specific area or apartment on the upper east side for natasha’s apartment, and i don’t remember if my headcanon is in sync with phil noto’s black widow run, but the closest thing that matches my idea of where natasha would live is the concorde, a postwar high-rise with what is genuinely the most staggering amount of amenities i’ve ever seen. seriously, check out what about $5,000/a month to rent (or ~$1.5-2.1 million to own) can get you, it’s also a thirty-five minute walk from the guggenheim. must be nice.
- of course, all of that is predicated on the idea that natasha, after living a rigid, structured, spartan life with little opportunity for agency and love and ample opportunity for living under fear and control, has chosen to treat herself well and live as comfortable a life as possible when not in the field specifically because she recognizes that she has a home and a life in new york now. which is how i like to see her.
- there is a lot of food in this chapter. i think i might actually make that list of "foods already used in hot librarian au" just so i don't double up too much.
- it took me everything in my power not to make the chapter description a starbucks (both the coffee place and the ship name) joke. so, there’s that.

i’ll see you when i see you, everyone. thanks for all the patience, care, and love. you have no idea how much it means to me. i’ve signed up for camp nanowrimo for july, so i’m going to get a bit done of this fic through that, but i’ve also got a few oneshots in the works that i need to finish by the end of camp, so keep an eye out for those. catch you when i catch you :)
“Morning, butterbeans,” says Tony Stark, before slurping down a piping-hot cup of coffee from a bright red MIT travel mug. As per classic Tony, he’s the last to arrive at their meetings, but he damn well makes a show when he does. Steve sighs, just barely under his breath, choosing to focus on his tablet, instead. “Remind me why we meet this early, again?”

It was one of the few times that the team met as a group. They being the Avengers, plus some S.H.I.E.L.D. agents who proved to be decidedly *not* part of a right-wing coup to take over the world, and minus Thor, who was busy taking on some cosmo-Norse responsibility. Not everyone was physically present—Sam was in DC, and Banner was doing some low-profile aid work in Sokovia—but everyone was at the meeting, some way or another. And as semi-official leader, Steve was in charged with headlining the meeting—even though most of his meeting notes were giving room for others to speak.

“Maybe because some of us have nine-to-fives, and this is our lunch break,” says Rhodes, without any real heat or sarcasm in his voice. Tony makes a face at him, to which Rhodes, under the table, flips Tony the bird. They clearly love and adore one another. Their friendship operates in a way that only relationships that took decades to foster could. Steve envies it.

“Speaking of,” Natasha says, turning to look at one of the many wall-mounted monitors, where Sam is absentmindedly watching the scene in front of him. “What’s for lunch, Wilson?”

“Are you asking what my lunch is, or are you trying to get me to Seamless you something?” Sam asks, his voice coming across slightly distorted on the line. Natasha shrugs. “Doesn’t Stark order you sandwiches?”

“In *this* economy?” Tony jokes, and Rhodes snorts.

They’re getting chatty, and getting distracted. As much as he likes the mood of easy camaraderie in the room, Steve takes that as his cue. He stands from his seat, slow, so as to send a message, and waits until all eyes are on him before he speaks.

“Allright, everyone. Lunch plans can come later. Let’s get this meeting started,” Steve says, slipping into his role easily, *fluidly*. “It’s good to have everyone here. We’ve got a few important things to touch on today. Nat just got back from a successful undercover operation, one that led to a just-as-successful raid on a Hydra base.”

A wave of knowing nods, pats on the back. Steve pauses, just for a moment. Just to let everyone congratulate each other.

“With the Russian faction leaders still in S.H.I.E.L.D. custody, we’re still getting new information
about Hydra’s ongoing plans and operations,” Steve continues, after a moment. “That said, we’ve got enough to go on to start taking down the smaller splinter cells in the region and surrounding the region. We need to work fast on making sure that Hydra is fully burnt down in this area. We don’t want any of these cells coming to fill in the vacuum left by the Russian faction leaders, and we definitely don’t want this acting as a catalyst for a violent power struggle between different Hydra splinters. So, we’re going in next week to take them all down.”

Cut off one head, cauterize the wounds, salt the earth, and burn that mother down. Guerilla tactics, Avengers-style. It was Steve’s preferred philosophy when dealing with Hydra, and he had absolutely no intentions to change to a strategy even an inch more diplomatic.

“I’ve drawn up strategies and group formations, and I sent them out this morning. If you haven’t pulled them up yet, here’s an overview,” Steve says, pulling up the file on his tablet. Within seconds, it flashes onto the monitors not occupied by Avengers calling in long-distance. “We’re on a quick, rolling timetable, and it’s very important we do this carefully and smoothly. Familiarize yourselves with where you’re supposed to be and when. First wave has boots on the ground in five days. Questions?”

Tony raises his hand. Steve readies himself for whatever question—or, in Stark’s case, argument—might come next. Just another part of the job. “Stark?”

“This operation shouldn’t be this big,” he says, matter-of-factly. “I don’t see why all of us need to be involved. Rhodey and I could have this down in a few days. No offense to the rest of you.”

“Our rolling timetable and overlapping operations make this op more efficient. You and Rhodes are valuable parts of our team,” Steve replies, calmly. He asked for questions, and this, sure enough, was a question. “But you can only be in two places at one time, at best. Fast as either of your suits may be—”

“Five-thousand, nine-hundred seventy-six miles per hour. That’s about Mach 5, and a hell of a lot faster than any Helicarrier or Quinjet our S.H.I.E.L.D. buddies have loaned out, just so you know,” Tony says, rapidfire-quick and condescending.

Steve pauses and takes a breath. Stay level, Rogers, goes a soft, friendly voice in his head. There was no need to get in a fight with Tony. Not now.

“Fast as your suits may be,” he repeats, his voice carefully level. “There’s still the risk of word getting out. We don’t want these cells to scatter, and we’re wanting to minimize civilian casualties, if not eliminate them completely. Some of these smaller cells can take hostage of entire towns. A quick, rolling ambush is the smartest option.”

Tony looks at him, an argument painted bright and clear on his face, like the hot rod red of his suit. Steve tries to ignore it, simply reiterating to the team the details of the maneuvers he’s showing on-screen. Walking through the steps to guarantee mutual understanding.

Of course, Steve Rogers—brave leader or not—was born and bred a fighter, and he could only suppress that fighting urge for so long. And so, though he tried—he really tried—to take the high road with Tony, something smarmy and fighty and more than a little rude still slips out. As Steve is preparing to step down, setting up to give the stage to someone else for a while, it slips in like a verbal stowaway:

“—this plan is the smartest, most efficient, safest plan possible. Given you’re the smartest guy any given room, Stark, you should be able to see the logic in that.”
And the energy in the room shifts *immediately*.

“Well,” Tony says, not in a yell, but somewhat ruffled, nonetheless, “I’m glad you’ve finally started to recognize that, Cap.”

“Only because you feel the need to repeat it, Stark,” Steve replies, sharply, flicking through his notes on his tablet.

“Hey, uh, I—I’ve got to get back to my patients, can we—let’s—let’s move on,” Bruce chimes in quickly, his voice soft and amicable, from his place on the other side of the world. Steve and Tony spend some time watching one another, neither one backing down. Neither one wanting to be the one to blink first. If it weren’t for the fact that they had a meeting to close out, if it were just him and Tony, Steve would have very well kept that up forever.

But he couldn’t keep it up forever. He couldn’t go head-to-head with Tony, not there. Not in front of practically the entire team. It wasn’t just his time he would be wasting if he engaged; it would be the entire team’s. As captain, both in rank and in title, it was *not* a good look, pettily arguing with another member of the team. It was practically the chaos of their very first meeting all over again. Steve clenches his jaw, letting out a low, slow breath—steadying himself. Levelling himself once more.

“You’re right, Banner,” Steve says, eventually. Tony backs off, looking smug, even through his frustration. “Let’s get back on track. Are there any other questions?”

The tension in the room dissipates almost in time with Tony sinking back in his chair. No one seems to want to pipe up, not after Tony and Steve’s little spat. That was *not* good for morale. And that consequence was on Steve. On Tony, too, but mostly on Steve. He would have to do something to fix that, to make sure that group cohesion and cooperation was high. More importantly, he would have to emphasize that there was *nothing wrong* with bringing up potential flaws in whatever strategies and battle plans he drew up. That, if anything, was the biggest piece of damage control Steve would have to do.

Filing those thoughts to the back of his mind—for the time being—Steve makes eye contact with Natasha, seated at the corner of the table, opposite him. She’s watching him carefully, and when their eyes meet, she nods. It’s her usual poker face, but Steve has a feeling they’ll be talking about this incident later.

“I’m going to turn it over to Natasha to give us a summary of the intel she’s gathered while undercover. Nat?”

She nods and stands, a few of her own notes carefully-organized and strewn in front of her.

“Morning, everyone. As you all know, Hydra has lost much of its organizational power and cohesion since the elimination of most of its upper leadership during the Lumerian Star and Sokovia incidents,” Natasha says, “As Rogers mentioned, this has led to factionalism and splintering, even among lower-level, local Hydra cells. There is *already* a struggle within Hydra’s ranks to rebuild ranks and install certain leaders as head of the whole organization. And as Rogers mentioned, that struggle has the potential to turn violent, with civilians at the most risk.”

Steve has heard a version of this same briefing before. He takes notes on his tablet, regardless. After all, it was always good to be thorough, especially with something as sensitive as this.

“While this is all going on, we have some information that seems to indicate a coordinated effort to launch an attack against population centers in the United States. There seems to be some interest
from Hydra cells stateside requesting weapons from Hydra cells around the Sokovia-Russia region. Big weapons. Ultron-guts weapons,” Natasha continues on, “We don’t have any leads on which American Hydra cells are requesting these weapons—or where, specifically, they’re planning on using these weapons—so these raids are going to have to serve two purposes.”

A pause. Time to let the importance of their next mission, those non-stop, exhausting attacks, soak in. Like earlier, there are some understanding nods, but fewer. Further between. Laced with concern because of that element of uncertainty that Natasha introduced—the idea that, good as any of them might be, there was the chance that at any time, the Avengers might be taken by surprise.

It was a lot to digest. For anyone, but especially for newer recruits—people who didn’t make careers out of uncertainty, out of responsibility. Not for the first time, Steve makes a note to speak to touch base with Wanda. Just to check in. Just to make sure that she—the youngest member of the team, and the one closest to loss—is doing okay.

Steve’s phone lights up, a silent alert to a new message received, and from its spot on the glass tabletop it’s like a beacon—both a distraction and a welcome break from the heaviness of the job. Steve flicks his eyes over the screen, briefly—moving quickly to unlock his phone and glance over the full message.

BUCKY [10:59 AM]: Morning, Stevie. How’d your run go?

BUCKY [11:17 AM]: We still on for tomorrow? :P

It’s not professional in the slightest, checking his phone in the middle of a meeting like that. With most of them dealing with day jobs, and all of them dealing with breaking threats, it’s more excusable to keep up to date—though it doesn’t make Steve’s lack of focus any less unbecoming of a leader. But he finds himself almost working on autopilot, swiping in a quick response:

ME [11:18 AM]: In meeting; yes. :)

The situation at hand might have been heavy, but he still found himself feeling lighter, brighter, even, knowing that, even in spite of his responsibilities—many and important that they were—he had begun to create a life. He wasn’t just Captain America anymore. He was slowly but surely beginning to exist and live and thrive as just Steve. He was learning how to be a person again. And Bucky was his touchstone for that.

“Steve?” Natasha asks, jerking him out of his little distraction. He makes eye contact with her, and she looks, almost, like she’s smiling. Chagrined, but smiling. “Got anything to add before we break?”

“Keep an eye out during these rolling raids, and when you’re taking out leadership, let’s try not to kill them,” Steve replies, slipping quick and easy back into Captain mode, though far less rigid than earlier. “Sound good?”

Hums and nods and murmured affirmatives. No questions raised, not even unspoken ones, the kind that make their presence known, but manifest only through physical expressions of doubt. Just concern. Anxiousness. The kind that follows a big mission like this, but more so, the kind that accompanies the fact that there is knowledge we are missing.

Steve nods, not filled with brimming confidence, but trusting in his team, regardless. That’s all he could do. That was probably the most important thing he could do—other than doing his best to keep the group together. “Well, in that case, we’re done. Since we won’t be having a training exercise before this op, be sure to make sure you’re prepared before you’re needed on the ground.
Our all-team meeting will be our debrief when we’re all back. Unless anyone has any lingering questions—this meeting is dismissed.”

Like antsy undergrads being let out a long lecture, the team breaks and disperses, gathering up notes and bags and half-empty cups of coffee.

“Nice seeing everyone,” Bruce says, with a little wave, before ending the connection. Steve looks up at the monitor and sends a tired little half-salute to Sam, who finger-guns back.

“See you in a few,” Steve says, knowing fully well the next time he’d see Sam was probably through the hail of bullets.

“Talk to you soon,” Sam replies, before he hangs up, the monitor blacking out. He wishes they could speak more. But Sam was a very busy man, with a very normal life, outside the Avengers. He deserved better than for Steve to start getting needy on him.

Turning, Steve scans the room as he packs his notes and his tablet up. Conversations have broken out in clusters, but Wanda, the person Steve wanted to talk to the most, is nowhere to be found. He makes a mental note—check in on Wanda later. Marked urgent.

“Rogers,” Natasha calls out. He finds her through the shuffle, and they meet in the middle.

“What’s up?” Steve asks, slinging his backpack over one shoulder.

“Lunch?” she asks, motioning with her head towards the door.

Steve shrugs, but the way that they smile at each other leaves no doubt about his coming answer. Of all the things people had proposed over that meeting, an early lunch was probably the best idea he’d heard all day.

“Sure,” he replies, “Why not?”

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Natasha leads him to a trendy little brunch café, complete with a trendy brunch café line. The two of them stand together, all but anonymous outside the front entrance, just two regular New Yorkers on a long lunch break. Being Avengers had both its responsibilities and its perks, but it sure didn’t exempt them from a twenty-minute wait.

“That meeting went well,” Natasha starts, once they’re comfortably settled in line, slowly inching ever-forward.

“It could’ve gone better, is how it went,” Steve says, sounding a lot more tired than he was.

“Tony can be dick. He has his good moments, but he can definitely also be a dick. You can’t control for that,” she says, with a shrug. “Comes with the territory.”

“No, I get that. And I’ve come to terms with that,” Steve says, “You’re gonna own a cat, you’re gonna have to live with a box of shit. Just think I could’ve handled it better.”

“Yeah. You could’ve. Could’ve also handled it a lot worse,” she replies, completely nonplussed. “Just don’t engage next time. Strange as it might sound to you, the thing is, you don’t have to fight all the time.”

Steve snorts. Easier said than done. Damn well easier said than done, especially when it came to
“What about Wanda?” Steve asks, a sharp pivot. He didn’t want to think any more about how he fucked up with dealing with Tony. Or how he was going to spend the next few meetings walking back the damage he’d done.

Natasha shrugs. “What about her?”

“You have any idea how she’s doing? I was gonna catch up with her after the meeting, but she disappeared.”

“She’s doing okay. From what she’s told me, anyway,” Natasha says. Then, she turns to him, head tilted to the side, looking almost comical. “You’re concerned about her.”

That was putting it lightly. Steve sighs, long and heavy. “She’s been through a lot. And she’s new to this. I mean—there’s a learning curve. We forget that, since most of us have been doing sort of thing for so long, we’re used to it, but—shit, Natasha, she’s been through so much, she’s barely had the chance to breathe, and here we are, asking her to make sure her country doesn’t get caught in the crossfire of a Hydra turf war.”

“And she can do it. She’ll learn. Many before her have,” Natasha replies, standing tip-toed to look to the front of the line. They’re so close to being seated. “If I remember my American history correctly, you ran after a Hydra agent about eleven minutes after popping out of the Stark-Erksine supersoldier-o-matic.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I did,” Steve says, shaking his head with a little smile. It was a trial by fire if there ever was one. “Guess you have a point. I’m still going to check in with her. And I—I dunno. I’m still going to offer her an out.”

They reach the front of the line, the twenty minutes passing by in a flash. A friendly, handlebar-moustached waiter waves them over to a cozy, two-person table in the window of the café.

“Don’t underestimate her, Steve. Wanda is stronger than your mother-henning instincts seem to suggest,” Natasha says, somehow having squeezed her way in front of Steve when he hadn’t been looking. “Now enough talking shop. Let’s go eat. I’ve been thinking about this place’s rosewater waffles since earlier this morning.”

They settle into their seats, their waiter hovering by the table. It’s a tight squeeze, and Natasha takes the one closest to the wall, knowing fully well how cramped Steve would be if forced into it. She’s a good friend, Steve thinks, stretching out those long legs of his, to the extent that he can.

Menus are printed on the cutesy, illustrated placemats at this café. Anywhere else, that would have been considered tacky. Only in New York could one order six-dollar coffee off a placemat menu. When they order, Steve gets the six-dollar coffee, anyway.

“So,” Natasha says eventually, drawing the word far longer than it had any right to be.

“So?” Steve asks, half-wondering if he’s in the mood to order a beer later. He knows he probably won’t—it’s not like he can get drunk, and it’s not like the taste is anything to write home about—but as it’s offered, it’s something he’s willing to consider. It would be a comfort, after the meeting, after all.

Natasha leans in close, almost stretching out across the entire table. “Who’re you seeing?”

“I’m not seeing anyone, Natasha,” Steve says, not looking up at her. “And don’t try to set me up
with anyone, either, you know I’m just gonna turn ‘em down.”

She hums, doing that thing with her eyebrows that makes her look suspicious. Like a picture she sent to him, way back when. A cat, looking smug, at the other end of a knife. That was a Natasha picture, if there ever were one. “Well—if you aren’t seeing someone, you want to be seeing this person.”

“What makes you think there’s a person?” Steve asks, trying hard not to sound overly defensive. Trying hard to sound casual.

“You looked at your phone during the meeting.”

Steve works hard to keep his expression level, knowing fully well he’d been caught texting a someone. The texting bit wasn’t the issue. That was all but acknowledged by now. The someone bit, though—that was where Steve was caught. He’d been putting off telling Natasha, and this could have been a good in—but that doesn’t stop him from playing the denial game.

“It was unprofessional, but that doesn’t necessarily mean there’s a person,” he says, sipping at his water. “I have notifications for breaking news. You should get them, too.”

“It was a text. I saw it. It couldn’t’ve been from me or anyone else you know, because we were all in the room together, and you know Sam doesn’t reply to the groupchat,” Natasha says, and just as Steve is opening his mouth to speak, she stops him, “And don’t try to say it was your dentist or something, because I saw you. I saw the way you smiled when you took a look at it.”

This game was always a losing one, especially when playing against someone as experienced and sharp-eyed as Natasha. If denial were chess, Steve was a child, playing against Natasha’s Winston Churchill.

“You know,” she says, mixing her juice with its straws, “You’re only really good at deflecting if you’ve got your shield.”

He sighs, turning his head away. The other side of the restaurant suddenly became very interesting. All she does is smile at him, looking smug. Looking like that very same cat, only this time, with an entire dead pigeon in its mouth.

“There’s a someone, Rogers,” she says, quietly, shifting tone, all that former playfulness gone. A rare moment of genuine softness. The Iron Curtain never really goes down, but in this moment, it parts, ever-so-slightly. “And really, I’m happy for you. You deserve a someone.”

“But?” Steve asks, glancing at her. She shrugs.

“No but. I mean it. I’m happy for you.”

Steve sighs. He would have to tell her. As much as loved the idea of having Bucky all to himself, having their relationship private and away and entirely shielded from any of the Avengers, he had to tell her.

Their food comes out in half the time it took for them to get a seat. Natasha digs into her fancy waffles almost immediately. She trusted him—enough to let those walls let things through. Enough to share meals with him. Enough to feel comfortable actually eating. He would have to tell her. Steve, after swallowing a mouthful of brunch steak, would tell her.

“It’s cute librarian.”
Natasha looks at him, wide-eyed and startled through a mouthful of rosewater waffle and honey syrup.

“Who?” she asks, after swallowing. Steve can’t tell if she’s being genuine, or if she’s playing it up—feigning ignorance to get him to say exactly what she wants to hear, an official confirmation, clear and without subtext. But if he had to choose, he would pick the former.

“You know. My—uh. My Instagram friend.”

“Bucky If You’re Nasty?” she asks, sounding excited even through her perpetual deadpan. “You’re dating Bucky If You’re Nasty?”

“No, not, not—not dating. But I—he and I, we have lunch together. Go on walks. That—uh. Those sorts of things,” Steve says, conveniently leaving out the part about how they’d been on one walk together while sharing one not-lunch. Two, counting their plans for the day ahead of them.

“Interesting,” Natasha all but hums, and she’s doing the face again. Maybe it’s the fact that as she grills Steve, she’s simultaneously enjoying her waffles. But somehow, that expression seems amplified, even though it’s exactly the same. “So, what’s he like?”

“He’s—he’s nice. We’re really just getting to know each other again,” Steve says, continuing to clean his plate. “But he’s nice. He’s nice, and he’s funny, and he’s genuine, and warm, and—I dunno. I really like him.”

She smiles, almost looking fond. “Sounds like you do.”

“Hey,” Steve says, “What’s that tone supposed to mean?”

“Nothing,” Natasha says, but nothing is never really nothing with her.

“Bullshit, Nat. Come on. I’m not—I’m not going to propose to the guy tomorrow, or anything.”

“I never said that, Rogers,” she replies, punctuated by a sip of her juice.

He studies her closely. “But this time, there’s a but.”

“Is it his? Is it nice?” Natasha deadpans, with a little smirk. Steve blushes at that. Like a goddamn schoolboy.

“I—uh. I’m not at liberty to say,” he says, his eyes settling on his forkful of scrambled eggs and hash browns. He hadn’t caught much of Bucky’s ass, given that they were almost always side-by-side, and in the time that they weren’t, Bucky was either sitting or wearing long, bulky cardigans. But he liked to imagine it was a nice ass—call it a combination of wishful thinking and an educated guess, given the few glances he’d stolen of Bucky’s seemingly-thick thighs.

“Uh-huh,” Natasha hums. Unconvinced. Unimpressed. She finishes off her juice, watching Steve the entire time. All Steve can do under her gaze is chew, slowly finishing his breakfast, getting sized up the entire time. It’s silent for a long time between them, though this one is far less comfortable than their usual ones, if only because God knows what is going on inside Natasha’s head. It’s only after Steve pays for their lunch that that silence is broken again—quick and sharp, as is Natasha’s nature.

“So when are you asking him out?” she asks, the question hitting Steve out of nowhere like oncoming traffic.
“Natasha, we’ve had lunch together once,” Steve says. She has him clocked. Big time. He’s in deep, and Natasha Romanov knows. “I—we can’t.”

“But you’ve been best friends with him for how long now? Few months? Almost a year?”

“Yeah,” Steve sighs. It doesn’t feel like that long. Somehow, it feels like he just met Bucky yesterday. But somehow, it also feels like he and Bucky had known each other since the beginning of time. “Yeah, about.”

She hums, standing. Leaving a few large bills as a tip. She had a soft side, a generous side, if one knew where to look. “You know, on dating apps, sometimes you ask people out after like, an hour’s conversation. I’m just saying.”

Steve follows her out, unfolding his long legs from under the tiny table, trying very hard to make himself small and inconsequential to squeeze his way through the crowded café as painlessly as possible. There were many times that New York City made him miss being small, and this—conversation and all—was one of those times.

“Even if I were into the Grindr thing, I don’t even know if he’s—you know. That kind of guy.”

“How does he know you’re that kind of guy?” is what she hits back with, looking him straight in the eye. And, to some degree, she’s right. It’s not like Steve started his first conversation with Bucky by saying, Hi, I’m your friend Grant, but I’m actually Steve Rogers, and also, I am sexually attracted to men. But he’d hinted.

“We’ve—” Steve sighs, “I’ve flirted with him. Kind of.”

She stares up at him, unblinking. “Steve.”

“What?” he asks, feeling accused. Less like a firing squad, and more like somehow, he’d been tattled on.

“You’re not very good at subtleties,” she says, and he can see it in her face: that awkward, undercover kiss between them, flashing across her memory. They both made an unspoken pact never to speak of it again, but that didn’t mean either of them could completely forget it. As much as either of them would like to. “Or flirting, for that matter, I imagine.”

“Hey, I bagged my fair share of hunks in the day,” Steve brags. Playfully, but not untruthfully. Not that the circumstances were the most intimate, or filled with much emotional depth at all, but the point still stands.

“Sure, sure, grandpa,” Natasha parries back, rolling her eyes. She sends him a little lopsided smirk, and he laughs, soft. Like an exhale. Like a little release.

Maybe Stark and Rhodes had their own decades-long, college-sweethearts friendship, but this thing with Natasha? Their little, intimate, difficult, fun friendship? It wasn’t too bad.

“Well. Thank you for lunch, but I have to go. Things to do. Intel to gather. A cat to feed,” Natasha says, “But seriously, Steve. Make sure he knows that you’re a viable partner for him before you start panicking about how he might not be a viable partner for you. That should change things. You’ll be happily dating within the next few weeks, and I expect you to tell me once you ask him out.”

“You know you can’t hold me up to that, Nat,” Steve says.
“Fine,” she groans, “But tell me when you ask him out, alright?”

“Yes. Of course,” he says, completely seriously. “I will.”

“And hey, Steve,” Natasha says, grabbing his attention—just one more last-minute thing before they part. “I mean it. I’m happy for you.”

Steve smiles. “Thank you.”

They stand there, off to the side, in the middle of Manhattan, enjoying each other’s company. It’s not like the warmth of being with Bucky, not like the way he feels like he could spend forever with that boy, but Steve wouldn’t trade this moment, this feeling, with Natasha, even still.

“Of course, you do know this means I have to tell Sam, right?” she asks, eventually.

“Natasha.”

“The only way to stop me is to tell him before I do,” she says, as she begins to walk away. “You have about eight hours. Better make them count.”

He shakes his head, waving a goodbye. If she wanted to tell Sam, she could tell Sam, and Steve could just fill in the details and course-correct when Sam would inevitably call to ask about it later.

There wasn’t much to tell, anyway—as much as Steve might wish, might hope otherwise.

Chapter End Notes

drifting away from steve and bucky's budding relationship (in whatever form it takes) to get to steve in the avengers and steve with others, for a while. no smooches yet, but they're coming. eventually. ;)

- this chapter (and the next two/three) were initially one chapter, but i got ahead of myself and it ended up being ~8k words and wasn't even fully finished. after some panicked consultation with/great feedback from my fantastic writing partner, emily (a.k.a. softbrobucky on tumblr), i divided it up. hopefully that solves some of the pacing and relationship-building issues, but we’ll see.

- read up on the guns and butter model here.

- on my tumblr, i originally had tony drinking from a regular, 30/40-year-old MIT mug, but i decided to give him a travel mug instead. there is another mug in the next chapter that i’m excited to talk about, but that’ll come when it comes.

- the café that natasha and steve have lunch at is based off jack’s wife freda in Soho. i still think about the madam freda there.

that's it for the time being. i have a good amount of the next chapter done, but i’ll be taking a break from writing hot librarian au, very briefly, to work on a giftfic that needs to be done by the end of the month. in the meantime, check out this great art that my good friend raz did of hot librarian bucky in a too-tight out of print sweater. it's a good preview for next chapter, i think. see you then. ;)
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

a week in the life. (more or less)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next day, Tuesday, Steve shows up at the Martinelli bright-eyed and ready for his and Bucky’s walk, complete with food—this time, a bag of sandwiches from his favorite deli. Seeing Bucky again had been on Steve’s mind ever since their last meeting. He would be up in the air and out of New York for a week, minimum, by Friday—this was his last chance to speak to Bucky regularly for a while. And he wanted to make it count.

Bucky already has three-fourths of a protein bar in his mouth when Steve arrives, and for a second, Steve panics, thinking he’s somehow, accidentally, shown up late. He readies up an apology, but the bright look on Bucky’s face puts those fears to rest. Suddenly, Steve feels not panic, but fondness. All he can think, then, is that with that with the better part of a protein bar stuffed in his mouth, Bucky looks like something akin to a handsome, blue-eyed hamster.


“Hi,” Steve says, with a smile. He sets the bag on the counter, a clear gift. “Brought you something.”

“Aww, Steve,” Bucky says, still cradling his mug in his hands. Reading is Sexy, it says. Steve wants to comment on it. Maybe even say something about its accuracy. He decides against it. Don’t be a fucking weirdo, Rogers, goes the eternal refrain in the back of his brain. Bucky just smiles at him, his expression soft, completely oblivious to the tug-of-war going on in Steve’s head. “You didn’t have to.”

“I wanted to,” Steve says, before pulling out a sandwich for himself. “Hope you like tuna.”

Bucky beams at him, bright and beautiful and sending butterflies fluttering in the pit of Steve’s stomach. Dammit, he was in deep. “Lemme tell Dolores I’m gonna take my lunch. Be right back.”

With that, he sets down his mug, pushes himself out and away from the circulation desk, and walks off, disappearing between shelves and through the library’s twists and turns. Steve watches him until he’s out of sight, before letting out a little—only slightly lovestruck—sigh.

He thinks about his conversation with Natasha the day before. About the fact that he’d fallen head over heels for Bucky so quickly. The idea of the two of them—Bucky and Steve, as a unit—feels like the most natural thing in the world. But Steve knows it’s far too early to even consider making a move, especially if they were starting over, as he promised they were doing on their first FaceTime chat. Combined with the fact that Steve’s not even entirely sure if Bucky is flirting with him, or if Bucky is just very friendly and he’s been misreading the signals, making a move is
almost entirely out of the question.

But God, does Steve want to. Does he wish he could.

Bucky shows up again in record time, twirling a pen in a way Steve had never seen before. Like he was practicing for a Coney Island knife show. In one fluid motion, Bucky flicks his wrist, the pen tumbling into the cup on his desk. Steve almost wants to applaud, but Bucky doesn’t even stop—he just grins at Steve, and continues to the door.

“Ready to go?” he asks.

“After you,” Steve says, angling his head slightly, looking to catch a quick peek of that ass, just to know. Sure enough, it’s a damn nice ass, at least, what Steve can tell from it.

Their walk to the park is quiet. It’s quiet in part because Bucky is eating his tuna sandwich, but moreso because Steve is trying to revel in the moment; he’s taking it in, studying it, memorizing every single shade and hue that he can take in. He was going to need the memory of today when he shipped out for the Avengers’ upcoming anti-Hydra op.

“Good sandwich?” Steve asks, less to break an awkward silence, and more to let Bucky know he’s not ignoring him. Not that it seems like Bucky would mind. He looks hungry, tearing into the sandwich like it’d been the first thing he ate all day, despite the fact that Steve knew it very much wasn’t.

“Mmm,” Bucky hums in agreement. “Good sandwich.”

Somehow, that agreeable little response—that friendly, polite form of validation, is all that Steve needs. If everything else that happens that day explodes in his face, Steve can at least hold on to the fact that Bucky liked the sandwich he brought him.

They settle onto the same bench they sat at during their last walk, and already, it feels comfortably routine. It feels like it’s theirs. Steve settles next to Bucky, settling the sandwich bag on his lap, and taking out its few remaining contents.

“So how’re you doing?” Steve asks, carefully unwrapping his own tuna sandwich, before passing a napkin to Bucky. “How’s your day gone so far?”

“Mm,” Bucky says, wiping a little bit of mayonnaise from the corner of his mouth. He tucks a few loose strands of hair behind his ear, almost absentmindedly. It shouldn’t have been such a charming gesture, but it was, and Steve finds himself smiling, something blooming in his chest, making his entire body feel fuzzy and warm.

“Mmm?” Steve echoes, as he takes a bite of his sandwich. The tone has a friendly little lilt to it, making it clear that it’s not an attempt mock, not an attempt to demean, but rather, an attempt to allow Bucky a chance to answer, if he wanted to—less a prod than a nudge. Steve, of all people, recognized the importance of allowing an easy, comfortable way out of a conversation, after all.

Bucky shrugs, crumpling his trash into a little ball. “It’s not a bad day.”

“Not a bad day doesn’t mean a good day,” Steve replies, watching Bucky.

“It’s been—slow,” Bucky says, sounding tired, though not the kind of tired that comes from a bout of physical exhaustion. His tiredness sounds like he kind of that comes when one is tasked with too
much or too little to do. All that exhaustion seems to ebb, to dissipate, when Bucky meets Steve’s gaze. “It’s been a slow day. But it’s a good day. Now that I’m here with you.”

Steve, eternally fifteen—at least with this boy—ducks his head, feeling flattered and embarrassed. He thinks he can hear Bucky chuckling at him, but he’s comfortable. He knows that he’s not being laughed at.

“You’re just a natural charmer, aren’t you?” Steve asks, elbowing Bucky, just slightly. Bucky squirms at the gentle ribbing, laughing as he does. “Bet your dance card’s awful full.”

Bucky laughs at that, softly. He’s shaking his head, and Steve is mesmerized by the way that his hair sways, even tied back like it is.

“Nah. Nah, no one’s asking me out or anything.” he says, casually, seemingly focused on a spot in the grass. “Well. No one but you.”

Steve blinks at that. “Huh.”

“Huh?” Bucky echoes, tilting his head to look at Steve.

“I’m just—that’s surprising,” Steve says, leveling with Bucky, who looks surprised and confused, “You’re a really great guy. Dunno why other people wouldn’t see that.”

“Jeez. You flatter me, you know that? Keep on talking like that, and I’ll get a big head. And with my fucking forehead? That’d be no good, no good at all. Can’t risk that,” Bucky jokes, completely deadpan. The snort that Steve makes is sudden, and messy, and undignified. He’s lucky that he wasn’t eating then. Choking on a tuna sandwich was not a good way for Captain America to go. When he looks over, Bucky is grinning at him, looking satisfied, charmed, even. The idea of Bucky going out of his way to make him laugh is a little too much for Steve to bear, given how little dignity he had left. He’s glad, then, when Bucky continues, more seriously: “But who knows. Guess you’re stuck with me.”

“Lucky me,” Steve says, without a single hint of irony. His sandwich, half-eaten, sits like an indescribable weight in his lap.

The sounds of the park continue unperturbed as a heavy veil of silence falls between them, somewhere between comfortable and awkward. Steve continues to pick at his sandwich, but somehow, he doesn’t feel all that hungry. His stomach feels fuzzy, but not sick; less nausea, and more the feeling of walking barefoot through the grass.

“What about you?” Bucky asks, not suddenly, but seemingly out of nowhere, still.

“What about me?” Steve repeats, bemused.

Bucky shrugs, making the motion of tucking a strand of hair behind his ear, despite the reality that there are no loose flyaways there. “Anyone special?”

Steve smiles, warm and sweet, his heart fluttering wildly in his chest. “No one but you.”

Bucky looks up at Steve, his lips parted just slightly, that soft, surprised look of his all but engulfing Steve. There’s hardly six inches’ worth of distance between them. It would be easy to hold hands with Bucky, to link their tuna-covered fingers together and sit there, basking in the warmth of their park. It would be so easy for Steve to silently, covertly express how he felt about Bucky, then and there. It would be easy, even, for Steve to kiss him.
But he doesn’t.

Steve keeps his hands to himself. Another silence falls between them, comfortable, still, but loaded, buzzing with things that were said and things that still need to be said and things that won’t be said. Steve’s heart still feels fuzzy and soft, but he feels like he’s stumbled; Bucky makes him feel like a newborn fawn, bumbling cluelessly through the emotional minefield that was their relationship.

They sit in that semi-comfortable silence for an indeterminate amount of time, neither making a move. Steve etches the moment into his mind, like he did with the walk over, memorizing the sway of the grass and the trees, the eclectic clash of birdsong and the muted din of the city, the comfortable warmth of Bucky sitting beside him. He files that moment away for the week ahead, for whenever he would need a mental break—for when peace was all but impossible, and fighting seemed like it would last forever. But of course, that moment there—that brief peace in the park—could not last forever, either. Eventually, Bucky lets out a deep breath, takes his trash in his hand, and stands up, slow, as if not to startle Steve.

“Well,” he says, sounding neither disappointed nor relieved, “I gotta head back. Books to file, archives to care for, you know.”

“Lemme walk you back.” Steve says, carefully wrapping up his half-eaten sandwich, and putting it back in the deli bag.

“You’re such a gentleman,” Bucky jokes, though not unkindly. “I think I can safely make my way back to work, though, you know.”

“Yeah, well, you never know. Lots of danger out there these days.”

“Right, right,” Bucky laughs, “Like I’m going to be snatched up by gang of knife-wielding art history grad students between here and the library.”

“Hey,” Steve says, grazing the edge of his Captain America voice. “Wouldn’t be the weirdest thing that’s happened in Brooklyn.”

Bucky shrugs, grinning. “You got me there.”

“Alright. Well, come on. I don’t want Dot to start thinking I’m a troublemaker for keeping you out too late,” Steve says, before they fall into one of their comfortable silences again, as they were wont to do.

“Yes, sir,” Bucky laughs, and they walk back to the library together, Steve leading the way. The walk feels quick, almost instant, like they’re back at the Martinelli the second they step away from that bench. At the front entrance, they stop, hovering at the entryway, like it’s a first date, with Bucky not yet making his way inside, and Steve feeling hesitant to leave.

“Thanks for spending time with me again. And for lunch,” Bucky says, tossing his trash in a can by the door.

“Thanks for letting me steal you on your lunch break,” Steve replies. They’re standing so close.

“It’s not stealing if I wanted to go,” Bucky says with a smile. “And hey—just know you can come in any time you like. I don’t want you to feel like you’re only allowed to visit me during my lunch break. Any time you’re around, I’d be happy to see you. Besides, if you come in and I’m busy, it’ll give you more reason to check out what we’ve got.”
From the sound of his voice, Steve can tell that Bucky wants to see more of him. In his own, roundabout way, he’s asking Steve Can we do this again sometime? and Let's do more things together. Bucky, too, sounds like he wants to take the next step—whether that means a romantic relationship or not. And that, small as it is, offers a flicker of hope to Steve.

Which makes it hurt so much more when he has to let Bucky down gently.

“Oh, hey, uh—that reminds me. I—I don’t think I’ll be able to make it next week. Gonna be away for a week. Maybe two,” Steve says, feeling more and more guilty with each second. “You know. Work.”

“Oh,” Bucky says, casually, calmly. He’s clearly trying hard not to sound disappointed. “No, that’s okay. Gotta do what you’ve gotta do. Fight the good fight.”

“I’m gonna be pretty off the grid, and I’m not sure how long this op is gonna take, exactly. Supposed to be the better part of a week, starting Saturday, but things come up. You know,” Steve starts, trying hard not to look away from Bucky. “But I’m gonna try to text you. As much as I can, I mean.”

Bucky looks worried, genuinely worried, telling from that deep frown. “Steve, you don’t have to.”

“It’s not like you’re forcing me to check in on you. I’m gonna message you because I want to. I like talking to you,” Steve says, because I like having you in my life is far too intimate than is acceptable among friends who’ve—though having known each other for months—have only had lunch with one another twice.

“Steve—” Bucky says, his tone a warning.

“Bucky. Buck. I’m not gonna do anything that’s gonna get me killed. I know what I’m doing. I’ll be fine. Alright? I just—I wanna hear from you while I’m outta town, if I can. It’d mean a lot to me.”

Bucky lets out a defeated-sounding sigh. “Alright. But don’t—don’t go running into trouble just ’cause you’re texting me, yeah?”

“I won’t. Promise.”

“Alright,” Bucky says with a nod. He still looks worried and unsure, but he seems to have reached acceptance. “Alright. Good. When you’re back in the states, though, you lemme know.”

“Don’t gotta tell me twice,” Steve says, warmly.

“Hey. Be safe, okay?” Bucky murmurs, stepping closer, concern clear on his face. It absolutely breaks Steve’s heart. All Steve wants to do is wrap him up in a tight hug and stroke his hair, to assure him that they’ll both be alright. He wants to press up close—closer than they are, even now—and kiss Bucky, like he saw other troops do with the girls they were leaving stateside, all those years ago. Instead, he just puts his hand on Bucky’s right shoulder, squeezing it tight. He’s surprised to find it’s not as soft as his big, plush sweater would make it seem—but files that thought away for a more appropriate time.

“I will be,” Steve says, softly, “You know I’ll be.”


“I gotta go, but I’ll keep you updated, alright? Who knows? Maybe this op will be over before we
know it,” Steve lies, knowing fully well the complicated situation he’s about to go into.

“Yeah. Alright. Good luck,” Bucky says, and Steve, painfully, turns to leave. He gets about five feet out, peeling off into the sidewalk slowly, each step feeling like he’s being pulled away from his own heart.

“Hey, one last thing, Steve,” Bucky calls out, from his place at the library’s entrance. Steve looks up, almost too enthusiastically.

“What’s that, Buck?”

“Can we—can we FaceTime?” he asks, sounding tentative. A little unsure. As if he didn't know what he was doing. “Not tonight, but before you go?”

Steve smiles, his heart, once uncomfortably distant from its body, now settling comfortably in his chest.

“Yeah, Buck. I’d love to. Of course.”

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Because there’s no rest for the wicked, on Wednesday, Steve has an appointment.

On the way to Manhattan, Steve’s mind is completely occupied, a fuzzy haze of thoughts he’s juggling and anxieties he can never fully put to bed. He thinks about the mission ahead, going over strategies and formations again and again and again, working out scenarios in his head, worrying over whether this battle plan is truly airtight. He thinks about Wanda, about how she’d never replied when he tried to check in. He thinks, as always, about Bucky.

But the issue with worrying about battle plans is that nothing can be accounted for with one-hundred percent certainty. And the issue with worrying about Wanda is that if Steve keeps pushing, it might make her more uncomfortable. Steve, slowly recognizing that only one of his thought-spirals can be dealt with, does the only thing he can: he texts Bucky.

ME [12:09 PM]: I need a distraction from myself. Do you mind if I ask you to humor me?

BUCKY [12:13 PM]: Not at all, bud!

BUCKY [12:13 PM]: It’s what I’m here for :P

Steve manages a small smile, letting out a slow, heavy sigh. The chaos in his brain does not dissipate, but it steadies—not getting better, not yet, but thankfully not getting worse.

ME [12:14 PM]: You’re the tops, Buck.

To that, Bucky sends over a gif—a cutesy cartoon skeleton clutching its face as it blushes. Somehow, even in that little gesture, Steve finds himself blown away at how Bucky was just so naturally charming. Only he could manage to make a cartoon skeleton seem charming.

BUCKY [12:19 PM]: Well, work’s been slow so I don’t have any good library stories that I can use to distract you

ME [12:19 PM]: That’s fine.

BUCKY [12:20 PM]: Okay
BUCKY [12:20 PM]: How about this

BUCKY [12:21 PM]: I used to play this game with my sisters when we would go on long road trips or to keep them awake and out of trouble when I’d walk them to school

ME [12:22 PM]: Tell me.

BUCKY [12:24 PM]: Look at all the people in the subway car

Steve glances around the subway car. It’s just like every other train from Brooklyn to Manhattan, especially during that time of day—crowded, stuffy, but not yet packed-to-the-gills.

BUCKY [12:29 PM]: Did you do that?

ME [12:30 PM]: Yes.

BUCKY [12:30 PM]: Now pick out a person. Doesn’t have to be the most fashionable or whatever, just someone who stands out to you

Taking another glance around the subway car, Steve tries to do just that. There’s two black boys, reading a comic book and giggling to each other about something within it. There’s a Hasidic man, leaning next to the doors. There’s a pair of fashionably-dressed Asian women, one of whom, is holding a ceramic milk jug. There’s a white guy with a handlebar mustache and beard, looking like he stepped right out of the 1890s, jamming out to something on his iPhone. There’s a woman in a hijab carefully wiping snot from her baby’s nose as her son chatters excitedly about dinosaurs. There’s a woman with her hair shaved short, Lavender Menace muscle tee showing off intricate tattoos and muscular forearms. There were some bespoke businessmen types, stressed student types, and folks in between. The people of New York City—in all their resiliency and simplicity and diversity—are in that car, represented in one way or another. And Steve was one of them, just another New Yorker, on his way to someplace else. It’s calming. Humbling.

Eventually, Steve settles on his subject, an older woman in a sweater sitting across from where he’s standing, deeply engrossed in a book. The text, from what Steve can tell, is in Cyrillic. He texts Bucky, ready to move forward.

ME [12:36 PM]: Alright. I picked my person. Now what?

BUCKY [12:36 PM]: Now

BUCKY [12:37 PM]: This is the fun part

BUCKY [12:37 PM]: Try to come up with a fake life story for that person

Steve smiles at the challenge, before quickly tapping out a friendly response.

ME [12:39 PM]: A whole life story?

BUCKY [12:40 PM]: Yep

BUCKY [12:40 PM]: Name, friends, family, job, deep, dark, secrets

BUCKY [12:41 PM]: All those things

BUCKY [12:41 PM]: Then tell me about it

Coming up with a convincing fake backstory wasn’t part of Steve’s usual repertoire. Natasha was
so much better than he was at coming up with complicated backstories on the fly. It was her job, after all. But Steve is nothing if not dedicated when given a challenge. So he tries. For Bucky, he tries.

ME [12:53 PM]: Okay. She’s an old woman, Eastern European. Russian or Ukrainian. Her name is Olga, she’s 73 years old. She moved to Brooklyn after the war. She was a soldier, but none of her kids or grandkids know that. She’s on her way to stay with her daughter and her grandkids right now. That’s all I’ve got.

Steve looks up at the woman again, still engrossed in her book. He wonders how far from the truth he is. He wonders what sort of stories she actually has to tell. He wonders if anyone is thinking the same thing about him. When his phone buzzes in his hand, he’s still thinking about it.

BUCKY [12:58 PM]: Nice one!

He smiles, tapping out a quick reply.

ME [12:58 PM]: How’d I do?

Bucky’s text comes in just as the train begins to approach the platform. Steve’s able to skim it over and send off a quick reply just before the doors open.

BUCKY [12:59 PM]: Did great! Maybe you should start writing :P

ME [1:00 PM]: Thanks. I’m not that good with words, though.

The old woman, not-Olga, does not rise to leave. Steve steals a glance at her, briefly, as he leaves, still thinking about Bucky’s little distraction; still thinking about the sheer vastness of stories contained within one subway car. He wants to tap out a thank you to Bucky, as he’s heading out onto the sidewalk. He wants to thank him for reminding him of the wonder of cities, of existing in New York. He wants to thank him for everything. Instead, he sends him something completely different.

ME [1:11 PM]: Have you ever noticed those ads on the subway advertising plastic surgeons? As someone who had their appearance drastically altered by a doctor in a white coat, I can’t say I would go along with it all the same if he’d put out an ad on the subway.

BUCKY [1:14 PM]: Omg

BUCKY [1:14 PM]: Yeah, same

Steve snorts at the response, for reasons including, but not limited to, the inclusion of that innocuous little same. He’s about to send over a snarky response when Bucky breaks in, quickly sending a barrage of texts, sharply diverting the course of their conversation.

BUCKY [1:21 PM]: STEVE

BUCKY [1:21 PM]: STEVE

BUCKY [1:21 PM]: STEVEN

BUCKY [1:22 PM]: THERE IS A FAMILY WHO JUST CAME INTO THE LIBRARY AND THEIR DAUGHTER IS DRESSED UP AS PRINCESS CAPTAIN AMERICA
That—the concept of a little girl dressed as Princess Captain America, and Bucky’s sheer joy at it—makes Steve laugh. Out in the middle of Manhattan, her barks out a laugh, loud and visceral and completely unacknowledged by everyone else on the crowded sidewalk. Steve taps away at a response, and just keeps on walking.

ME [1:26 PM]: Princess Captain America? Gotta say, that’s a new one.

BUCKY [1:27 PM]: Would it be weird to tell her I know you?

BUCKY [1:27 PM]: Wait no that would be totally weird, never mind, sorry I mentioned it

ME [1:30 PM]: That’s so cute.

Before he knows it, Steve makes it to his therapist’s office, a S.H.I.E.L.D.-operated entity, tucked into the third-floor offices above an old coffee-and-donuts shop, hiding in plain view. As he makes his way through the shop, past the bathrooms, and up through the hidden stairway, Steve realizes that he was able to ride out the worst of the storm without his anxiety leaving him too worse for wear. Sure, he might not have felt completely at ease. And sure, he still had lingering discomfort at the prospect of going to therapy, even months into it. But he knew, with at least some renewed confidence, that he could do this.

When Steve arrives in front of a familiar door, he stops suddenly, just short of entering. He has no intentions to turn back, but taps out a quick message to Bucky before he makes his way through:

ME [1:43 PM]: I’m about to walk into my therapist’s office, so I’m going to put my phone on silent mode. But Bucky, thank you. I needed someone to talk to. Funny enough, I always get anxious before I go to these things.

BUCKY [1:45 PM]: No worries Steve

BUCKY [1:45 PM]: I did too, when I was still going

BUCKY [1:46 PM]: And like I’ve said before, I’m always here for you <3

Steve warms at that, his entire day brightening at the sight of that little emoji heart, confidence welling up in him like it's high tide.

ME [1:47 PM]: Thank you, Bucky. Thank you.

ME [1:47 PM]: I’m going now. I’ll talk to you soon.

BUCKY [1:48 PM]: Talk to you soon, Steve!

BUCKY [1:48 PM]: Good luck! :)”

Followed by that last text, a string of hearts—more types than Steve ever realized there were; more than he realized there could be. With that feeling of solidarity, of care, still lingering in his mind, Steve takes a deep breath, keying in the unlock code and pushing through the door.

Yeah. He could do this.

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“Good afternoon,” Steve’s therapist—Doctor Rebecca Kaplan, PsyD.—says, in that soft, comforting voice of hers.
“Afternoon,” Steve replies, all but automatically.

There’s a brief silence between the two of them. Doctor Kaplan flips through her notes, briefly, as Steve sweeps his gaze around the office, not for the first time. Nor would it be for the last time. When Doctor Kaplan meets his eyes, Steve takes a deep breath, working up the truly enormous amount of courage it took to speak first. “I—I have a few things I’d like to talk about.”

It’s been a slow process getting used to the neutral-calm, vaguely safe environment of Doctor Kaplan’s office. Between therapy never being an option when he was coming up, and his general mistrust of S.H.I.E.L.D.-aligned agents, Steve’s hypervigilance was never completely gone, and it sprung up from time to time, when in therapy. If it weren’t for the fact that Doctor Kaplan came on recommendation from Directory Fury and Natasha, Steve wouldn’t have even stepped foot in the office.

Of course, taking the first step was always difficult, and he knew that. Even when it was just taking the first step towards starting a conversation—as Steve had done today.

“What would you like to talk about, Steve?” she asks, half-smiling, balancing her pen delicately in her hand.

“I—” Steve starts. “I’m seeing someone.”

“Oh?” Doctor Kaplan intones, already beginning to take notes.

“Well—no. I mean. Not really. It’s—he’s—we’re just friends, right now. But I really, really like him,” Steve admits. Even in his therapist’s office, even just talking about Bucky, has him smiling. “He’s funny, and he’s cute, and he’s kind, and I think maybe he thinks the same way, and I just—I want nothing more than to take him by the hand on one of our lunch dates and tell him that I just—I just want to kiss him.”

“It sounds like there’s a but coming.”

“Yeah. It’s—I’ve just—I want this. But—but I don’t know if—” Steve starts, suddenly feeling self-conscious of himself. He is hyperaware of his language, of his posture, and though he knows this space is a neutral space, he treads very, very carefully. “I don’t know if it’s the right move. I don’t know if I’m ready.”

“I see,” Doctor Kaplan says. “And how long have you and him been meeting?”

“Uh—just. Just a few weeks.”

Doctor Kaplan nods, making yet another a note in her pad. Steve suddenly feels judged; what’s more, he suddenly feels the need to justify himself—to prove he’s not obsessed with some man he just met. To prove that he—that Captain America—is adjusting to modern life in a healthy way.

“But—but we knew each other for months beforehand. We were friends before we started going on these lunch dates,” Steve adds, “I—I think I might have fallen for him then. Before he knew I was—you know. Me.”

“I see,” Doctor Kaplan says again, watching him with that same professionally friendly expression. “So where did you meet him, this friend of yours?”

Steve’s gaze immediately drops to the floor. The floors are an inoffensive shade of brown, just like everything else in the room. “I—uh. We met—we met online.”
“On a meet-up website?”

“No, no. On Instagram. I, uh—I post my art, under a pen name. He started liking my posts and commenting on things, and then we started talking,” Steve explains. “It all happened pretty organically.”

Doctor Kaplan hums, seemingly in understanding. Steve always wondered how much she—how much anyone—could understand his situation. It wasn’t like there were many other lonely, anxious, once-frozen, now-unfrozen Brooklyn-native supersoldiers out there.

“So, you’re close to this friend of yours. And you have feelings for him. But you’re hesitant to tell him these things,” she repeats, her voice understanding and neutral. As always. “Correct?”

“Yes,” Steve says, feeling worn out already. Therapy might have been helping, and this might have all been a necessary discomfort, but Steve was ready to be out of there. “Yes, that’s correct.”

“Now, Steve,” Doctor Kaplan says, “This hesitancy to make your feelings known, this is fitting into a pattern of yours. You’re quite intelligent. And when it comes to your work, you’re willing to make split-second decisions quite easily. You’ve shared your anecdotes from some of your previous operations that show that. Even your time at Camp Leigh, what you’ve shared of it, shows that.”

That was true. That was all true. But that couldn’t have been everything—she couldn’t have ended their session there. And she doesn’t, continuing on with the second half of her evaluation after about a half-minute of silence. Just enough time for Steve to prepare himself for what she was about to say next; just enough time for him to prepare for the but.

“But when it comes to your personal life, Steve, you have this preemptive anxiety. You overthink all the possibilities—ten, twelve steps into the future. And that restricts your ability to move forward. You are a master military strategist, but trying to strategize your personal life will trap you in a cycle of overthinking and anxiety. You need to break that cycle. Try to look at situations you’re overanalyzing in your personal life, and make those decisions and act,” Doctor Kaplan says, firm, but not harsh. She leans back slightly, her pad in her lap and her pen in her hand. “What do you think about that, Steve?”

“Yeah. Yeah,” Steve murmurs, breathing slow. She wasn’t wrong, calling him out like that. But it was going to be a lot easier said than done. He didn’t want to ruin the good thing he had with Bucky. Not after all the time they’d spent working up to where they were—not after all the mistakes Steve was still trying to work to repair. But she was right. As difficult as it was going to be, Steve knew it as solid advice. And just that recognition—the knowledge that Doctor Kaplan was right—was exhausting.

“It might also be helpful to look inside yourself, and understand why you’re so hesitant to make a move with your friend. Ask yourself, what happened in my past to make me hesitate?” Doctor Kaplan continues. “Why don’t we do that, very briefly? Try to answer that question.”

Facing the question and knowing the answer were two very different things, and though he could very easily list the causes of his anxiety and hesitation in social situations, Steve wasn’t sure he was entirely ready to speak them. It was hard, facing the full truth. But he still had to do it.

“I guess,” Steve starts, after a while, with a little difficulty, “I guess growing up, I never really connected with anyone. Never got the chance to learn how to be friends with people, between getting sick and getting picked on. I got rejected a lot, got targeted a lot, and I had to stick up for myself a lot. I got a chip on my shoulder.”
“That sounds hurtful. Especially for a kid who’s already going through so much,” says Doctor Kaplan. She doesn’t move to write notes, though she probably wants to. Instead, she keeps eye contact with him. It’s somewhere between uneasy and comforting.

Steve swallows. “Yeah. Yeah, it was. I mean, I grew a thick skin, eventually. I mean, I had to. I learned how to throw a punch, I learned how to fight, and I tried to defend other people like me, other people who couldn’t. But them, after I got the serum, I could never tell who saw me for me, and not—you know. Captain America. Except for Peggy, but we—that didn’t—that ended. Very abruptly.”

Doctor Kaplan nods. “That, I imagine, was very difficult for you. Anyone in that situation would have trouble coming back to a relationship, even without your history. It would be hard, learning to let yourself be close to someone again.”

“Yeah. And besides that, there was the whole—you know—” Steve starts, motioning vaguely in the air. “I mean—people think that us queers didn’t exist back then, and I’m not saying we didn’t, but—we had to be careful, is what I’m saying.”

“That sounds a very difficult time to have lived, and a very difficult time to let yourself be vulnerable,” Doctor Kaplan says, and Steve nods. “But now that you recognize that cause for your anxiety, and how that—along with Peggy, along with this chip on your shoulder—has made it difficult for you to move forward and move on, you can acknowledge when you’re acting from a place of hurt, and you can move to break that cycle.”

“Yeah,” Steve says, his voice more broken than he thought it would be. “Yeah. I can.”

She nods. There is a pause, a chance for Steve to parse Doctor Kaplan’s advice. A chance for him to gather himself up again, after sharing those difficult details, not for the first time, but always, with some difficulty.

“Well, Steve, do you have anything else you want to bring up from this week?” Doctor Kaplan asks eventually. Steve, feeling somehow infinitely heavier and infinitely lighter at the same time, sighs, heaving a little shrug.

“I, uh,” he starts, “I dunno if we can get to the rest of the week in the time we have left. It’s a lot. I—I really think that’s enough, for this session. If that’s alright.”

“I understand. In that case, when should we meet again?” Doctor Kaplan asks, knowing fully well how unconventional Steve’s schedule was.

“I’m not going to be able to come in next week,” Steve says. She nods, not asking for an explanation. She knows. Maybe not the details of the op, but she knows. “Can I do the first thing on Monday the week after? Maybe nine or ten?”

“Does nine-thirty work?”

Steve nods. “That’s perfect.”

“Well then, Steve,” Doctor Kaplan says, after marking him down on her computer, “That’s it for today, then. I’ll see you Monday after next, at nine-thirty. And if anything comes up, or if you just need to reschedule, feel free to call the office or text me on my secure line.”

“Thank you, Doctor Kaplan,” Steve says, rising from the too-plush office couch. She nods, a little goodbye, a little you’re welcome at the same time, and Steve steps out, feeling wrung out, but not entirely worse-for-wear. He wills his body down to the first floor, back into the coffee shop. Back
into the too-bright, too-loud outside world. But not before he gets his regular post-therapy coffee and donut.

As he waits patiently in line, behind non-S.H.I.E.L.D. civilians and plainclothes agents alike, Steve takes out his phone, just as something to look at; just as a distraction from the noise in his head and the heaviness in his chest. He has no new texts, no new emails—nothing but a little red notification bubble, floating in the upper right-hand corner of the Instagram icon. Steve taps it on autopilot, making his way to check his DMs within seconds. And when he sees what the notification is, he's glad he does.

Sitting in his Instagram inbox is a new message from Bucky: a photo of a little girl, no older than three or four, wearing a bright pink tutu over a dark blue Captain America Halloween costume. In her hand, she's holding a picture book—*I Am Steve Rogers*, complete with a cutesy illustration of Steve, matching Captain America uniform and all. This image—posted to the Martinelli’s official Instagram page—is paired with a personal message from Bucky:

@imjamesbarnes: For you <3

Seeing that—the costume, the book, the sweet little message from Bucky—brightens Steve’s day. Bucky made his life better, just as he did earlier. Just as he always does. Steve grins, and if the deep cover S.H.I.E.L.D. agent manning the cashier has to yell at him a little because Steve forgot he was in line, well—that was okay.

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Thursday morning, Steve sleeps in. It’s not that Wednesday’s session with Doctor Kaplan had been particularly difficult. In fact, it had been one of less heavy sessions Steve had experienced, in his brief time going to therapy. But Steve needed the rest. He needed a chance for his body to breathe, even if he had a healing factor that astounded the scientific community. And so, throwing his usual routine to the wayside, Steve sleeps in, waking up at 10:17 AM—all but mid-afternoon, comparatively.

When Steve checks his phone, he has a few texts waiting for him: one from Natasha, asking to sit next to him on Friday’s flight, one from Sam wishing him good luck, and two from Bucky—a simple good morning, and then, two hours later, a picture of a vintage storybook illustration.

ME [10:20 AM]: Sorry, I Slept in. You said you wanted to FaceTime before I left. How about tonight, around seven? Maybe seven-thirty? Does that sound good?

BUCKY [10:23 AM]: Yes, sir :)

That message is followed by a chain of patriotic emojis, and a waving hand, perhaps, Bucky’s attempt to convey a salute through emojis. He was clever, and his emojis were cute, but that one was a miss. Steve would still give him points for trying.

Sleeping in—as nice as it is—always throws Steve’s routine off. At ten-something in the morning, it's too late for a real breakfast, but too early for lunch, and a lonely Thursday morning is no reason for a celebratory brunch. Steve settles on a meal of cold takeout, eaten mindlessly as he scrolls through headlines on his phone. It leaves him feeling somehow full but unsatisfied, and he goes through basic acts of hygiene sluggishly, as if the greasy noodles had completely weighed him down. By the time Steve has his teeth brushed and his face washed and his hair combed, it’s quickly approaching noon.

Still in the comfy clothes he went to sleep in, Steve settles on his couch, going over battle plans for
the billionth time since he proposed them. Nothing has changed since he last looked at them; no new holes, hiccups, or glaring mistakes made their appearance overnight. Steve stares at the plans in front of him, drawn up in his own familiar handwriting on his tablet, the dark lines stark against the gleaming white screen. He stares at it until his eyes burn, waiting for a realization that will never come.

Eventually, Steve pulls himself away from his tablet, blinking quickly. Time, somehow, moved too quickly while he was poring over his plans, and noon has long since passed. Outside, the sun is high and bright in the sky, and Brooklyn bustles, buzzing with after-lunch energy. Steve puts his tablet aside, trying hard to ignore the fuzzy, floating shapes, the negatives of his battle plans burned onto his eyes. What he can’t ignore is the buzzing in the back of his brain, the lingering doubts as to the veracity and safety of his battle plans. And as much as Doctor Kaplan’s sessions have helped, Steve can’t ignore his anxiety, or his lingering fears, or his restlessness.

So instead of sitting in his apartment, instead of hyper-fixating on every single pixel, every single minuscule detail of his battle plans, Steve moves to do something else.

He goes for a run.

---

Going out for a run in the late afternoon doesn’t help settle Steve’s feelings of unease. All the familiar faces he’d gotten used to on his regular routes were gone. Every now and then, schoolchildren making their way home would stop and stare. The regular scenery was all off and discolored in the afternoon light; Steve almost felt like he was running through an entirely different city.

So he keeps running. He runs until he’s out of Brooklyn. He runs he thinks he’ll start to burn. He runs until the sun begins to dip below the city skyline. He runs until he checks his phone for the time and quickly realizes—he made plans, and he needs to be home.

Disappointed and defeated, Steve texts Bucky, knowing fully well he won’t make it back to his apartment before seven-thirty.

ME [7:15 PM]: I’m sorry, Bucky, but I can’t FaceTime right now. Would you be okay if we talked later tonight?

BUCKY [7:20 PM]: Sure

BUCKY [7:21 PM]: How bout I call you as soon as I get home? Sound good?

ME [7:21 PM]: Yes. That sounds good. Thank you, Bucky. I’m real sorry.

BUCKY [7:23 PM]: It’s okay, Steve :)

BUCKY [7:23 PM]: I’ll call you around 9:30? 10?

ME [7:23 PM]: I can do nine-thirty or ten. I’ll talk to you then.

Steve pockets his phone, feeling heavy and despondent. He doesn’t run when he makes his way to the closest subway station. Somehow, he can’t find the energy to anymore. The ride back to Brooklyn is long and bumpy and claustrophobic, and, because New York had no sympathy for Steve, stalled by forty-five minutes because of—something.

Steve, pressed up against the subway pole, sighs.
It would have been faster for him to run back home.

---

Bucky calls that night, just as promised, two minutes after ten. Steve had his laptop up and ready for Bucky’s call for an hour and a half beforehand. The bright, chiming tone of a call incoming was the best thing Steve heard all day.

“Hey,” Bucky says, as soon as their call connects. He’s wearing a big, fluffy gray sweatshirt, and his hair is down from its usual bun, looking loose and fluffy.

“Hey,” Steve replies, “I’m, uh—I’m sorry I’m late. I went for a run, and I lost track of time.”

Bucky shrugs. “It’s fine. Life happens. I’m just glad you told me.”

He was taking it on the chin like a champ. That made Steve feel even more guilty, but then again, that seemed to be the trend in their short-lived offline relationship.

“So,” Steve says, so he doesn’t end up in an embarrassing shame spiral, “Other than Princess Captain America, how’s work been the past few days?”

Bucky shrugs. “Fine. The usual. Quiet, as always.”

“Oh,” Steve says. Then, suddenly realizing his neutral tone could be misconstrued as disappointment, he adds, “Well, at least there was Princess Captain America.”

“Yeah,” Bucky says, a slow, almost sleepy smile spreading across his face. He looks at Steve, smiling, watching, for a few quiet seconds before he speaks again. “Yeah. I guess that’s true. What about you?”

Steve lets out a deep breath. “Oh, you know. Prep work. That sort of thing. Today was, I dunno. It was a day. Cleaned my place, went for a run. Just—getting ready for, you know. The trip.”

Bucky watches him, those stunning blue eyes all but glowing electronic on Steve’s screen. “Are you okay? Will you be okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, the mission, it’s—it's gonna go fine. I mean, there’s never gonna be a zero percent chance, but—it’s gonna go alright.”

“Steve—” Bucky starts, in a tone that Steve has already started to lovingly think of as his Mom Tone.

“It’s going to be fine, Buck,” Steve says, which doesn’t seem to convince Bucky. “I'm going to be fine. Not my first firefight, like I said.”

"Okay,” Bucky sighs, and thought Steve might be imagining it, Bucky looks like he's come to terms with the mission ahead; he looks, if only slightly, more at ease.

A silence falls over them, comfortable—not in the same way their in-person silences are comfortable, but comfortable all the same. Steve could spend the night FaceTiming with Bucky, not saying a thing; it would be enough just to be with Bucky.

Suddenly, Bucky laughs, breaking that silence. His voice is soft—almost as soft as his comfortable sweatshirt looks.

“I’m sorry I asked you to FaceTime, and I don’t have much to say,” Bucky says, looking a little
sheepish. “It’s just—I—I just wanted to see you.”

“It’s alright,” Steve says, gentle and genuine, “I wanted to see you again, too.”

That earns another smile from Bucky—the sleepy one again. It occurs to Steve that he’s been witness to a whole variety of Bucky smiles. He considers himself lucky for that. He wonders what Bucky has witnessed of him, what Bucky considers himself lucky for. With Steve admiring Bucky—admiring that smile—it’s only inevitable that they fall into another comfortable silence. But as much as he enjoys that comfortable, inevitable silence between them, Steve knows—much like he knew in the park—they can’t stay there forever.

“Well,” Steve says, “I should go. It’s late, and I don’t wanna keep you. You’ve got work and I’ve got a flight.”

Bucky nods, chewing his lower lip. God was it a good look on him, worried as he might have been. “Be careful, will you?”


“Of course,” Steve says. That was a given. He would fight all of Hydra and its many splintered heads all by himself if he had to, just to see Bucky. He would do it without thinking twice.

“Well—“ Bucky says, “Goodnight, Steve.”

“Goodnight, Bucky,” Steve says, and the last thing he sees before the connection fades out is that same sleepy smile.

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Steve leaves New York on Friday at noon, on the dot. He lands in Sokovia ten hours later, and is suited up and on his way to a remote base in the Sokovian woods five hours after that.

Everything’s a blur of flights and firefights after that.

To his credit, his battle plans were airtight. All his anxiety, all his nervousness over missing something, over accidentally allowing for his team to get hurt, came out to be unfounded. Each raid went along smoothly, more or less; Hydra in the Sokovia-Russia region were neither organized nor resource-rich enough to take the Avengers by surprise.

But fighting non-stop for a week was just so exhausting.

He’s standing in the burned-out shell of a former Hydra base—the largest Hydra base of this cycle of raids—his hair plastered to his face with sweat and grime, several days’ worth of stink heavy in his suit. This was their last mission in their most recent round of guerilla raids, and he’s glad for it.

Not that Steve hated his job—he liked the rush and clarity and physicality that came with a mission. He was compelled to fight bullies—to fight bigots—wherever he could. Steve was biologically drawn to doing what was right; he was, quite literally, built to fight, to do good, even before Erksine.

But this op was rough. Even with the serum, Steve is worn out, and smelly, and bone-tired. He can count on one hand the times he’s gotten to sleep over the length of this op, and he’s not entirely sure what day it is. As much as he liked the beats of a fight, as much as he knew he was doing a job few
else could do, Steve's just glad that major leaders were in custody. He's just glad the op is over.

He’s just glad that he’ll be going home.

They would be out of region and in the air soon. All they needed to do—all Natasha and her little squadron of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s intelligence agents had to do—was finish up with their intel work, and from what Steve could tell, it wouldn’t take long. As if on cue, Natasha, with an armful of files and a USB stick hanging from her neck, nods to Steve.

“You need help?” he asks her, but she shakes her head.

“I think I can handle a few reams of paper, Rogers,” she says, hip-checking him as she walks by. “But. I would use this time to talk to Wanda, if I were you.”

She nods again, pointing with her chin. Steve really wishes she would let him help her, but Natasha would rather chew off her own arm than ask for help. Instead, he pats her on the back—gently, so as not to rustle any papers—and makes his way over to Wanda, catching her breath on a semi-flat pile of concrete.

“Hi there,” he says, sitting next to her. She smiles at him, tired and cautious.

“Hi,” she replies quietly.

“Holding up alright?” he asks, and she nods.

“Yeah,” she says. And that’s all she says, for a minute, leaving them both to sit together in uncomfortable, prickly silence. Steve never truly appreciated how comfortable even the most awkward silences were with Bucky until he found himself facing silence with someone else. Eventually, gratefully, Wanda speaks up. Steve didn’t want to be the one to break the silence. “Steve? I’m sorry for not replying to your email.”

He turns to her, slow, trying to come across as understanding, trying to come across as safe. “It’s alright. Just wanted to check in on you. I know it’s hard, all you’ve been through in the past few years. And getting used to being part of this team—getting used to being responsible for people’s lives, for the safety of the whole world—hell, I still stumble on it, and I’ve been at this job since the 1940s.”

She smiles at that. That makes Steve feel good, knowing he could make Wanda smile.

“Don’t think that you’re alone, Wanda,” Steve says, “I might be Captain, but I’m not your boss. Don’t think I’m not here for you. You can come to me for anything. Even if it’s just the best ways to drown out Stark when he tries to give you one of his gross, long-winded celebrity stories.”

“Thank you,” she says, “I very much appreciate that, Steve.”

“Of course,” Steve says. They fall into a lull—something slightly more comfortable, this time, but Steve still feels the need to fill the silence. He unsnaps the clasp from one of the pockets on his belt, and takes out a handful of small, round things and he offers some to Wanda.

“Hard candy?” he asks, only about a quarter ironically.

And that earns him a laugh. Hearing Wanda laugh makes Steve laugh, too. Exhausted as he is, knowing that she trusts him enough to laugh with him—and genuinely laugh with him—makes Steve feel energized. It makes him feel good.
“No, I’m fine, thank you,” she says.

“No, I’m fine, thank you,” she says.

“Your loss,” he says with a shrug, unwrapping a caramel and popping it into his mouth. She shakes her head, but she’s smiling, still.

Natasha, arms no longer full of files, strides up to Wanda and Steve, dusting her hands off on her pants. “Hey, kid. Grandpa.”

“Tasha. Want a hard candy?” Steve offers. She takes the remaining two, and pops one in her mouth —who she’s planning on giving the other one to, Steve couldn’t say. Clint, maybe, or Sam, if she’s willing to wait that long for rendezvous.

“I don’t mean to interrupt your heart-to-heart, but we’ll be wheels-up in a few,” she says, her words slightly muffled, buy the candy. ”You want to walk over together? I don’t want to make small talk with the baby S.H.I.E.L.D. agents any more than I have to.”

Steve shakes his head. “You go on ahead, I’ve just gotta—I’m gonna make a call.”

“‘We can wait for you,” Wanda says, and as much as he’s glowing over the fact that she’s quickly warming up to him, he wants to have this conversation alone.

“It’s okay. But let’s make a date. You, me, and Nat, after we’ve slept off the jet lag. Let’s get some coffee. I’ll buy.”

“Oh,” Wanda says, “Okay.”

Natasha nods. Whether or not she recognizes who, specifically, he’s about to call, is unclear—but she at least understands. “We leave in ten. Make it quick.”

“Can do, Widow,” he says, and she nods, walking with Wanda up into their stealth jet.

Steve makes sure they’re out of earshot before he presses call. He’d been ready to speak to Bucky all week. He’d been ready to speak to Bucky the second he was in the air. With each repetition of the connection tone, his heart seems to jump higher and higher up into his throat. Suddenly, the connection tone cuts out, and Steve feels himself buzzing with excitement, when the voice on the other line says—

The number you have dialed cannot take your call. Please leave a message after the tone.

Of course. Of course. Steve’s soul sags, as he realizes the time difference between Sokovia and New York. His phone lets out a little beep, and he takes a deep breath, unsure what he’s about to say, but knowing he has to say something.

“Hi,” Steve says, “I know it’s about—God, I dunno, five in the morning over there? I’m real sorry if this message wakes you up. It’s just—”

Steve takes a deep breath, running his gloved hand over his face.

“—it’s just that—work’s been really tough. And I know I’ve been kind of AWOL on the communication front. I’m sorry about that. We had a quick timeline. You must be worried sick. Just know I’m okay, and I’m coming home soon. I know I probably should have called later, when you were awake, but I wanted to call you as soon as I could. I—it’s been a lot, Buck. And I just—I miss you.”

Maybe it’s because of his exhaustion, or maybe it’s because he’s finally getting in contact with
Bucky after a week, but Steve’s throat feels tight, and he feels he has shown too much of his hand. He clears his throat, continuing on, trying hard to steady his voice before he speaks again.

“Anyway, I’ll see you soon. Thanks—uh. Thanks for listening, Bucky. Bye. Miss you.”

He hovers over the *end call* button, debating whether to re-record the call. Steve, realizing that he’s wasting time, ends the call, sending the message to Bucky—and sending his heart along with it.

A few minutes later, as Steve is buckling up for the flight home, his phone buzzes, shaking wildly in his pocket. He wastes no time getting out, all but trembling when he sees there’s a new text alert on his screen. He spends an inordinate amount of time scanning that vital one-line message over and over again, as if it could disappear at any moment.

BUCKY [5:06 AM]: I missed you, too.

Steve lets out a slow, shuddering breath.

He can’t wait to be home.

Chapter End Notes

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it's my birthday, so my gift to you and yours: this giant-ass chapter that's been slow coming, and to tell the truth, not as well-edited as it could be :/ this is a long, long chapter, but i felt like i couldn't snip it anywhere, so - here's all of it. i'm going to try to be better about length in the next few chapters (i can't play all my cards at once, after all) but i'm getting very, very wordy as this thing progresses.

- bucky’s "reading is sexy" mug is real and it's the greatest thing it's ever seen
- and [here is some art phoenixgryphon drew of bucky and that fantastic mug](https://example.com), she's the best and sent me an australian care package, so send her all your love!!
- i included an irl friend in the brooklyn to manhattan subway scene. see if you can guess who it is. the gender traitor shirt is also real, and it is also among the greatest things i've ever seen.
- rebecca kaplan is less based off [rebecca kaplan in the young avengers comics](https://example.com) (since she had like, hardly any characterization in those) and more of a mix of my previous therapist and my current primary therapist.
- i really hesitated on whether or not i should write in a section where steve actually goes to therapy for this fic, but after plotting out this chapter without it, i thought it was a necessary addition. i based steve’s experience of therapy on my own in the broad sense, but that said, i don’t have any sort of clinical training, and so i apologize for any inaccuracies or problems with this portrayal, and i am happy to fix it up if there are problems. :>
- the I Am Steve Rogers book is, in this universe, part of the orindary people change the world series by brad meltzer and christopher eliopoulos, one of my favorite marvel comics illustrators. because there are totally steve rogers children's books. how could there not be? he's probably at the same level of historical importance and modern myth status as the founding fathers, in the MCU. anyway. we used to carry this series at the store i used to work at, and if you have little ones or know someone who does, i really recommend them.

grad school started up for me this month, so it's back to the grind, but i imagine this
year will be better than the endless hell parade that was last year. that said, i don't have
an "official" posting schedule because of my workload, so i'm gonna have to ask for
patience. thank you for putting up with the sporadic updates in the meantime. <3
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

home, again.
(or: you can never go home.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After the Sokovia mission is settled and all the paperwork is done, Steve does what anyone in his situation would do.

He sleeps, for about two days straight.

Three days after Steve returned to New York, he wakes up at dusk exactly, feeling rested for the first time in a month. He doesn’t hesitate to slip back into his regular routine, running until the sun comes up and then some—but he doesn’t run until his body almost gives out. He doesn’t run aimlessly, like he does when he’s more or less running from his anxiety.

Steve follows the beats of his morning routine, because Steve, for the first time in weeks, is feeling great.

When he slows his run to a walk, New York is already fully awake. For breakfast, he stops by a neighborhood bakery, picking up a bag of flaky pastries and a hot, creamy coffee. Spring is in full bloom, and soon, as quick as it came, it’ll be gone, replaced by the sticky heat and rude tourists of New York in the summer. He might as well enjoy it while he could. Steve settles on a bench, part of a little sliver of grass that passes as a park, and takes out his phone.

ME [9:33 AM]: Morning, Buck.

The reply comes almost instantly—practically the second he sends the original message.

BUCKY [9:33 AM]: Steve! :D

BUCKY [9:33 AM]: How have you been?

ME [9:35 AM]: I slept for what felt like another forty years, but I’m awake now. I just got done with my run, I’ve got coffee, and a bag full of croissants. So, my day is going well, compared to last week. Especially now that I’m talking to you.

BUCKY [9:35 AM]: Aww, Steve

He sends over that blushing skeleton gif again. Steve wonders if he had to search for it, or if he keeps it in his phone just for occasions like this. He smiles regardless, the idea of making Bucky blush making his chest feel like all the parks in all the world, in bloom. Though Bucky might have been the one to send it, Steve suddenly feels an odd kinship with the cartoon skeleton looping on his screen.
BUCKY [9:36 AM]: You flatter me, you know that? :P

*Always,* is what Steve replies, before taking a big bite of his hazelnut-crusted pastry. Bucky sends over a chain of hearts and happy, smiling emojis in response, just as sweet as the sticky-warm chocolate filling of the croissant. Wiping his mouth, Steve taps away, eventually sending over a text that doesn’t leave him having to talk to Bucky about how he *really* feels about him.

ME [9:40 AM]: So, what are you doing today?

The reply comes a little later than Steve expected. He worries, for a while, that he offended Bucky somehow, changing the subject like that, but a reply comes shortly, interrupting that moment of panic.

BUCKY [9:53 AM]: The usual

BUCKY [9:55 AM]: I do get to go through some donated books though so that should be fun

ME [9:55 AM]: Sounds neat. Do you mind if I drop by?

BUCKY [10:01 AM]: Today?

As if that wasn’t evident—as if he wouldn’t drop by to see Bucky *every day,* if it were a possibility.

ME [10:03 AM]: Yeah, why not?

BUCKY [10:05 AM]: Well, if you’re free, I’d love to see you :)

Steve smiles, tapping out a quick response.

ME [10:05 AM]: Great. I’ll stop by sometime today.

BUCKY [10:06 AM]: Sounds great!

It *did* sound great.

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After finishing his breakfast, Steve doesn’t feel like going home. The weather is just too nice, he’s feeling too good, and he’s going to stop by and visit Bucky, anyway. It doesn’t make sense to go back to his apartment.

Instead, Steve decides to go for a walk. It’s a scenic, comforting experience, accompanied by a cool spring breeze and row after row of picturesque Brooklyn brownstones.

Eventually, he arrives at the library, far earlier than he’d intended. He contemplates texting Bucky, but quickly puts his phone away, another spontaneous idea sprouting in his mind, quick as a daisy weed. Bucky *had* said that Steve could visit any time he liked. He could just show up and visit Bucky then. It would be nice, after all, to give Bucky a surprise. It was settled. He wouldn’t waste any more time waiting. Steve had done a lot of waiting with Bucky, and he was still waiting for a sign that Bucky had *feelings* for him. No point in waiting any more than he was.

When Steve enters the library, the smell of books and wood hits him straight-on. It’s quickly become comfortable and familiar. Steve basks in it, just for a second, before noticing Bucky is not at the front desk. Instead, in his usual place, is Dot—Dolores, as her real name was, though Steve
was already nicknaming her in his head. Her face is pressed close to the monitor, there’s a cart of books by her side, and typing away very, very slowly.

“Hi,” Steve says, as he approaches the desk. Dot looks up quickly, pushes up her glasses, smiles up at him.

“Steve,” she says warmly, her gray curls bouncing as she moves away from the computer screen. “You’re here early.”

This is the first time they’ve spoken face-to-face. It’s their first time meeting, period. But the way that she greets him is like she’s talking to an old friend. Steve wonders how much that has to do with Bucky. He wonders, briefly, what sort of things Bucky has said about him. He considers, even more briefly, how rude it would be to ask.

“Yeah, thought I’d go for a walk, and I ended up here,” Steve half-lies, with a smile and a little shrug.

“Right,” Dot says, giving a little nod, as if that’s happened to her before, too. Somehow, without even knowing her, Steve would believe it. “Well, I assume you’re looking for Bucky?”

“Yeah,” Steve replies, almost bashfully. “Not that I wouldn’t like to talk to you. You just seem—you know. Busy.”

“That’s polite of you,” she says, and her voice is soft and genuine. “But you know what, you remind that Bucky of yours to remind me, I’ll really have to buy you a coffee one day. We can shoot the breeze, talk about old Brooklyn—I’m sure we both have stories.”

Steve grins at this. She smiles at him, too, over his glasses, as if they share a secret. He doesn’t know how old Dot is, not exactly, but there’s a grit in her grin and a bounce to her voice that makes Steve understand they’re both old, old Brooklyn natives. He might not know it for sure, but he knows it deep in his soul—both of them have been with the city since before the yogurt bars and microbreweries and rampant *fucking* gentrification. With this understanding, Steve—old, old Brooklyn native, all the same—responds to Dot’s invitation in kind.

“Hey, no, my Ma raised me well, if I’m gonna take a beautiful lady out on the town to share stories, she’s not gonna be the one to pay,” Steve jokes. This earns a laugh from Dot, and Steve can swear he sees her blushing. “Ma Rogers always said, Stevie, we might not be rich, but you find a nice girl, you treat her well, you bring her to dinner, you take her out. Never been one to disrespect my Ma, Dot, so I’m sorry, but like it or not, I’m paying for you.”

The way she laughs is electric. It’s almost too loud for a library, but Steve wasn’t going to say anything. It’s not like he worked there, after all.

"Cripes, you're a charmer," she says, her laugh low and croaking and full of life. "I talk to you for half a minute, and you've already charmed me more than half the guys at Senior Swing Nights, and you have all your teeth. God. Sure don't make 'em like they used to."

Steve shrugs, feeling flattered, all the same. "I'm not too special. Sure there's a fella out there. Just gotta find the one-in-a-million for you."

“Eh. Maybe. Or maybe I'll just steal you away from Bucky,” she says with a laugh, dotting her eyes with the back of her hand.

That earns a blink and a bit of a stunned silence from Steve, and he wonders if she really means what he thinks she means. He wonders, for a second, if it's *that* clear how lost he is for Bucky. He
wonders if Bucky has been saying the same things he's has been sharing with Natasha; he wonders, not for the first time, if Bucky feels the same way he does; if Bucky has feelings for him, too.

“Well, speaking of him, you're probably excited to see him, aren't you?” Dot says, adjusting her glasses, oblivious to the swarm of thoughts going on in Steve's head. "He’s been in the basement all day, so your best bet is finding him down there. Just yell, sound travels well in those halls. He'll find you.”

“Thanks,” he says, bolting off—in part, to meet Bucky, but also because he didn’t want to have a conversation if Dot was wanting to have more Bucky-centric conversation. Steve gets about halfway through the maze of bookshelves before realizing he has no idea where the basement is. He backpedals, and before he can open his mouth to ask, Dot answers his question, not even looking up from the book she’s scanning as she does.

“Far right-hand corner of the library, Steve.”

She probably doesn’t see it, but Steve grins as soon as he gets her answer, wide and bright. “Thanks Dot! You really are the best.”

Steve ambles to the basement, bouncing excitedly down the stairs—not bumbling, not like he felt on their previous lunch date—like a days-old fawn. He’s so excited to surprise Bucky that he almost runs head-on into him when he catches up to him in the middle of the stairwell, carrying an intimidating-looking stack of boxes.

“Oh. Hi,” Bucky says, good-naturedly. He pauses, as if suddenly realizing something, and his eyes go wide, a fleeting moment’s panic rushing across his features. Steve feels guilty, suddenly, but he doesn’t know why. “I—uh. I didn’t think you would be coming so soon.”

Steve looks over the stack of boxes that Bucky is carrying. He worries, for a second, that he is a distraction, that he is unwanted, but Bucky’s smiling at him again, nodding in a follow me motion, as he sidesteps Steve carefully and continues on his route.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to—it’s just that I have to move these,” Bucky says, not unkindly. Warmly, even. He’s continuing up the stairs, glancing back at Steve, every now and then, to make sure he’s still following. “I—uh. I didn’t think you would be coming so soon.”

Steve looks over the stack of boxes that Bucky is carrying. He worries, for a second, that he is a distraction, that he is unwanted, but Bucky’s smiling at him again, nodding in a follow me motion, as he sidesteps Steve carefully and continues on his route.

“Do you—“ he starts, frowning, “Do you need help? Getting those upstairs, I mean.”

“No, I’m—I’m good,” Bucky says, and he continues climbing the stairs, not stopping or slowing his pace for a second, “Thanks though.”

Steve bites his lip. The boxes look like they must be heavy. Boxes of books were always heavy, and as someone who moved from Manhattan to D.C. before going back to Brooklyn, he knew that firsthand. “You sure?”

“I’m literally getting paid to do this, Steve. It’s nothing,” Bucky laughs, as if Steve wanting to help him is cute or funny or something, somehow. Steve’s not going to push him, but he follows closely, like a dog—like Bucky might give out any minute.
They travel up to the lobby, then, up another set of stairs, up to the second floor, past the bookshelves, past the study area, and into an unfamiliar hallway. There’s a community corkboard on the way over, outlined with a happy spring-themed border and neatly filled with flyers for library events.

One flyer on the board particularly catches Steve’s eye. It’s nothing simple black text on a canary-yellow sheet of paper reading, in bold print: THIS LIBRARY HAS NOT BEEN VISITED BY THE FBI OR S.H.I.E.L.D., then, in parentheses, in small font underneath: watch carefully for removal of this sign.

Before Steve can ask about it further, Bucky is far ahead of him, settled in front of a spartan, mostly-unused office. He nudges the door—left slightly ajar—with his hip, and navigates through a maze of other stacks of boxes, brimming with books, before finding a lone empty patch.

“Oof,” Bucky says, setting the boxes down on the floor with a heavy thump, somehow not sounding short of breath in the slightest. Or maybe he was trying hard not to.

Steve's protective instinct begins to kick into overdrive, tempered only by the fact that he didn't want to push Bucky away, not for something as small as this. As much as he was worried and confused about Bucky, he was more concerned about coming across as smothering.

“Hey, uh,” Bucky starts, "Sorry about that. I didn’t think you would be coming so soon.”

“I know that there are policies about letting non-employees help, but I literally have super-strength, Bucky, you know that,” Steve says, trying to come across as funny, but he can’t hide his concern. Not for a second.

“They’re paperbacks and kids books, mostly,” Bucky says, then, “It was—I mean, it was heavy, but it was, you know. Manageable.”

Steve glances at the stack of boxes, still incredulous. But he reminds himself, he was there to say hello, not to start an argument. So he shrugs, conceding to Bucky’s ego, and can only hope that Bucky doesn’t throw his back out later that day.

“You know you don’t have to go out of your way to impress me,” Steve says, “But if it’ll let you accept my help any easier, I’m very impressed.”

Bucky smiles up at Steve fondly, shaking his head. “I got coffee on the way to work, and I’m pretty sure Dolores will run up here just to yell at me about migraines if I even consider having any more. But thank you.”

“Any time,” Steve says, and he means it. Bucky could ask him for anything and he’d do his best to
They enjoy a fuzzy, comfortable silence there, as they always seem to do, this time, among the precarious stacks of boxes and books. Steve knows that he should leave Bucky to his work, that he should just check out more books and make his way home, but he can’t seem to will himself to move. And from the way that Bucky doesn’t leave, or continue whatever he was doing with the mountains of books, maybe he wants Steve around, too.

“Hey, while we’re here—” Bucky starts, after a while, softly, slowly, looking unsure, as he speaks. “This might be weird, so stop me if this brings up anything too fresh, but—do you wanna see our Carter exhibit?”

Steve blinks. He wasn’t expecting that. Though Bucky meant well, the question hit Steve like an accusation, like a challenge. Did he want to see the Carter exhibit, proof that the first—and so far, only—love of his life was now part of history? Could he manage to get through it, knowing that seventy years under the ice and five years in the new century had passed since he kissed Peggy goodbye?

Was he truly ready to accept the fact that she’d moved on? Was he ready to move on?

Clearly, Bucky takes Steve’s silence as a no. He slumps into himself, looking horrified at the prospect of having hurt, even if unintentionally. “I’m sorry, Steve, I shouldn’t have—that was a dick move—it was an inappropriate thing for me to ask—“

“No. No, I—“ Steve starts, stopping Bucky in his tracks. He takes a breath and looks Bucky in the eye—smiling tight, but genuine. “I’d actually like that. I’d like that a lot.”

Bucky meets Steve’s gaze, like he’s looking for a sign; like he’s waiting for Steve to change his mind and say no. Steve just keeps his gaze steady and his breathing calm, trying to steady the rocky current churning in his mind. When Bucky nods, he doesn’t ask Steve if he’s sure, he doesn’t try to dissuade him. Steve is grateful for that. He’s glad they don’t have to have conversation that would follow. He’s glad when Bucky just nods, starts out the door, and says, the picture of professionalism:

“Follow me.”

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Being in museums where things from the war were on display was always felt both surreal and hyper-real, all at the same time. Steve could accept the time he missed, the legacy people set up for him with his own exhibit, if only barely; he could look at everyday objects turned into artifacts, and understand, odd as it was. But seeing Peggy, appreciated for all her accomplishments, honored for all the things she did in the seventy years that Steve was gone, it was something else. Walking into Peggy’s exhibit feels like crossing a threshold. It’s overwhelming—it’s feels like a full recognition of the time behind them.

And Bucky—patient and understanding enough to be canonized a saint—just stands to the side as Steve sweeps slowly through, waiting and watching, his presence a comfortable, steadying weight by Steve’s side; less a brick tied to his ankle, and more a buoy tethered to harbor.

“Why do you have all this?” Steve asks, his voice barely above a murmur, not looking up from a notebook lined with unfamiliar handwriting, but filled with familiar stories.

“We’ve got the largest collection of documents, books, and artifacts by, from, and relating to Peggy
Carter, probably outside of the Smithsonian. It’s about half of what we do. Well. Half of half—most of the preservation and curation work we do is about Angie Martinelli herself,” Bucky says, clearly reciting from a tour he’s given dozens of times before, but his voice far from displaced and routine; his heart is in those words, rote as they might be, and Bucky sounds somewhere between sympathetic and trepidatious.

“But where did you get it all?” Steve asks, moving on to look at a lipstick-stained napkin with what looks to be Peggy’s handwriting on it, sealed in time behind durable plexiglass. Rendezvous, fire escape, third floor. 10:15 PM sharp. Don’t be late. Those last few words send something off in Steve’s chest, echoing some of the last things he heard before bringing the Valkyrie down. Briefly, he regrets asking Bucky to show him this place, this testament to a woman who shook the world—to one of a handful of people who Steve loved, and who loved him back.

“Well,” Bucky starts, not unkindly, his voice going soft, as if he’s suddenly become witness to the full extent of heartache Steve went through, after the ice. “Most if it came with the building or were donation from the estate. The Martinelli used to be a home, after all, and these are the things that were kept over the years.”

That’s a comfort to Steve, knowing that someone cared enough to hold on to the things Peggy left behind. “She—she was very loved.”

Bucky lays a hand on Steve’s shoulder, squeezing it tight, with a warmth that radiated and filled Steve. When he speaks, when he echoes Steve—she was very loved—it’s the verbal echo of that physical gesture: comforting, without taking pity. Steve puts his hand on top of Bucky’s, a thank you, without the words, and they stand like that for what could have been another seventy-something years, easy. It’s the closest, most intimate gesture they’ve shared. Steve aches when he realizes it’s time to pull away.

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The rest of the exhibit is easier to get through, after that. Not painless, but easier. Steve doesn’t stay at the Martinelli much longer afterward, making an excuse about not wanting to steal Bucky away more than he already has. The train back home feels still and quiet, even in spite of the subway’s regular rumblings and the detached, artificially-polite voice announcing stations and saying something if you see something.

He’s hungry again when he gets home, his stomach aching in addition to his heart. Making real food seems like too much work, so Steve throws a frozen meal—a frozen paella bake, something he grabbed off the shelf when he’d last gone grocery shopping with Natasha—into the oven, grabbing a slice of bread to chew. While he waits, chewing the slice of farmers market sourdough slowly, savoring the crispness of it, Steve does something he should have done a long time ago—he goes on the Wikipedia page for the Martinelli Public Library.

Through his adventure through the Wikipedia rabbit hole, Steve learned the following:

The Martinelli Public Library is the former home of Angela Martinelli, former stage star, film star, and, later in her life, prolific author. She had a grand amount of wealth, but no children, and willed all her assets to the city, on the condition that the land never be sold to commercial entities, and her home turned into a public library.

Angela Martinelli was very, very close friends with Peggy Carter. It’s said that her most famous series, The English Rose, is based on Peggy’s life and legacy.

Some scholars speculate that Peggy Carter was one of Angela Martinelli’s lifelong loves.
The knowledge settles heavy in Steve’s chest. Not in a bad way. Not in a good way. It just settles. Not like fallout after the bombs, not like a broken stallion, but like a river stone settling in a pond—heavy, cool, and inevitable.

Peggy lived a life. Peggy loved and was loved. Peggy moved on.

And so too, as inevitable as the feeling settling in his stomach, would Steve.

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Natasha sets up the coffee date between the three of them—herself, Wanda, and Steve—though it’s less a coffee date and more a take me to this festival happening in the park. They find themselves sitting on the grass, colorful smoothies in hand, a cardboard basket of sweet potato fries to share, and a borrowed blanket protecting them from the dewy late afternoon grass.

“How’s combing through the intel?” Steve asks, and Natasha rolls her eyes, picking at the fries to find one that isn’t particularly soggy.

“It’s like wading through the sewers to find gold,” she says. Wanda makes a face, looking put off from her green smoothie after that metaphor. “But we’re finding some interesting things. As we suspected, there are a few clear leaders beginning to emerge after the collapse. Strucker was gunning to unite all of Europe’s Hydra cells before we took him out, and it looks like he still has a following in Western Europe. There have been mentions of a Zemo, mentions of a Schmidt, and—guess who.”

The devious quirk to her lips gives it away. Steve groans. “It’d better not be who I think it’s going to be.”

“Who is it?” Wanda asks, completely lost. Of course. She wasn’t with them in D.C., when Hydra first came to light and scattered after the collapse of the Lumerian Star initiative, like cockroaches after the lights go on.

“Mister Brock Rumlow,” Natasha says, disdain dripping from her tone, “He’s going by Crossbones now, apparently.”

“He always wanted a nickname. Of course he gave one to himself,” Steve says, drawing a messy caricature of Rumlow on his napkin, before scribbling it out. “Dunno how much you can trust that intel, though. Rumlow’s hardly fit to lead a STRIKE team, nonetheless a whole organization.”

“Sorry, who’s Rumlow?” Wanda breaks in to ask.

“The guy who broke Steve’s heart,” Natasha jokes, deadpan, and Steve throws his balled-up napkin at her, before course-correcting immediately.

“We don’t joke about those things,” Steve admonishes, and Natasha grins around her own pinkish-purple smoothie. “Brock Rumlow was part of Hydra-in-S.H.I.E.L.D., and we worked a lot of missions together. He was the definition of asshole.”

“Next time you’re at a bar or a party and you get negged by some hyper-macho finance bro with a bad haircut and worse cologne, just name him Brock Rumlow, because he’s that kind of guy,” Natasha says, and Wanda makes another face, this one, more disgusted than the one before.

“Is Rumlow back in the country?” Steve asks, “Is that why Hydra’s funneling weapons stateside?”

“I don’t know yet. The cells we got intel from seem to be mostly in the dark as far as the whys go,
and everything’s being ordered third- and fourth-hand. Whoever’s in charge of this wants to cover their tracks. And I don’t know who that is for sure yet. All we know is that however is in charge is planning something big,” Natasha says. A solemn silence falls over them. Steve nods, realizing he’s setting his jaw in that way that Natasha makes fun of, the way that only Captain America can. Wanda looks nervous, running her thumbs over her sleeves, just trying to do something with her hands. Natasha takes a last, loud slurp from her smoothie, breaking the tension, if only barely. “That’s enough talking shop. We didn’t come out here to work, after all.”

“Right,” Steve says, sitting up a little straighter. “Well, how’re you both doing? Recovering well after last week? Nat? Wanda?”

“Are you asking as Captain, or as a friend?” Natasha asks, eyebrows raised.

“As someone who cares,” Steve answers in turn, and Natasha hums, conceding point made well enough to Steve.

“Fine. Getting some rest. Doing that intel work in between, so it keeps me busy. But I’m taking care of myself, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Wanda nods. For a while, Steve was under the impression that she was just uncomfortable speaking with him, but he’s starting to think she’s just naturally very quiet. “The same. I—I’m tired, still. I’d had trouble sleeping ever since moving to New York, but it’s getting better.”

“And you’re taking care of yourself, yeah?” Steve asks, and Nat shoots him a look, making him realize how paternalistic he sounds. “Sorry, I mean, I’m glad you’re acclimating. Getting better, and taking care of yourself is important. So that’s—that’s good.”

“Steve’s a native, but take it from me, this city takes a lot of getting used to. Practicing self-care is very important,” Natasha says, carefully measured, her tone just on one end of neutral. “Me, personally, I like taking ice cream walks, but it’s different for everyone.”

“Sorry,” Steve says, tilting his head. Wanda glances from him to Natasha, her hands folded neatly in her lap, no longer fidgeting. “What is an ice cream walk?”

“Glad you asked. Here’s how you do it. Step one, ice cream. Step two, walk,” Nat answers, and her tone could be mistaken for serious, if it weren’t for the fact that it was full of shit. Wanda bursts out into a little snort. Natasha grins at this, and Steve, too, is smiling, even if the joke is sort of at his expense. “It’s real new-age stuff.”

“I thought you were being serious,” Steve says, shaking his head.

“I am! Doctor Kaplan recommended them to me. They combine being active and treating yourself, and they’re a great way of clearing your head, Steve,” Natasha says, and he can’t see Doctor Kaplan ever recommending such a thing to him, but for Natasha—maybe for Wanda, even, down the line—he can see it.

“Funny. She just tells me to stop over-analyzing things and ask a guy out for once,” Steve half-jokes.

“Well,” Natasha says, and that well hangs in the air, heavy and imposing, as Natasha watches Steve. The way she looks at him, the way she pores him over, looking for any hint to the situation, is almost physical in its intensity.

“Who are you seeing, Steve?” Wanda asks, still seated straight-backed and hands folded, but her eyes sparkling with renewed interest. “Is it someone working with us? Is it an Avenger?”
“It’s Tony,” Natasha answers quickly, and Wanda gapes in the millisecond before Steve jumps in.

“Jesus Christ, Natasha, stop lying,” Steve says, exasperated, and Natasha grins, smugly chewing her straw, as Steve works to correct for her little lies. “He doesn’t work with us. He’s a civilian. He works in Brooklyn, in a library.”

“Oh,” Wanda says, “What’s he like?”

And wasn’t that the question. Steve takes a deep breath before answering, not so much because he doesn’t know how to answer, but so he doesn’t ramble on and on and on about all the things he likes about Bucky.

“Well, he’s cute. And he’s smart. And he’s kind,” Steve says, not mentioning the ways that Bucky warms up his life in the same way all the slush and black ice of the world gets cleared away by the gentle warmth of spring. He realizes it’s a complete echo of what he said to Doctor Kaplan. Yet somehow, describing Bucky to people never gets old. “And he’s good about the whole Captain America thing, which is so helpful.”

“He sounds lovely,” Wanda says, and she’s smiling at him, warmly, and Steve can’t help but blush at that.

“Yeah,” he says, ducking his head a little, “Yeah. He is.”

They fall into a lull, after that. The sky is slowly shifting, the bright blues of the afternoon slowly dipping into the muted purples and oranges of dusk. There’s a hazy blue, nestled in between the orange of sunset and the blue-black of the night sky that looks like the color of Bucky’s eyes. Steve wishes for paint, there and then, and regrets not bringing his field kit.

He’s happy for this conversation, for the time he’s sharing with Wanda and Natasha. He’s hoping it makes Wanda feel more welcome, safer, being part of this ragtag superpowered team. He’s hoping that, as much as it’s becoming clear that it’s time to go home, she doesn’t feel relieved that it’s over.

“Well, this has been fun, but I’ve got to get back to working on sifting through those Hydra documents,” Natasha says eventually, stretching. “We should do this again sometime.”

“I’d be happy to,” Steve says. Wanda nods, looking torn over taking the rest of her smoothie with her, or tossing it.

“Wanda? Wanna walk home together?” Natasha asks, sounding like she’s trying hard for sisterly.

“I have to get groceries,” Wanda says, sheepishly, as she folds the blanket up carefully. “But thank you for the offer.”

“Then I’ll see you two later, then,” Natasha shrugs, as she makes her way off, trash in hand. “Bye, Wanda. See you later, Steve.”

“Bye, Nat,” Steve says, waving. He turns to Wanda, who already looks ready to return the blanket and leave. “I’m gonna head home. Thanks for coming with us. We’ll do this again soon, yeah?”

“Yes. Yes, that would be nice,” she says. “Oh, and Steve?”

He turns back to her, quickly, “Yeah?”

“When you ask that boy out,” she says, putting a strong emphasis on the when, “I’m sure he’ll say
yes to you. So—I’m hoping for you.”

Steve smiles at her, warming up at that advice. “Thanks, Wanda. I’m hoping he will, too.”

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A few days later, it’s a lazy spring afternoon and all the events of the past few weeks—the Peggy exhibit, talking to Wanda, Doctor Kaplan’s advice, even the text Bucky sent him while in Sokovia—is buzzing around Steve’s head, making him antsy, restless, compelled to do something.

He checks his phone for the time. It’s not nearly closing time yet, but closing time proper wouldn’t be a good time to make plans for the night. If he were going to take Bucky out for the night, the best time to ask him would be now.

So, with his heart in his throat, and his phone in his hands, Steve takes a deep breath, taking the initiative—the plunge—to ask Bucky to go to dinner, his fingers tingling and stomach twisting with every letter, every character, every second it takes.

ME [5:43 PM]: Can’t be fucked to cook tonight. Wanna get dinner? I’ll pay.

As soon as he presses send, he throws his phone on the couch, buries himself in one of his library books, and resigns himself to fate. Steve, only half-understanding the words he’s reading, waits.

And waits.

And waits.

He’s in the middle of typing a follow-up message—a double text, Natasha informed him, with an air of disdain to her voice—in the form of a semi-joking, semi-serious, semi-desperate attempt at levity when his phone buzzes, nearly bouncing out of his hand.

BUCKY [6:57 PM]: Yes

BUCKY [6:59 PM]: Oh my God yes

BUCKY [7:03 PM]: You have no idea how much I need a night out

BUCKY [7:05 PM]: I would love to go out with you tonight, Rogers <3

That’s followed up by a chain of emojis, hearts and smiles and exhausted little frowns, in between. Steve doesn’t make the effort to decipher what it means, to put thought into every little image attached. He’s too excited at the prospect of dinner with Bucky, a far more intimate meeting than they’d ever had before.

Great! he writes back, using an exclamation point—hell, he almost felt good enough to include two—I’ll see you soon. :)”

Steve wants to slump on his couch and sigh, happy and content, into his pillows. But he can’t, not with dinner with Bucky coming soon. No, Steve had no time for basking in everything. Not yet, anyway.

He has to get ready.

Chapter End Notes
i said i was gonna get better about posting monster-sized chapters, but after last chapter, this one feels short. whoops. next chapter is about two-thirds of the way done, and it's a tad longer than this chapter so far, but hopefully it won't be another 10k-sized giant again.

some notes, as per usual:

- for those wondering and asking about it: i mentioned in the comments last chapter (two chapters ago?) that we're very close to the one-third mark of this fic. i didn't plan on being this verbose when i was writing, so it's going to go a little bit longer than i expected, but i expect the final product, after all is said and done, to be at about ~120-150k words (just for reference, the word document of the fic so far plus a little bit that i've planned up ahead is at ~80k words). so yeah. that's that.
- also: i added the “not agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.-compliant” tag upon looking up a timeline of cap2. this won’t have any bearing on the content of the fic, but just know – as much as i try to be sharp and canon-comprehensive with this AU, it’s definitely a major canon divergence, given how sprawling the MCU is at this point. also, i don't watch agents of S.H.I.E.L.D., so.
- the signs up in the martinelli are modified warrant canary signs, first created by jessamyn west. you can find copies of them here on library.net, and you can read up more about warrant canaries on this wikipedia article. don’t forget: libraries and bookstores are always going to be political, whether overt or not.
- here’s an article about ice cream walks (and other forms of relaxation) on man repeller. i did an ice cream walk before i read this article and it’s super-satisfying. defs not a substitution for formal mental health care, or more pressing forms of self-care, but as far as forms of "soft" self-care go, it’s one i recommend, if that's something you're looking for.

that's about it for now. grad school this semester is a very heavy workload, but i’m going to post and work on this fic when i can. and thanks for (as of this writing) 400 comments and 9.5k views. i couldn't have ever, ever, ever anticipated such a level of appreciation and love for this fic. it's really beyond anything i could ever have expected, something i'm still struggling to comprehend, and it means all the world and more to me, knowing that people like what i'm trying to do. thank you all so much, really. thank you. all of you. from the bottom of my heart.

anyway, i've got readings. see y'all when i see you. <3
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

the rogers-barnes uncertainty principle; or: ruminations on genetic fate.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s about an hour until closing time when Steve arrives at the Martinelli, dressed in a fitted black Henley and dark bootcut jeans. It’s an outfit that doesn’t quite scream to the world, *Hello, this man and I, we are on a date*, though it definitely comes close. After tying it all together with his familiar brown leather jacket, Steve snaps a picture of himself in the mirror and sends it to Natasha, not because he needs her advice—not this time, at least—but because, as even Steve is willing to indulge, he looks good.

There’s a bounce in his step as he makes his way into the library. Just as he’s about to cross the street, though, Steve is hit by a brief but intense wave of panic—just another surprise appearance by his anxiety, those familiar, suspicious voices in the back of his head asking if he’s really ready—if he’s really willing to do this.

Luckily, he’s able to shake those thoughts off and make his way into the library. He hopes—with every single bit of him, Steve hopes—he can keep it at bay, at least, for the next few hours. He can’t get blindsided again, not when he’s made so much progress. Not tonight.

In Bucky’s usual spot is a teenage girl, her nose buried deep in a book—something about sharks, judging from the cover. It’s a warm spring night, and outside, the streets are buzzing with people going to do whatever they do when the world is just too nice to stay in. But inside, the library is quiet and still as if it were a living thing, waiting.

As Steve makes his way to the counter, he recognizes who the girl is—Kamala, the intern, the one in charge of the Martinelli’s Instagram feed that fateful day. The first person to reveal Bucky to the world, to Steve. He feels the urge to thank her.

“Hi,” Steve says, announcing his presence, and she blinks, putting her book down, ever-so-gently. She looks like she’s about to launch into the typical *how can I help you?* when she freezes, her eyes wide and mouth hanging open, if only slightly.

“And there it is. Recognition. Steve would never get used to it, not entirely.

“Oh—uh—I’m—hi,” Kamala says, her entire frame tense and trembling. Steve’s seen star-struck—hell, Bucky was star-struck, too, when Steve first visited the Martinelli—but nothing like this.

“You must be Kamala,” Steve says, and he puts out his hand to shake, which she just stares at, before taking it, awkwardly. “It’s good to finally meet.”

She blinks, still not letting go of Steve’s hand. “You—you know my name.”

“It’s on your nametag,” Steve says with a shrug, and she glances down, as if to confirm that yes, her name was on her own nametag. “And I follow the Martinelli on Instagram.”
“Oh—oh. Oh my gosh,” Kamala says, her voice all but a whisper. Clearly working hard to coordinate her limbs, she stands, clearing her throat. “Can I—uh. Can I offer you something?”

She probably meant to ask if she could help him find something. But Steve goes with it, anyway, trying to be friendly. “Are you asking if I want something to drink?”

“I—uh, I mean, yeah. We have coffee in the break room, and there’s a dragon’s hoard of Quest bars and snacks in one of these drawers—” she starts, “I mean, they’re technically not mine, but I was explicitly told I could have some if I was hungry, and I don’t think they’d mind if I offered one to you, I mean, you’re Captain America, sir, withholding Quest bars has to be like, an actual crime, or something—“

“No, I’m fine. But thank you,” Steve cuts in gently, smiling. He knows exactly whose Quest bars those are. Speaking of: “Hey, is Bucky around?”

“He’s downstairs, we had a little issue with the servers. Wait—” she says. Her eyes somehow widen even more, as she seems to piece something together. “You’re Steve? You’re the Steve who I keep missing? Holy cats.”

Steve shrugs, sheepishly. Kamala gapes, unblinking, for a good five seconds, before she continues, her voice barely a peep: “I—is—are you—is Captain America dating Mister Barnes?”

It’s Steve who finds himself struck, then, at her question. What was Bucky saying about him that would lead her to believe they were dating? Did that mean he felt the same way? Is Captain America dating one James Barnes?

He tries not to let any of those racing thoughts come across when he answers her—he had to, after all, keep the monster that was his anxiety at bay. Instead, he parries her question with another question: “Does he know you call him Mister Barnes?”

Kamala blushes, looking like she’s been caught doing something embarrassing.

“I only call him that when he’s not around,” she admits, lowering her voice, as if to share a secret. “It’s weird calling him by his first name because he is a grown-up and what is this—but he told me to call him Bucky. So—uh. No. He doesn’t know.”

“You should call him by his name,” Steve says, in that stern-but-understanding voice he breaks out sometimes when he’s Cap. “There’s probably a reason he doesn’t want you to call him Mister Barnes.”

“Yeah,” she says, a little guilty, “Sorry.”

“It’s hard, but people’s names are important to them. Even if they’re not there to hear it. So—I get where you’re coming from. I do. But call him by the name he gives you. Even if it’s hard,” Steve says, leaning on the counter a little bit, trying not to come across as friendly, and not too grossly paternalistic. That, too, is hard, given that in the time he’d been asleep, he somehow became a modern myth. She nods, looking guilty, so Steve tries to throw something in there, something to make it clear that she didn’t disappoint Captain America, the version of Steve she must hold as a hero. “Besides, Mister Barnes makes him sound like a curmudgeonly old man. Or a high school teacher.”

“Yeah, it does. I think he’d probably be a science teacher. Or a history teacher. Or a math teacher,” Kamala says, in a mutual attempt to bring the conversation back to a place more casual. Steve nods, letting out a little laugh, and she continues, “With a moustache. A big, brown moustache.
Like a caterpillar on his face.”

“Jeez,” Steve laughs, shaking his head at the thought of it. “I don’t think he could pull off a moustache.”

“Sorry for the mental image,” Kamala says, though Steve isn’t entirely sure how much she means it. Misery loves company, after all, and the image of Bucky with a bushy brown moustache is a miserable one. “When you see him for real, you won’t be able to un-think it. Oh—! Shoot, sorry, I still haven’t told you where he is, have I?”

Steve shrugs. “It’s alright. This was a good conversation. Moustaches notwithstanding.”

She blinks, then smiles, looking bashful and blushing with an intensity that rivals Steve’s full-body blush. If Steve were anything like the celebrity they’d turned Captain America into—if Steve were anything like Tony, he thinks, only a little bitterly—he would have reveled in her hero worship. Instead, he just finds it charming, but not entirely pleasant. Intimidating, in a way. He hopes that he can just become Steve to her someday, just as he had become with Bucky.

“Mister Ba—uh—Bucky is downstairs,” Kamala repeats, having caught herself and regained her composure quite quickly. “If you head down the staircase, near the back of the library, you’ll see the downstairs bathrooms. Past that are two big double doors marked Staff only, and you’ll want to go through them. Once you go down the big, kinda scary hallway, it’ll fork. The server room will be on the right side, first door on the right.”

“Got it,” Steve says, with a nod. “Thanks, Kamala.”

She nods in return, quite enthusiastically, still. Her energy is infectious. “No prob.”

“Oh, one more thing,” Steve says, because like a dog with a bone, he can’t leave things well enough alone.

“Yeah?”

“Does he—” Steve starts, “Does he say we’re dating?”

“You’re not—?” Kamala starts, and in an echo of realizing that Steve was Steve, her eyes widen, a more horrified expression of recognition slowly dawning on her. “Oh—oh. Oh my gosh, I’m so sorry, you’re not—I just assumed, with how he—and how you—and Dot was saying—oh my gosh, oh my gosh oh my gosh I’m so sorry—”

“Hey,” Steve cuts in, putting his hand on her shoulder. “It’s okay. Between you and me, we’re not, but—”

He trails off, tapping his nose with a little smile as he leaves for the basement, letting her fill in the rest.

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“Thanks for doing this, Doreen,” Bucky is saying when Steve peeks his head into the server room. He sounds exhausted, and looks it, too. There’s a giant shaker bottle of something of an indeterminate color in his hand, and he’s wearing a loose, slouchy cardigan in a dull, sad-looking gray. His messy bun looks messier than usual, and there’s a beat-up mini spiral notebook half-hanging out of his cardigan pocket. He hadn’t texted Steve that much that day, and looking at him, looking at the tension held in his shoulders, Steve can see why. Whatever must have happened that day must have been hectic.
“Bucky Bear, even if this weren’t like, my literal job, I’d still be back here saving the day with the dust bunnies,” a young woman—presumably Doreen—says, poking her head out from behind a tangle of wires and big, dusty servers. She’s chipper, almost disturbingly so, an incredible contrast from Bucky. “The Martinelli and I go way back!”

“And that’s why we love having you,” Bucky says, his voice tired, but the sentiment no less genuine. “You know, if you get a better job offer after you graduate, we’re screwed.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she says, trying to brush it off, but clearly very, very flattered, even half-obscured behind all the blinking machines. “You know, you shouldn’t even be in there with that thing. Can’t have you spilling anything on the goods.”

Bucky snorts, but he takes a few careful steps back, nonetheless. “Maybe the servers need their protein, ever think of that?”

“Jeez. You guys really are screwed,” she jokes, shifting to send a look to Bucky. She seems to notice Steve as she does, meeting his eyes briefly, and, somehow, seemingly, understanding his purpose immediately. He wonders, not for the first time, if he really wore his fondness for Bucky that clearly on his sleeve. “Heads-up, Bucky Bear. Looks like someone’s waiting on you.”

Bucky turns to look, and his expression visibly shifts, brightening the second he sees Steve. “Oh. Hi.”

“Hi,” Steve says, coming a little closer, feeling like he’s making his way out of the shadows. He likes to think that the way Bucky’s gaze flicks up and down him means that Bucky’s taking him in, admiring the way he’s dressed to impress. “Am I interrupting something?”

Bucky glances from Steve, to Doreen, then back to Steve. “No, I—we’re—”

“Go, go,” she says, her hand poking out from behind a tangle of wires to wave him off. “I can handle this on my own.”

“You sure?”

“Again. My literal job that I’m going to school for.”

“Alright—” Bucky starts, and there it is again, that Mom Voice, this time, not directed at Steve. “But you need me, you text me right away, alright?”

“Will do,” Doreen says, and Steve doesn’t know her, not in the slightest, but he trusts that Bucky has her word, all the same.

Bucky makes his way to Steve, tucking strands of hair behind his ears as he does—perhaps, Steve thinks, in a way to come across as presentable. He leads Steve upstairs, out of the server room, out of the basement and into an intimate little corner of books. In that spot, next to an emergency exit, Steve and Bucky are nicely hidden from the rest of the library, hidden from the rest of the world. It makes Steve’s body buzz with a funny sort of energy, an anticipation of something, of anything. It brings him back to being a teenager, dreaming of a beautiful someone with beautiful intentions taking him to an impossibly-isolated part of the Coney Island pier.

They smile at each other, Bucky leaning up against the wall, holding that shaker bottle in a delicate grip. The way Bucky looks at him makes Steve feel like a star, like something bright, something that can’t be looked away from—and somehow, unlike Kamala’s hero worship—he doesn’t have a problem with that.
“Your coworkers are nice,” Steve says eventually, returning Bucky’s gentle, friendly smile.

“Yeah, they’re all a pretty good group,” Bucky says in agreement, before he takes a sip from his shaker bottle.

“I met Kamala, finally. She’s a good kid,” Steve says, and Bucky nods, his hum muffled by his mouthful of—whatever it is he’s drinking. “How come I never run into Kamala or Doreen, though? I see Kamala a lot on the Martinelli’s Instagram, but I only ever run into you or Dot.”

“Doreen only works part time. She and Nancy are in the computer science honors program at ESU, so while they’re geniuses when it comes to shit like what happened today, they couldn’t reasonably do full time. We’re probably going to hire them on after they graduate, though,” Bucky says with a little shrug, absentmindedly shaking the bottle, letting the ball bob wildly in the muddy-looking liquid. “As for Kamala, she’s here as part of an internship program we do with tri-state high schools, and since she has to make her way all the way over from Jersey City, we just let her come in whenever she can.”


“Yeah,” is what Bucky says, as he begins absentmindedly reorganizing a few books on the shelves, putting them back in their proper order. Steve watches him, the way his fingers delicately graze the spine of even the most obscure, beat-up books, and it stirs something in him, something he can’t describe or explain.

“So—dinner,” Steve says after a while, and Bucky makes that same wide-eyed expression he did when Steve almost ran into him the last time they’d met up; it was only earlier that week, but it already feels like part of history. Part of their history.

“Right. Dinner. Sorry, we’re so busy with the server problems I totally forgot,” Bucky says, shaking his head. He looks guilty. For once, it’s not Steve who feels that way. “I’d love to go out with you for dinner. I would like nothing more than that. I just—we’ve gotta figure whatever’s happening down there first, and then we’ve gotta close up. Is that okay with you?”

“Yeah. Yeah, of course it’s okay with me,” Steve says, shrugging. Even if Bucky said no to Steve’s initial text, it wasn’t like Steve had anything planned as an alternative.

“I’ll be an hour. Maybe a little bit more,” Bucky says in warning. As if that would dissuade Steve.

“Buck, I’d wait ’til daybreak if you asked me to,” Steve says, and Bucky looks surprised at that. Flattered. Steve shrugs, trying to act casually. As if that was possible, given Bucky. “I really don’t wanna cook. And if I’m gonna get something, I wanna take you with me. I wouldn’t offer if I didn’t really mean it. So I’m willing to wait. And look—worst comes to worst, you and me and Doreen and Kamala can get a pizza or something.”

Bucky smiles at that, warm and beautiful and breathtaking. He might have looked at Steve like he was a star, but Bucky was nothing short of a supernova.

“Alright. Okay,” he says, his voice soft and sweet. “In that case, I’m gonna head back downstairs and check on Doreen. I’ll meet you at the circulation desk when we’re all closed up. Go have fun, read something new.”

“Will do,” Steve says with a nod, resisting the urge to follow. Bucky grins at this, leaving Steve with one more thing.
“And don’t do anything stupid ‘till I get back, yeah?”

From anyone else, for that, Steve would’ve decked them, or at least given them a good amount of lip. But coming from Bucky, Steve can just beam.

“Can’t promise you nothing, jerk,” he says, with infinite fondness.

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Doreen really was a genius when it came to computers, because the server issues are resolved and everything is settled no later than an hour after Bucky left. Things move even more quickly after that; Bucky and Steve are settled at a restaurant no later than half an hour after they leave the library, and somehow, either through some perfect alignment of the stars or through someone recognizing Steve is Steve Rogers, they practically don’t even have to wait.

The restaurant—on recommendation from some local magazine that Steve follows on his Instagram—isn’t exactly what he expected. It’s a painfully hip, crowded, small place, neither romantic nor seedy, and decidedly not a date. Except, from the way they’re seated in a quiet corner booth, to the way their waitress addressed them as a unit, rather than a separate pair, the universe seems to think it definitely is.

“Thanks for taking me out tonight,” Bucky says fondly, over his plate of pasta and steak—it’s almost double that, on Steve’s side of the table. “It’s like you knew.”

“Hey, thanks for coming with me,” Steve says, equally warm. “Like I said, I wanted to spend time with you. If you’d said no, I’d probably be on my couch, still in my sweats, eating greasy Chinese takeout and binge-watching all the movies I’d missed while I was iced.”

“Huh,” Bucky hums, through a mouthful of pasta. He seems to pause at that, using the time-honored tradition of buying time under the guise of chewing. It was always a touchy subject to people—to civilians, especially—when Steve brought up the fact that he’d technically been dead for the better part of a century. More often than not, people didn’t know how to take it. With a sinking feeling of awkwardness pooling in the pit of his stomach, Steve’s attention darts to his food, hoping that Bucky doesn’t notice he’s stalling for time by doing the exact same thing.

“You know, actually? That doesn’t sound like too bad of a night.”

Steve breathes out a sigh of relief. That anxious tide recedes, leaving behind a welcome calm. So far, so good. He swallows his mouthful, takes a sip of water, and continues on, trying to come off as never having been anxious in the first place. “Well, hey, if I could have that and your company, I wouldn’t complain.”

“Jeez,” Bucky says, quiet, almost to himself, and he’s smiling, ducking his head, looking bashful as ever. Steve is satisfied at that. Things are back on track.

They share a silence there as they work on their respective dinners, one less awkward than the one that came before it. As much of a not-date as it might be, dinner with Bucky feels intimate, even in its silences, opening up paths yet unexplored, conversations not yet had, questions still left unanswered. It’s not a date, Steve keeps having to remind himself, but in that crowded, tragically hip restaurant, it’s about the next best thing.

And Bucky seems to be on the same page.

“Can I ask you something?” he asks. “It’s kinda personal.”

“Shoot,” Steve says, cutting into his thick, juicy slice of steak. It’s rare as they make it, and biting
into it, even with all the table manners drilled into him for dinners with bureaucrats, satisfies something primal and **hungry** in Steve.

“Was it—were you okay?” Bucky asks, his tone trepidatious, a tiptoe, caution in every syllable, in every beat. “After I showed you the Peggy Carter exhibit, I mean.”

Steve sits up at that, or at least, sits up as high as he can, without shifting bumping into something. Bucky has his lower lip between his teeth, and for a second, Steve stumbles off the path of their conversation, too distracted by the way Bucky looks, worrying his lip like that.

“I—uh,” Steve says, taking a deep breath. Taking a moment, however brief, to find his way back. “I was fine, yeah.”

Bucky doesn’t look convinced. “Steve, I’m—I’ve been thinking about whether I made the right call ever since I offered to show you there, and I’m sorry for it. It was inappropriate. You don’t gotta spare my feelings, you know.”

“Buck,” Steve says, genuinely, biting back the urge to reach across the table and tuck a stand of hair behind Bucky’s ear. “It was fine. Look, it’s—it’s hard, yeah, seeing how much I missed, how much I could’ve been part of. Seeing that Peggy moved on after me. But I **needed** to see it. As much as it hurts, it gets easier each time, knowing that everyone moved on. Because if everyone else moved on, then so can I. Yeah, it’s something that’s gonna take time—hell, you should’ve seen me when I got to the Peggy part of the big Smithsonian exhibit—but it—I **need** to see these things. So it was—I was, yeah. I was fine.”

Bucky doesn’t look convinced. Worse, he looks like he’s blaming himself for Steve’s hurt, for the internal ordeal that was going through the Carter exhibit. And Steve can’t have that. He can’t have Bucky feeling guilty, not for Steve’s trauma.

“Hey,” Steve says, leaning in close, taking care not to bury himself elbows-deep in his pasta. “Trust me, okay? I needed to be there. And I don’t regret you taking me. I would’ve never gone to that part of the library if it weren’t for you. Alright?”

“Yeah,” Bucky says, still sounding a little deflated. Still not sounding completely absolved.

“Buck, really. It’s okay,” Steve says, “Besides, putting the fact that’s Peggy aside, I liked seeing a part of the library I don’t pay attention to. I like when you show me more of the things you do. That’s part of why I like going to the library.”

This seems to bring back that light, that spark. “Really?”

Steve nods. “Wouldn’t say it if I didn’t mean it, Buck. You know that.”

“Yeah,” Bucky says, and his voice is soft, again, “Yeah, I guess so.”

They don’t speak for a while after that, instead, working on their food. Bucky cleans his plate quickly, ravenously—or, as ravenous as one can, while still maintaining proper table manners. He refuses, of course, when Steve offers some of his pasta, but it doesn’t stop Steve from worrying over him like he’s his mother. It’s a moment more of silence between them, of Bucky watching Steve and taking small sips of water when Steve finally breaks the silence.

“Can I ask you something?” he asks, “Not as personal. As yours, I mean.”

Bucky shrugs, looking far more relaxed than earlier. “Sure.”
“When you were doing what you did, going into librarian school, did you ever think you’d end up having to lead Captain America through an exhibit about his ex—” Steve starts, stopping short of calling Peggy his girlfriend. No, they were never that. The war wasn’t made for boyfriends and girlfriends, with their egg creams with two straws, and their date-night strolls along the pier. And she wasn’t his lover. She could hardly be reduced to that. She could hardly be reduced to anything, in the grand scheme of his life—Peggy wasn’t Steve’s girlfriend, or lover, or fiancée. She was Peggy, and that was that. But Steve settles on something, regardless, realizing that Bucky is expecting him to continue, to add a cap to the end of his sentence, instead of letting it spool out, awkwardly, into oblivion. “—his ex-gal?”

“No, no, I can’t say that I did,” Bucky answers, with a laugh, “I mean, not that I’m complaining. I’m glad I was able to meet you. But they don’t exactly have a Living Legends and You class, even at NYU.”

Steve raises his eyebrows, leaning back in his seat. “You went to NYU? Shit.”

“Yeah, well, I’m still paying the bills for it, and probably will be for a long time,” Bucky says with a smile and a lopsided shrug, lighthearted, but self-depreciating, nonetheless.

“I guess what you’re saying is, don’t go back to school?” Steve asks, jokingly.

“I’m not saying that. Just—keep an eye on those tuition costs,” Bucky replies, “Besides, you? I’m sure any university would pay you to enroll as one of their students.”

“Kinda defeats the challenge of going to school if they’re just letting me in as a celebrity endorsement,” Steve says, before digging back into his meal. Bucky heaves another little one-shouldered shrug at that, and they fall into another comfortable silence, as Steve finishes his pasta and Bucky watches him eat.

“Can I ask you another question?” Bucky asks eventually, as soon as Steve pushes his plate aside, now completely empty.

Steve smiles at Bucky, his head tilted slightly, so he’s looking up at him through his long, brown eyelashes. He didn’t mean to play coy, but it didn’t hurt if it came across that way. “You don’t have to ask for permission, Buck, but go ahead.”

“What would you go back to school for?” Bucky asks, and of course, Steve answers with art. Journalism, if he truly chose to give up the shield for good one day, and art—illustration, specifically—if he stayed Captain America, just to say that he finally got a degree. Steve, then, asks him his own question, a variation on Bucky’s own, and Bucky answers it in turn.

They continue like that, asking each other questions—always asking permission, even though the laughs and groans and shared smiles—learning more things about each other than they ever could have through texts, than they ever could have through awkward little conversations in the park. Steve learns that Bucky was an English major in undergrad, that he has an awful sweet tooth, and he loves Halloween but hates his birthday. In turn, Steve shares things of his own—not secrets, but not common knowledge. Things like the fact that he doesn’t tan, he burns, even with the serum, but earns little bursts of freckles for the trouble of it. That his favorite dessert is apple cake, and he’s agnostic about apple pie. That his favorite holiday is Thanksgiving, though it used to be Easter, and he listens to far more of the Top 40 Hits than anyone would suspect. It’s this last fact—and Steve offering proof in the form of singing the first verse to the big dance song of the week—that puts Bucky in stitches, his laugh becoming a low wheeze, as he tries to pull together enough composure to get some air.
It wasn’t a date. No more than any of their other times spent alone. Except under any other circumstances, it would be. Except, if Steve was being honest with himself, it was.

“Okay, okay. You ask me a question now,” Bucky says, still half-laughing at Steve’s performance of a pop song.

“Well. Hmm,” Steve hums, thinking over something simple, something fun. He thinks about the things people usually ask on first dates. He thinks, and considers his question, and asks, even if it’s pushing the boundaries of appropriateness between friends. “First crush. Real crush. None of that kid you asked to marry you on the schoolyard bullshit. I mean puppy love. The real stuff.”

“Oh God,” Bucky laughs, burying his face in his hands, “Are you really asking me this?”

“I mean,” Steve says, quickly, “I can think of another question, if you want.”

“No, no, it’s fine, it’s just—” Bucky says, his voice muffled. “You first, you first.”

Even under the dim lights of the restaurant, Steve can see Bucky is blushing fiercely. “Jesus Christ, Buck. Who was it?”

Bucky takes a deep breath, composing himself. “Okay. Alright. Promise you won’t judge me. Swear it to me, Rogers. You have to swear it to me.”

“I promise, I promise,” Steve says, raising his right hand. Captain’s Honor. “On my Ma’s grave.”

Bucky takes a deep breath, closing his eyes, as if staring down a precipice. As if preparing to jump, hoping he’ll survive whatever lies next. He only barely meets Steve’s eyes when he finally speaks, when he answers Steve’s question; a question far from appropriate from something that was not a date. But when he answers, Steve feels like the only person in the restaurant, in the city, in the world. When Bucky finally answers, Steve swears, on his late mother’s grave, that he feels his heart stop in that moment.

“It was you.”

It’s Steve’s turn, this time, to find himself struggling for air.

“Really?” he manages to get out.

Looking away, Bucky nods. “Yeah. I—uh. I’d just turned thirteen. Just two, three years ago, I still thought girls had cooties, and being into guys was out of the question. I didn’t think I’d ever have a crush on anyone, and it’s not like I hadn’t seen you before. My dad was—is—completely obsessed with the history World War Two, and he’s a huge fan of you.”

Suddenly, a memory resurfaces in sharp relief: Bucky, as an image on a screen, across Brooklyn, when Steve admitted he was Steve, spoken almost like a confession, like a secret: I dressed up as you. I had a poster of you. Interest of that intensity, especially as a child, had to come from somewhere.

“But one day, I walk into eighth-grade history class, and we’re learning about the Howling Commandos, and Mister Czernecki puts these pictures up on the projector of you, Steve Rogers, before the serum. And I just—I looked at you, all small and sharp and real, and I had this moment of clarity, this moment where I thought, if I were alive back then, I would want to be with you,” Bucky says, his eyes trained on a water stain in front of him and his voice dropping down low. He should be inaudible, through the restaurant’s din, but as Bucky continues to confess his childhood crush, his rich, familiar voice is all Steve hears. “I just thought—I dunno, that I understood what
being in love was when I looked at you.”

Had it been anyone but Bucky—who Steve started falling for before he’d even met him face-to-face—this new knowledge might have been off-putting. But instead, it feels almost like cosmic destiny; like theirs was a relationship—though it wasn’t even that, not really—generations in the making. He’s flattered to be Bucky’s childhood crush. He’s humbled with the knowledge that Bucky trusts Steve enough to confess to something so raw. He’s buzzing with the thought of what
does this mean, what could this mean.

But more than anything, feels a nagging urge in the pit of his stomach to respond; he feels the moral duty not only to say something to Bucky, but to reciprocate.

“Yasha,” Steve says. “His name was Yasha. He was my first crush, my first real crush.”

Bucky looks up at him suddenly, as if startled.

“He lived two floors below mine. His folks would help out my folks, then my mom and I, once my dad passed. We used to sit out on the stoop, me sketching things, him talking about plants, and the science of plants. It was us, from ages eight to—yeah. About twelve, thirteen.”

“What happened to him?” Bucky asks, his voice quiet, still; barely a whisper.

Steve shrugs. “His dad moved the family out to Chicago, or near it. Times were getting tight, especially for us poor folks, and he had an uncle out there, I think. Guess they just wanted a new start.”

Bucky is silent, though Steve knows, not for lack of caring. And he welcomes that silence. He’s grateful for it. It gives him a chance to breathe.

“I’m sorry, Steve,” Bucky says eventually, his voice soft. His hand is on Steve’s. The warmth Bucky’s touch is all-consuming, and Steve is hyperaware of the way that Bucky’s long fingers instinctively curl around his own.

“It’s okay,” Steve says, realizing he sounds far more vulnerable than he’d planned. He shifts, moving his hand to squeeze Bucky’s, just once, just gently, but enough. Looking at Bucky’s face, the way that his expression shifts, ever-slightly, is enough, “It was almost a hundred years ago, now. Plus, I’d all but moved on once I watched a movie or two of Katherine Hepburn.”

“Katherine Hepburn was your first celebrity crush?” Bucky asks, and though the mood has changed, Steve can’t help but notice Bucky didn’t move his hand away. “Somehow, that makes total sense.”

“You think so?” Steve asks.

“Yeah,” Bucky says, and the way he’s looking at Steve makes Steve’s heart ache in every best way; there’s something indescribably humbling, knowing that even though he’s probably countless people’s celebrity crush, Steve is still the apple of Bucky’s eye.

“Uh—we should go,” Steve says, floating back to their present moment, in the too-crowded, too-hip, too-loud restaurant. “I think the waiter’s been hovering.”

Bucky glances over his shoulder, spotting said antsy waiter. The restaurant is just as tight as it was when they arrived. Free tables, even occupied by Captain America, were at a premium. Understanding, Bucky nods, reaching for his wallet.
“Hey, no,” Steve says, “Lemme pay for this.”

“No,” is all Bucky says, but Steve won’t have that. He makes eye contact with the waiter, and when he’s at the table, Bucky is still trying to pay.

“Nope, nope,” Steve says, swatting Bucky’s hand out of the way, “I’m the one who asked you out. I’m gonna pay for you.”

“Steve,” Bucky whines, as the waiter nods, darting off with Steve’s card. All Steve can do to that is shrug, taking a sip of his water as Bucky looks at him, as they wait for the waiter to come back with the receipt. When it comes, Steve has to maneuver to keep the total hidden from Bucky’s prying eyes. The bill isn’t much—Steve would even describe it as reasonable, really, given the amount of food he eats. And it’s not that he doesn’t think Bucky can’t afford it. It was just the principle of the thing. Just like how the principle of it all compels him to leave a tip that’s more expensive than the meal in spades.

“Ready to go?” Steve asks Bucky, meeting his eyes once he’s done signing a messy version of his signature on the receipt slip. Bucky is still looking at him, eyes intent, as if he’d not blinked in the time that Steve received and signed for his credit card charge. He continues looking at Steve for a moment, intense as always, before nodding, moving to untangle his long legs out and away from their cramped spot. Steve follows, and soon, they’re back out into the night, the air sticky and thick with the promise of rain.

“Hey,” Bucky says, his hands absentmindedly going to tuck hair behind his ear, not for the first time that night. “Thanks again for going to dinner with me. And thanks for paying. You—I owe you one.”

“Bud, I’ve got more than I know what to do with. It’s really nothing,” Steve laughs. He might not be as rich and flashy as Stark, nor as regal and naturally elegant as Thor, but between the decades’ worth of government backpay and corporate compensation for the use of his likeness, Steve was comfortable. And he would use that generously comfortable sum of money he still had—after the bills, after the charities, after what little he splurged to himself—to spoil Bucky rotten, if Bucky would give him the chance to.

“We should do this again sometime,” Bucky says, running his thumbs over the sleeves of that big, loose cardigan of his. Even lit up by the searing, electric-white lights of the city, he looks soft. Cuddly.

“I’d like that,” Steve says, feeling like a sap and smiling at Bucky, because from the looks of it, Bucky feels the same. It’s only after a few minutes and a light jostle from a passerby that Steve realizes neither of them has made any effort to leave.

“Well—“ Bucky starts, awkwardly, “I should get going—“

“Yeah. Yeah. I—uh. I could walk you home. If—uh. If you want,” Steve offers, gently. Bucky looks him over, considering. Chewing on his lower lip in the way that Steve knew was contemplative, but looked playful and coy.

“You know what, why not?” Bucky says eventually, with a smile and a shrug that makes Steve’s heart jump. “I’ll buy you ice cream, or coffee, or something while we’re on our way.”

That mention of ice cream suddenly brings Steve back—to his time with Wanda and Natasha at the park, to the beats of their conversation, to Natasha’s self-care advice. All he can do is laugh at it, shaking his head at the coincidence of it all. “You ever go on an ice cream walk?”
“What?” Bucky asks, confused, but still looking warm as sunshine, and God, will Steve never be over that bright, perfect smile.

“Had a friend tell me about it,” Steve explains, feeling silly, but in no way, feeling embarrassed or under pressure under Bucky’s gaze. “You buy yourself a cone and you go for a walk. It’s supposedly a great way to relax. Clear your head.”

“So it’s just a walk,” Bucky says, slowly. He’s watching Steve carefully, as if he’s trying to work out some inside joke. “But with an ice cream.”

“Yeah,” Steve says, “An ice cream walk.”

“Gotcha,” Bucky replies, and as he shakes his head, he’s still smiling. “No, I can’t say that I have. You?”

Steve shrugs. “Nope.”

“Well, let’s try it out, then,” Bucky says, as they begin to walk. “Next ice cream place we see, I’ll buy us cones. And don’t try to fight me on this one. You bought me dinner, least I could do is buy you a cone.”

“Alright,” Steve says, with a little laugh, “I’m okay with that.”

“Good,” Bucky says, with a nod, looking determined—sparkling, even. “Good.”

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They make their way through Brooklyn, walking close, their hands almost touching, but not quite. Steve feels overconfident and exuberant. It was like he’d completely defeated his anxiety. He was making real ballsy moves, and it hadn’t got the best of him once over the course of the evening.

Maybe he’d figured out a way to beat the whole debilitating anxiety over interpersonal relationships after all.

It’s late enough that by the time Bucky and Steve pass by an ice cream place, the staff is getting ready to close. Polite as they are, instead, they stop into the bodega near Bucky’s apartment, grabbing a couple sundae cones out of the cooler by the register. They pass in and out quickly, but not before Bucky stops to pet the big, lazy gray bodega cat peering up at them from the warm patch next to the ice cream cooler.

“His name’s Max. WNYC interviewed him last year,” Bucky says, as if it’s the most normal thing in the world, scratching Max behind the ears one last time before he makes his way to go, “He’s pretty cool.”

Steve has to bite back the urge to meet that with a, You’re pretty cool. Instead, he just holds the door open for Bucky in true first date fashion, waving a little goodbye to the cat as the door swings closed.

Bucky is digging into his sundae cone almost the moment they’re out of the bodega. Steve peels the paper wrapper from his, biting into the peanut-topped chocolate shell with gusto. As they continue through Brooklyn together, Steve following Bucky’s lead down familiar streets, through vaguely familiar neighborhoods, Steve completely forgets his anxiety. Everything feels lighter, simplified; that shared walk, with their bodega sundae cones, feels like his entire world. He was going to have to thank Natasha—ice cream walks really did work.
“Hey,” Steve says. Bucky looks up, already down to the last kernel of his cone. Steve pulls his phone out with his free hand, pulling up the front-facing camera. “Not to be that guy, but—you wanna—?”

Bucky shakes his head, loose strands swooshing as he does. “Yeah, sure. Just don’t throw this up on the internet. I don’t wanna get mobbed by TMZ. I like my boring, quiet life the way it is.”

“I like your quiet life, too, so you don’t gotta worry about that,” Steve says, and he snaps a picture of the both of them. It’s a nice picture, the two of them smiling, with half-finished ice cream cones in their hands—one could forget, looking at that picture, that Steve was pushing a century.

“Great,” Bucky says, as soon as they’re done, and he pops the final bit of the cone into his mouth.

“Yeah,” Steve says, because it is great, finally having a picture of the two of them together, finally having a picture of Bucky at all. Beyond preserving that night digitally, beyond preserving it in a format outside of Steve’s supersoldier memory, there was something exciting about having a picture of them together. There was something solid about it, something real.

They walk in silence for hardly two blocks more as Steve finishes up his ice cream. It’s late, and even with enhanced stamina on top of his baseline staying power, Steve can already feel his energy levels dropping. Moving forward with a boy as incredible as Bucky, all while fighting off one’s anxiety and taking many, many first steps would do that to a person, enhanced or not.

“Well,” Bucky says, stopping in front of a nondescript red brick walk-up. “This is me.”


“I—“ Bucky starts. There’s something he wants to say, something that lingers on his tongue, but he chooses not to share it with Steve. “Thanks for taking me to dinner, Steve.”

“Hey, yeah. It’s no problem. Anything for—” Steve starts, the words my best guy, on the tip of his tongue, and that’s when it happens. That’s when the confluence of Steve’s flagging energy and his insidious intrusive thoughts and his incredible need to strive for perfection with Bucky all combine to create something messy; that’s when, like a trip wire, Steve’s anxiety is triggered, working lightning-fast and with a vengeance.

A spiky, insidious thorn of fear lodges itself in Steve’s throat, as a familiar, cynical voice in the back of his head screaming that he’s going much too fast, that he’s shown his cards too soon, that he’s forgotten Bucky’s a civilian and likes his life quiet and simple and uncomplicated, that their lives aren’t compatible beyond what they have, that this—all of it—cannot end well and will not end well. He wants it. But maybe all of this so far—was nothing but trouble. It tears a hurricane through Steve’s mind at a million miles a minute, battering what tenuous confidence he’d built up, and he stumbles, falling down, down, down, two steps forward, one step back. And all the progress he made working up the courage to admit to Bucky how he felt—how he really felt—falls with him. The house they built of secrets and sincerity was not made of cards, but it still weathers significant damage under the gusts of Steve’s anxieties, all manifest when Steve swallows hard and lets the words tumble, like a mudslide, like an avalanche:

“—uh. Yeah. Anything for a friend.”

And standing there in front of him, Bucky—beautiful, funny, incredible Bucky—looks crushed. As if he’d been trapped under a mountain’s worth of snow.

He watches Steve, and Steve watches him—carefully, ever-so-carefully—in return. There’s the
most miniscule, almost-unnoticeable change in expression on those perfect features. Bucky, looking up at Steve, with those big, expressive, blue eyes, looks unsure. Unsure, and even a little hurt. That hurt, that visible ache, more than anything, is what Steve sees. And that, more than anything, hurts him, too.

“I, uh—I should—” Bucky starts, gesturing vaguely to the front entrance. His voice quiet. Tight. “Yeah.”

“Right, right,” Steve says—immediately regretting that he’d said anything. “I don’t wanna keep you. G’night, Buck.”

Bucky nods, pausing briefly, as if waiting. Maybe, Steve thinks, with a rush, this entire night, Bucky was waiting. After a second, he sighs, and puts on a smile, one that hardly compares to any of the dozen smiles they’d shared over the course of their night. “Yeah. Alright. Good night, Steve.”

Steve nods, and as he watches Bucky leave him, Steve becomes fully aware of how deeply he’d fucked up. He wants to take it back. He recognizes his own irrationality, his own stumbling, and he wishes he could harness whatever energies Wanda used to turn it all back. But he can’t. He made his mistake. No matter how much or how many times he would like to, he could never go back.

Somehow, in the aftermath of his panic, in the wake of all he’s done, Steve wills himself away from Bucky’s building, and before he knows it, he’s far away from Bucky, deep in New York City’s underground, barreling through the city at seventeen miles an hour; barreling towards the big, empty apartment he called home.

Yet, fast as he might be going, fast as the city might be rushing by him, Steve—with his phone sitting heavy and cold in his hands—feels like time has slowed. Once more, Steve feels like the world has frozen; the only proof that it hasn’t is the familiar, blinking cursor, flashing at him accusingly at the edge of an unsent text:

ME [DRAFT]: What are we? What do you want us to be?

The voice of the MTA—mocking in its amicability—announces his stop. And Steve—the stumbling, broken, anxious, unsure humanity behind the mask, behind Captain America—deletes his text immediately.

Chapter End Notes

:^)

anyway, some notes:

- hi sorry for the delay i am literally bowing under the immense weight of grad work like an over-shelved ikea bookshelf but on the bright side that new budget bill might make it so i have to drop out and move back home since if i were taxed for my full tuition at my wages i would no longer be able to afford living and working here ha ha ha i lied there is no bright side
- that said, parts of this chapter were super-rushed, so i apologize for that -- i might end
up editing them for clarity and for flow, but that's going to be at a time when i'm not as crushed by work.

- soundtrack for the second half of this chapter is father john misty’s “holy shit,” which I stole part of the chapter description from (the other part from another branch of science that's i'm totally obsessed with). i imagine it will be thematically relevant to other chapters in the future, as it’s also relevant to previous chapters, but how it’s relevant, i won’t say. spoilers, etc.
- steve’s outfit in this chapter is this one, worn by actual dream hunk chris evans. also: expect a lot more henleys in this fic.
- kamala's description of science/math teacher bucky is a reference to “they’re gonna send us to prison for jerks” by napricot, (which, in itself, is a reference to sebastian stan’s terrible i, tonya moustache). It’s one of my favorite stevebucky fics out there. i put myself on a cap!steve/modern!bucky fic moratorium when i started writing this, but that fic was too good for me to pass up (and kind of skirts by as not under the moratorium, anyway).
- max isn’t an actual cat from an actual bodega, but WNYC really does have a feature called bodega cats in their own words and it’s pretty much the greatest thing i’ve ever seen. i spent an evening i should have been doing grad work watching the entire series thus far.

anyway, that's it for now. i promise that next time's update will be less miserable.
Rain comes down in sheets the next day, leaving scores of broken umbrellas littering the sidewalks, and dredging up all of the city’s dried-up sludge like some sort of holy reckoning, or something just short of it.

Steve goes on a run, anyway.

He runs until he’s soaked to the skin. He runs until his bones begin to ache. He runs until even his supersoldier metabolism can’t keep up, and he begins to get the chills.

It doesn’t help. He still feels anxiety and guilt and an almost pitiful degree of self-loathing chewing at his insides, less like a dog with a bone and more like a fox trapped in a snare, ready and willing to gnaw its own limb off.

So of course, it surprises him when, late into the afternoon, on his way home, Steve takes out his phone to see, among other notifications, a text from Bucky.

BUCKY [4:22 PM]: Hope you’re staying dry out there, pal

Steve tries so, so very hard not to pore over it. He wishes that he could just take it as a sign that Bucky isn’t breaking off their tenuous relationship then and there—that even after Steve’s dumb stunt that he’d pulled back at their restaurant, he was still willing to talk to the guy.

But Steve, of course, is Steve. He couldn’t stop himself from confronting bullies when he was sickly, frail, and ninety pounds soaking wet. To think he could ever stop himself from running head-first into a losing battle—this time, with his own stormy mental wellbeing—was out of the question.

Ducked into his favorite spot and still half-soaked, even after changing out of his running clothes, Steve stares at the text on his screen—at those seven words, so damning and wonderful and indiscernible all at once. Cradling a mug of instant coffee against his chest, he struggles, with all the desperation of a man at a world’s end, to understand; to divine what Bucky is trying to say without saying. And more importantly, perhaps, most importantly, to respond in kind. It takes Steve almost an hour to come up with a response, and all the willpower in the world and more not to run over the library, still dressed in his sweats, slippers, and paint-stained shirt, there and then.

ME [4:42 PM]: You too, Buck.

Then, because he can’t help himself, he follows up—
ME [4:46 PM]: Want me to order you a cab? On me.

Bucky doesn’t answer. Steve paces his apartment for an hour, reminding himself—sometimes verbally, sometimes not—that he needs to try not to panic.

BUCKY [5:59 PM]: You know what

BUCKY [5:59 PM]: Yeah, that’d actually be really helpful

BUCKY [6:01 PM]: Thanks

And it’s not an *I forgive you*, from Bucky. It’s not even an *I’m sorry*, on Steve’s end. Not by any means. But it’s *something*. It’s a start. And Steve, in spite of the massive weight of having fucked up the *one good thing they had* hanging heavy around his neck, replies with something akin to *hope*.

ME [6:01 PM]: Any time, Buck.

ME [6:01 PM]: :)

It continues to rain in New York City. Steve continues through the day with a constant, ever-distracting ache, like a scab that just won’t heal. But after hearing from Bucky again, after helping him get home safe, Steve, in spite of everything, feels *warm*.

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After that text, Steve curls up on his couch, wrapped up tightly in a comforter he drags out from his bedroom, and falls asleep to a friendly, familiar Canadian-accented drone. He sleeps restlessly, still feeling far too chilly after his run in the rain.

He sleeps for hours after his alarm goes off, hours after he ignores a small flurry of Natasha’s texts. It’s only when his phone starts ringing, the passive-aggressively cheery tone grating on his eardrums, that Steve pulls himself awake, not even looking at the screen before he answers the call.

“Hello?”

“Hi,” comes Bucky’s voice, from the end, and Steve, out of surprise, nearly falls off his damn couch.

“Oh—hi. Hi, Buck,” Steve says, suddenly, *violently* awake. He rights himself, trying his hardest to sound casual, normal. Trying his hardest, above all, to keep to himself the fact that hearing Bucky’s voice again after their awkward, stilted absence was like seeing light again after a long, painful trek through the dark. “What’s—uh—what’s up?”

“Just making a courtesy call to remind you that you’ve got three books out that are now a week overdue,” Bucky says, sounding standard. Professional. The bubble of joy that was rising in Steve’s chest deflates, and for a moment, before he realizes that Bucky is still on the other line, Steve wants to let out the smallest, most miserable little cry he can muster. But he doesn’t. He just swallows his sadness, puts on an equally friendly, level-sounding tone, and moves forward.

“Oh—shit,” he says, running his free hand over his face, “Yeah. I’ll—uh. I can return those soon, I—uh. I’ll come in and return those today.”

Bucky hums. “Alright. Sounds great.”
“Yeah. Yeah, I’m—” Steve says, his mouth unable to form around the word sorry, lest he invite something over the phone that wouldn’t be able to handle. “I—Shit, Buck. I totally forgot.”

There’s a half-second of silence that Steve takes as a shrug. “Happens all the time.”

Another silence, entirely still, this time. After what feels like a charged, unresolved forever, Bucky sighs, the huff of his breath in Steve’s ear feeling intimate, roiling up the very feelings in Steve that got them in that stilted position in the first place.

“Steve, I—”

“Yeah? What is it, Buck?”

Bucky is silent for a moment once more, and Steve can picture him, chewing his lower lip, trying to pull together his words. Steve’s heart aches, missing that little quirk so much. As if he feels the same way, Bucky, on the other end of the line, sighs. “You know what? It’s not that important.”

“Hey,” Steve says, softly, “It’s okay. Tell me.”

“I—” Bucky starts. He seems to want to say something, but he’s searching for his words. Steve wants to hold his hand. It might have only been a few days, but he misses that boy, desperately. Eventually, after what feels like hours, Bucky settles on something. “I—thanks for calling me the cab the other day.”

“Hey, yeah,” Steve says, and this is the time he would confess to Bucky, if they were a week or so back along the line, if Steve hadn’t danced around his feelings for Bucky, and so suddenly pulled back. “Yeah. Anytime, anything. I—uh. Don’t—don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Mm. Yeah. Alright, yeah,” Bucky says, though he clearly has something else in mind, something he’s keeping from Steve, settled just behind his teeth.

Steve waits, but Bucky never budges, so he just continues, clearly repressing yet another sigh: “I—uh, I’ll see you in a few?”

“Yeah,” is all Bucky says. “Uh, yeah, I’ll—uh. I’ll see you in a few.”

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With a backpack stuffed with books, a paper bag full of still-warm pastries, and a head filled with a thousand different thoughts in conflict, Steve stands in front of the Martinelli, staring at it with all the fatalistic conviction of a fourteen-year-old kid about to storm Normandy. His head hurts, and it isn’t until he sighs, slow and measured and through the mouth, that he realizes that, ever since he stepped out of his apartment, he’s been clenching his jaw.

He still doesn’t know what he’ll say to Bucky about that night. He still doesn’t know if he’ll bring it up at all.

Hell, he doesn’t even know if Bucky wants to bring it up.

All he knows is that he has to see Bucky. He can’t—unlike when he’d fucked up before—turn around and walk away. Not without seeing Bucky, at the very least.

And so he pushes through—into the Martinelli, into the library—hoping that the buzzing in his brain and the trembling in his hands will stay at bay, if only for a moment; if only for Bucky.
“Hey,” Steve says the second he’s at the circulation desk, and in spite of everything, his shoulders sag, the tension ebbing, leaving his body through his limbs, the second he sees Bucky; Bucky, with that mesmerizing mouth and those unreadable, impossibly-blue eyes.

“Hey,” Bucky says, not smiling, but not looking overly hostile, either.

“Brought you something,” Steve says, unloading the books onto the counter. Then, he unloads the bag of pastries—two cheese danishes and an almond croissant, warm enough to still fill the space between them with a sweet-delicious bakery scent. “Two somethings, actually.”

And that earns him a smile. It’s small, soft, and nothing compared to the other smiles Steve had earned before, but it’s something. “Thanks.”

“And that earns him a smile. It’s small, soft, and nothing compared to the other smiles Steve had earned before, but it’s something. “Thanks.”

“Anytime,” Steve says and looks away, trying to ignore the way his eyes begin to sting and burn. He bites the inside of his cheek, trying to will those welling tears down. He’s not mad at Bucky; Steve’s absolutely enchanted by him, not that it’s a surprise. But the surge of guilt and excitement and sheer joy that is being near Bucky threatens to make him a blubbering, pathetic mess. Or at least, more of a blubbering, pathetic mess than he already was. So he wills it down. For a terse moment, he wills it down, standing there at the circulation desk with Bucky, as he had, so many times before.

“I, uh—” Bucky starts, his voice low, at the same time that Steve opens his mouth, wordlessly.

“Yeah?”

“No, I—” Bucky starts. He pauses, then shakes his head. “You go.”

“It’s just—“ Steve says, flicking his gaze away from Bucky’s, just for a moment. Just long enough that he needed to be able to say it, without losing the delicate composure that he had. “I—uh. I missed seeing you yesterday.”

Bucky nods. As he speaks, he doesn’t make eye contact, either. “Yeah. Yeah, I did, too.”

It’s still not an apology. It’s not even an admission, of anything. And as such, it’s not an acceptance of the not-apology that it is. But it was a start. As double-edged and painful as it was, it was a start.

“Hey,” Bucky says eventually, almost like he’s clearing his throat. “I’ve gotta—”

“Oh—oh, right,” Steve says, almost sheepish. “I don’t wanna—yeah.”

“I’ll see you—” Bucky starts, before he pauses, to seemingly, carefully, choose his words. “I’ll see you soon?”


“Alright, uh—well. I’ll—uh. I’ll see you soon.”

Steve nods. He feels like he can’t stop nodding. In spite of the potentially-explosive energy they both verbally tiptoe around, Steve finds it easy, relieving, even, to smile at Bucky, as he caps off their long, drawn-out goodbye. “Later, Buck. You—uh. You have a good night, alright?”

“Yeah,” Bucky says, and just like Steve, he returns the smile, seemingly, in spite of himself. “Yeah, Steve. You, too.”

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They continue to see each other after that meeting, all the while dancing around the subject of that night, of that half-swallowed, aborted attempt at something more. They continue to see each other, if only because Steve couldn’t imagine a reality where they would just stop. Having Bucky in his life was just the norm; he gravitated towards Bucky, and Bucky gravitated towards him, like two celestial bodies caught in each other’s orbit. They were twin planets; twin closed-off, emotionally-dysfunctional planets.

Neither of them brings it up. Not in the texts that Bucky sends him in the morning, not in their brief conversations in the library, not even in the prickly silences between them as they settle on their bench in Avengers Park. Sometimes, Steve thinks that it’s all in his head, that Bucky’s feelings for him are platonic, at best, that the almost-romantic angst is all a one-sided war was just that: a one-sided, pointless conflict. But that doesn't feel like the truth. Not when he remembers the look on Bucky's face that night. It doesn't feel like the truth, but Steve can never be so sure, not now, not when Bucky has, almost like with a flip of a switch, become so hard to read.

And Steve hates it. He hates how he can’t tell for sure how Bucky is doing. He hates how his traitorous anxiety kills his bravery, in the very moments he needs that foolhardy, famous bravery the most. He hates how he knows he fucked up. But more than anything in the whole situation, Steve hates himself.

Consequently, Steve stews in self-flagellation for a little over a week before he has to put on a brave face for anyone other than Bucky. After a week’s worth of pretending everything was fine until nothing was fine with Bucky, Steve had to do it again, this time, for a long-planned-out dinner date with his favorite redhead.

Steve arrives at Natasha’s doorstep, a bottle of corner shop wine in hand. He takes a deep breath, practicing his I’m okay, things are okay, did you see the game the other day? face before he rings the doorbell, pulling it on the second his supersoldier hearing picks up the soft pad of six feet—two human, four not—on their approach.

“Oh, hey. You showed,” Natasha teases, letting Steve into her apartment. Liho, at her feet, chirps at him in welcome. He hands Natasha the wine, and folds down to a crouch to pet Liho. “Good to see you haven’t been captured or something.”

Steve looks up at her and blinks. Liho, looking up at Steve, does the same.

“Why would I be captured?” he asks, pulling himself back up to full height. The fake-bemused tone he’s put on is a convincing one, but something in the pit of his stomach has already begun to lurch.

Natasha shrugs, casually, except not. “You’re usually good at texting back, but you’ve been pretty hard to get a hold of lately.”

“Just busy, s’all,” Steve lies, as he makes his way over to the couch. It’s not a smart move, lying to a superspy’s face like that, but the alternative was being honest with her, and he was not about to do that, not when he knew that he had just over a week’s worth of emotions dammed up.

She pads over to stand in front of Steve, before crouching to meet him at eye-level.

“Oh. Spill. What’s up?” she asks. The tone of her voice hasn’t shifted since she opened the door, but somehow, she sounds deathly serious. Not that she could intimidate him into a confession. Steve’s stared death in the face before.

“Nothing’s up,” Steve says, flashing a humorless smile. A typical defense mechanism—bare your
teeth. “It’s just—I’m, you know, ‘m tired. Mission-planning and everything. That’s all.”

She eyes him, carefully, like she’s watching a target, like he’s her mark, before she speaks again. “You’re bottling things up again. I can see you’re hurting, Steve.”

“I’m not—” Steve laughs, and he’s almost starting to feel offended. “I’m not bottling things up. I’m fine. Everything is fine. I’m not bottling anything up, I’m not isolating myself, I’m just—I’m busy. That’s all.”

Natasha doesn’t say anything to that. She looks like she wants to. In a rare move towards vulnerability, Nat lets her poker face slip, if only for a moment, as she looks at Steve, looking concerned and hurt and angry, all at once—before walking away, grabbing a brown and fuzzy something, and handing it, almost aggressively, to Steve.

“What do you want me to do with this?” Steve asks, looking up at Nat, as he gingerly takes the plush thing from her hands.

“His name is Cheburashka, Rogers,” she says, not an ounce of irony in her voice. “Show some respect.”

Steve rolls his eyes. “What do you want me to do with—uh—Chereb—Chaire—“

“Cheburashka,” she corrects, with all the patience of someone who’s used to having their language butchered by even the most well-meaning of people. Where did the thing come from? Was it Natasha’s? It had to be—but in that case, where did she pull it out from? Did she conjure it from some sort of spell made up of post-Soviet kitsch and the concept of childhood memories? Steve looks to the little monkey-infant-bear in his lap, as if for answers. It looks up at him with that same, big-eyed blank stare, as if in sympathy.

“Fine. Cheburashka,” Steve repeats, the word feeling more familiar to him, after hearing it repeated a few more times. “What do you want me to do with him?”

“Tell me what’s going on with him.”

“Are you serious?” Steve asks, equal parts amused and insulted. He wasn’t a child. And he wouldn’t be talked down like one. Just as he’s about to vocalize that very sentiment, Nat pipes up, her eyes trained on Steve.

“Try it. Works better than you’d think,” she says. She’s not calculating about it, not cold, but her focus intense, nonetheless. Steve realizes that it’s a manifestation of concern; he realizes, after feeling his distance, his absences, after seeing him carrying this weight, this must be her breaking point.

Steve, as if breaking, too, sighs.

“Alright,” he says, “Alright. Fine.”

There’s an awkward silence as Steve holds the plush doll in his hands. He stares at it, trying to work up the strength to actually talk about everything—about his mistakes, about his feelings, about Bucky. Cheburashka, weird as it is, looks up at Steve, its plastic, painted-on face gentle. Encouraging. It’s okay, that simple red smile and understanding little eyebrows seem to be saying. Take it easy. Being vulnerable takes bravery. And right now, you’re being very, very brave, Steve.

After a long, patient, awkward moment of silence, Steve sighs, and, carefully, tentatively, begins to speak.
“So—uh—Cheburashka. He—uh. He has a friend—uh. Bear. That’s—that’s his friend’s name,” Steve says, somehow feeling overwhelmed and like a damn fool, simultaneously. “Cheburashka really likes Bear. He likes Bear a lot.”

Vocalizing these things is hard. It’s hard, and embarrassing, and too much, all at once. But once Steve starts, everything, everything, comes pouring out.

“But Cheburashka’s got a goddamn century’s worth of baggage banging around in that big, dumb skull of his, and it seems like any time he gets close to having a single good thing in his life, a single thing that isn’t kicking or punching or stepping into a role that’s goddamn exhausting, he’s gotta sabotage it. He doesn’t even try. It just happens, even after he tells himself this is it, this is gonna be the day, I’m gonna step up and do the right thing. He just—he’s gotta ruin every good thing he’s got, because—because—“

She nods, her movement less a push, and more a gentle nudge forward—a go on, in a silent tone that doesn’t force a reply, more than it works to remind Steve that’s he’s safe, he’s grounded, he’s among friends.

Steve sighs. He feels exhausted. He feels lost. He feels like the biggest idiot in all of Brooklyn. But the words, as if on their own, continue to spill out, as if from an exit wound.

“I dunno. Maybe because deep down, even after the Depression, even after the war, even after seventy years under the ice, he still doesn’t think he’s gonna get a future with anyone. Not one worth the pain it’s gonna cause, anyway,” Steve says, with a sigh. “Maybe—maybe deep down, there’s still a kid with a chip on his shoulder and blood on his face who’s convinced that he’s gonna fuck it up, like he always does. And maybe because of all that he thinks—he’s convinced—that he doesn’t deserve nice things.”

“And Bear is one of those nice things in Cheburashka’s life that he doesn’t think he deserves?” Natasha asks, her voice earnest, though low, as she breaks her silence—as she speaks, for the first time since she set the terms of their impromptu therapy session.

“Bear is the best thing, Best thing since—since, you know,” Steve says, swallowing. “I—uh. Since. You know.”

She hums. She does know. She does.

There are tears, suddenly, fogging up Steve’s vision. He blinks, quickly, as if that would will them away.

“Sorry,” Steve says, somehow, feeling even more guilty.

Natasha, now perched on the back of the couch, in the way Sam would chide her for, had he been there, hums. She could never be mistaken for a hugger. She wasn’t even a toucher. Natasha valued her personal bubble and all the shifting boundaries that she drew like they were worth her weight in gold. But her bony hand on his shoulder, and her friendly presence at his back feels just as solid as any real hug would be.

“I’m sorry,” Steve murmurs, squeezing Cheburashka’s soft belly. It’s become a comfort. “And, I—uh. Thank you. I—I’m not—good at this.”

“That’s been clear. You’re about as emotionally backed up as my GI system gets whenever Clint takes me to get Taco Bell,” Natasha says, deadpan. Steve, in spite of himself, lets out a little sigh of a laugh.
“Gross,” Steve groans, sniffing a little bit.

“I know, I had to do something. Can’t have us getting too chummy, you know,” she says, her mouth quirked in a little half-smile.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever you say, Nat,” Steve half-jokes, his chest feeling lighter, as his sinuses feel congested and heavy, in the way that crying does. She slugs him on the shoulder, gently, and hops off the couch, gently padding her way to the kitchen.

“I didn’t know if you would show. So I didn’t cook,” she says, changing the subject, suddenly. He knows it’s a lie, for reasons including, but not limited to, the fact that Natasha can’t cook to save her life. But it’s a welcome shift. Steve needs time to let the ache clear out of his chest. He turns to watch her, uncorking the bottle and pouring some wine out for them both. Liho jumps up on the couch and aggressively headbutts Steve’s arm, only stopping when Steve scratches that sensitive spot behind his ears. “Let’s order something. Unless you have any objections, I’m getting Ethiopian food.”

“Were you going to give me a choice?” Steve asks, as she makes her way back over, handing him his glass.

“Nope,” she says, perching at the other corner of the couch, “I’m getting the spicy chicken stew. What about you?”

“I’ll have the same thing,” Steve says, and Natasha nods.

“Order you two?”

“Yeah,” Steve says, suddenly feeling overwhelmed at the knowledge that he has people who care about him, who know him well enough to know how much he needs to eat, to know when they need to force him to talk, to know him, period. “Yeah, two.”

She orders their food, and it arrives quickly. They don’t continue talking about Steve’s problems in the meantime. Instead, they talk about other things—about work things, about friend things, about New York things. When they dig into their dinners, their conversation slows, but barely. It’s when he digs into his dinner that Steve realizes that, over the week, he’d been eating like he was during the Depression, eating nothing but whatever bland, easy-to-make foods he could muster the energy to. It’s another thing that makes him ache, another thing that makes him have to fight back tears when he realizes how lucky he is to have his people.

Nat only finishes half of her spicy chicken stew before she decides she’s done, but she finishes around the same time that Steve does. As she wraps her leftovers up in aluminum foil, Steve grabs the wine glasses and begins to wash up, helping her clean up what little mess they left.

“You know,” she starts, as Steve dries off her wine glasses, wiping them down with a dish towel until they shine. “You have to talk to him.”

Steve heaves a heavy sigh. He sets the glasses down on the counter, and hangs the towel carefully in its place. As he speaks, his shoulders sag, as if on their own, but he nods at her, regardless. “I know.”

“Do you?” she asks, somewhere between her regular deadpan teasing and that absolute seriousness that she showed earlier in the night. Steve nods.

“I do.”
“Okay,” she says, “Good.”

A silence. A beat. It functions like punctuation—a period, indicating that this is the end of their night. Steve stretches, then moves, making his way out of Natasha’s kitchen, readying himself to go back into the world.

“Well—I should get going,” Steve says, toeing his shoes back on, feeling worn-out, but well-fed and cared for. “Take care, Natasha.”

She nods, escorting him to her door, scooping up Liho in the process. He mewls in protest, but doesn't squirm or move when she kisses his little head. “Start answering your texts again.”


She doesn’t say you’re welcome. Natasha had a complicated relationship with pleasantries, and an even more complicated relationship with genuine, open kindesses being directed her way. So she doesn’t say you’re welcome.

“Yeah, sure,” is what she says instead, her voice gentle as it could ever be. She smiles, and for Natasha, it’s soft. “New get the fuck out of my house, Rogers.”

Steve huffs out a little laugh as he makes his leave, knowing that it’s as heartfelt a goodbye as Natasha can ever manage to do. And that was fine by him.

---

Steve recounts everything to his therapist late that next day. After being called out for letting things spiral for far too long, Steve makes the call, early in the morning, setting up an emergency appointment for that afternoon.

She tells him all the things that he’d expected, things that, even before the previous night’s intervention, Steve already knew. But talking about it—about how much he loved Bucky, about how afraid he was to tell Bucky, about how much he knew he hurt Bucky—was something he needed far, far more of. And being pushed, even more than he was the night before, to confront his problems, his anxieties, the way that he’s been irresponsible, the way that he’s hurt people—is enough to move Steve to change himself.

Doctor Kaplan wants Steve to structure himself, to channel his anxious, analytical, overthinking tendencies to make things better. And so, he does. Steve, as he has done so many times before, makes a plan.

With that plan, talking over his plan with Doctor Kaplan, Steve thinks he’s ready. He’s got an apology and an admission and a timetable worked out. He even has a speech—an honest-to-God, point-by-point speech—in the works. Steve, with a little push, was going to plan his way into an apology, and he was going to make it perfect. He was going to, point by point, do things right, for the first time.

Too bad that a sudden change in plans with the Avengers meant that Steve’s mission parameters with Bucky would need to change, too.

Chapter End Notes
whoops i accidentally lied, these last two chapters are just all manpain, all the time. oops.

anyway, greetings loved ones, i'm back for a second (just a second!!) because it's the time of the year when i'm yet again drowning in grad school work, but forcing myself to write a little fic each day is helping me not burn out and also get parts of this fic finished so, uh. hi.

anyway, chapter notes:

- much as is the case with this fic, i ended up writing more than i could ever reasonably put in one chapter, so again, know that i didn't intend to have two chapters of manpain back-to-back, but know that, for real this time, things get kinder in the next update. i really did go into this chapter with the best of intentions.
- all the love to emily, my writing partner/editor/best friend, for beta-ing this chapter for me to make sure i didn't make steve too much of an asshole and leading me from the brink of posting potentially problematic trash. (i kid, i kid, but it was BAD before she took a look at it). she's just as familiar with where i want to take this fic as i am (as we developed the idea together) so as this begins expanding and getting bigger, expect to see me thanking her more. not only because she's the best, but because i'm going to be asking for her help more, maybe.
- the bit with cheburashka is inspired by silentwalrus's post about cheburashka and this subsequent exchange. sometimes it's easier to get your feelings out by projecting, especially when you're emotionally-constipated like steve is, as juvenile and as silly as it might feel. that's why we're all in fandom, amrite?

thanks for your patience, support, and love, everyone, and i promise, for real this time, next chapter will have substantially less angst. and, since i reached goal and was able to post this before the day's end: happy 101st birthday to the love of my life and #1 thicc grandpa, james buchanan "bucky" barnes. please don't die in infinity war, dude.

next up: the come-to-jesus moment, part two.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

morning has broken.
(or: the come-to-jesus moment.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It wasn't often that they ran into major disasters like this.

As a team, the Avengers were getting better.

Through the radical act of paying attention, they were getting better at finding the roots of anger and chaos and violence and stopping them, like constant gardeners, through prevention, through mitigation, and when they found things early enough, through care. They were getting better about moving on from being a superpowered special ops team. They were getting better at acting as real heroes. And because of it, they had been able to avoid being blindsided, being unprepared, countless times.

This mission did not end up being one of those times.

---

Brock Rumlow, a.k.a., Crossbones, former agent of S.H.I.E.L.D., current agent of Hydra, is, according to all accounts, a jackass. Putting it mildly, Rumlow is an overgrown gym class bully, a self-aggrandizing internet troll, except with the elite-level training expected of only the most special of agents.

But given all that, Brock Rumlow is neither subtle nor clever enough to come up with complex, long-term plans on his own. That’s where the new leader of Hydra, that dangerous unknown, comes in, putting into play plans that twisted and turned and unfurled in ways that even Steve is impressed with, looking back on it.

Impressed, if only in retrospect, and only to the degree that he could be, from the unfortunate position those plans left him in.

---

Hydra’s strategy was straightforward. Deceptively so. First, over a period of months, sow confusion among low-level members and weak regional leaders. Do this, fully aware that these people would be captured and recount whatever information they had to save themselves. Have these false plans written out in detail, deep enough to seem legitimate.

Second, plant elements of a larger, unified false plot through semi-secure channels, waiting for it to get intercepted and acted upon. Make things easy enough to hack, but not easy enough to rouse suspicions.
Third, while the enemy—while the Avengers—prepare for an attack that was never going to happen, turn around, drop all pretenses, and strike.

It took Steve and the team embarrassingly long to figure out what was going on. Though everything was obvious in retrospect, by the time they’d pieced all the moving parts together, half the team was storming an abandoned missile launch facility in Colorado, leaving the other half of the team rushing to pivot.

Which was how Steve and Colonel Rhodes found themselves in an abandoned nuclear facility on a tiny island alarmingly close to Brooklyn, with Natasha, Clint, and Sam scrambling to get people on the mainland to safety, just in case.

Though the facility had been cleared of the bulk of its materials, whatever team had been in charge of cleanup—be it S.H.I.E.L.D., or the US military, or whoever—failed to remove many of the prototype non-nuclear weapons that were being developed alongside the nuclear ones. Which, Steve thinks, was a stupid piece of planning, given that a nuclear facility was already a target, even without cutting-edge weapons prototypes. Or maybe leaving parts behind was intentional, considering that, up until recently, Hydra had been running the whole system.

Whichever way it might have come to be, the remnants of Hydra took over the once-abandoned facility with the help of a few remaining double-agents within S.H.I.E.L.D.’s ranks. With Rumlow acting as second-in-command, the Nazi bastards took over the abandoned facility, stole whatever half-abandoned tech they could use, and set it to blow—and take out half the city with it.

Or at least, that was their plan.

As Colonel Rhodes, in his near-indestructible suit, set to disarm the explosives, Steve—less-indestructible, but hard to kill, nonetheless—tried to subdue Rumlow. For a while, all was going well. For a while, Steve—flesh and blood and shield and spunk, going up against a fascist in two-thirds of a reverse-engineered Hulkbuster suit—had him on the ropes.

But the rusted metal platform that Steve was on began to give way under the combined weight of a supersoldier and an elite fighter in a prototype robot exoskeleton. Steve, in spite of his best efforts, in spite of his instincts, faltered. His foot lost its hold, his stance made way for an opening, and Rumlow took that opportunity and ran with it. With the full force of the suit, Rumlow landed a punch, right to Steve’s solar plexus.

And with it, Steve fell. Before he realized what was happening, he fell, farther and faster than any regular human could have survived, hitting something old and long-submerged on the way down. His arm and his head roared with pain, and try as he might, Steve couldn’t get himself above water before his vision, in all-too-familiar fashion, began to sting, blur, then fade away, until everything was black.

In the haze, Steve’s thoughts already had begun to rush. He couldn’t fight it, couldn’t use those stupid deep breathing exercises that his therapist offered for times of crisis. In those very last moments of consciousness, everything came at him at once—fragmented, unrelated memories, plans that would have made the mission smoother, and every single thing he’d meant to tell Bucky; every single thing he’d let go unsaid.

As he felt the gentle, familiar pull of unconsciousness, Steve had one last thought—one last word to the world, before he was entirely gone:

Fuck.
The universe would not let Steve die there.

Steve Rogers would live. He would *survive*, through a combination of the serum and early twentieth-century stubbornness.

Good news, Colonel Rhodes told him, was that Rumlow was in custody. *Better* news was that he fell into the harbor, too, not long after Steve. Hearing that, in the Colonels’ friendly cadence, almost made the whole *falling in the harbor* thing better. The image of Rumlow flailing in that suit wasn’t the one that Steve clung to through the barrage of being poked and prodded and stitched up and examined, but it brought him immense joy, nonetheless.

On a paper-covered gurney in some hidden clinic in the Tower, stripped down to his sweaty, smelly undershirt and his overcomplicated uniform pants, Steve gets checked over by Shiela—his favorite nurse, and *decidedly* not a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent—when he realizes two things.

First, for more reasons than the ambush, all his thoughts are firmly-situated back in Brooklyn, with a very *specific* Brooklynite in mind.

And second, he really, really needs a shower.

"Well, good news. As far as masked heroes go, you look fairly normal. No signs of concussion, no major bleeding, and no remaining fluid in your lungs. Which is good, considering where you fell from. In addition to the stitches, you’ve got several bruised ribs, and a fractured ulna, and a whole lot of bruising, but you'll live. And considering the fall, the fact that you're not much worse is a true miracle," Sheila says, snapping off her bright blue nitrile gloves, "You're *very* lucky for the serum. Give it a little bed rest, and you should be fully healed within the week."

"Great," Steve says, moving to get up, "That's great."

Sheila looks concerned. Worse, she looks like she's about to try to stop him.

"Captain Rogers. I said you're lucky, but at least wait for someone to help you out before you leave. Rest means rest, and if those stitches pop, even you'll be looking at a nasty infection."

"I know. I know. And I'm sorry, it's just—"

She sends him a look. As if she *knew* that he would respond the way he did. And from all the times she’s seen him, she probably did. "It's just that I can't stop you?"

"No, it's not—I mean—it's just—" Steve starts. He sighs a big, painful sigh. "I have somewhere I need to be."

---

It takes some managing, but Steve convinces one of the junior S.H.I.E.L.D. agents to drive him from the tower, out of Manhattan, and into Brooklyn. He hands the baby agent a twenty and a couple caramels for his trouble, and, in that *Captain America* voice he uses whenever he works with anyone from S.H.I.E.L.D., Steve asks the kid to drive back to the Tower and never speak a word of what they both just did, or where they went. Then, without hesitating for a second, without even looking back to see if the agent sped off, Steve stumbles into the library, feeling overexposed without his shield strapped to his back. He smells like a mix of sterile hospital, dirty water, and charred *something*. As bad as he feels, he looks and *reeks of* so much worse. It’s not the romantic image of a post-battle reunion that he had in his head at all, and he’s in no way dressed to impress,
but at the very least, he's no longer bleeding.

Bucky is sitting at the circulation desk with Dolores, Doreen, and another young woman that Steve doesn't recognize, along with some library patrons, all their attention turned towards two flatscreen displays. Usually, those screens would cycle through community messages, things about read-ins and canned food drives and guided tours through whatever it was they had on exhibit. But now, the screens are showing the news, the volume turned up louder than what would be appropriate for a library.

The reporter on-screen makes the situation seem much more unstable it was. Steve would have to clear that up at the press conference in a few days. But for now, he had another mission in mind.

“Hey,” Steve says, low, gently, as he walks over to the circulation desk, "Didn't mess anything important, did I?"

Steve will never forget the face Bucky makes when he turns to look at him. It's damn-near heartbreaking.

"Oh my God. Steve," Bucky breathes, sounding exhausted and relieved all at once. It tugs at Steve's heart, the way that Bucky says his name like that.

Bucky bolts out of his chair, and before Steve knows it, Bucky has him wrapped in a hug. More so than when he woke up in the Tower, more so than when he was getting checked out, Steve feels safe. He leans into Bucky's touch, taking in his warmth, feeling completely exhausted. With the last of his energy, Steve wraps his good arm around Bucky's waist—his surprisingly solid waist—returning the hug in a weak little gesture.

"I saw everything that happened out there. News covered it all day," Bucky says, pulling back just enough to look Steve over, just far enough to make sure that Steve is safe. Those blue eyes, those pink lips, the way his entire face scrunches up in care. It's the best thing Steve's seen all day. "God, you look like shit—what are you doing here?"

"Well, thanks. Great customer service as always, here at the Martinelli public library," Steve says, jokingly.

That didn't seem to help, judging from the way Bucky frowns at him. "No, seriously, Steve, have you even seen—?"

"Bucky. I'm okay. I got checked up, got a few stitches. Little bit of bleeding, none of it internal, and a few bruised bones," Steve says, managing a little half-shrug. "I look like shit, but it's nothing I've never handled before."

Bucky looks down at the sling. "Your arm—"

"Fractured. Don't worry 'bout it."

Bucky pulls away quickly, settling his hands on Steve's shoulders, but staying at arm's length. Steve aches for that lost touch immediately.

"Shit, Steve," he says, looking over Steve again, "I'm sorry—I didn't even think—"

"No, no. I—uh. I liked that," Steve says, feeling a little bit bashful, for the first time that afternoon. "Besides, they say with a little bed rest I should be good within the week. Probably won't even feel it in the morning."
"Then why are you here?" Bucky asks again, furrowing his eyebrows in worry. "The doctor says you need to be in bed, so that means you need to be in bed. You need to be—"

"Bucky. Bucky. Just. Lemme talk for a second, alright?" Steve says, smiling tiredly. Bucky snaps his mouth shut, but his brows are still creased in worry. Steve wants to plant a kiss on his forehead, he wants to do that more than anything, but instead, he pushes that aside.

Instead, for what feels like the first time in a long time, Steve pushes aside his gut instincts, and speaks.

"Today was—it—it was rough. We got caught off-guard by a classic redirect, and we had to scramble to minimize damage and casualties. We got surprised, and we were—as much as I can say for the Avengers—we were unprepared. You saw what happened. Haven't been hit that hard since the Sokovia thing. I got thrown into the Bay, at what? Seventy miles per hour? I mean— theoretically, I could have died."

"Jesus," Bucky lets out, his voice somewhere between his Mom tone and absolutely heartbreaking. "Steve—"

"Hey. Listen. I could've died. But I didn't. And when I came to, the first thing I thought, the very first thing that came into my head, was that I just—I just wanted to see you."

"Steve—" Bucky starts, before swallowing whatever it was he was going to say.

"I really, really like you, Bucky," Steve murmurs, pushing forward to slump his forehead against Bucky's. "And I—I know I hurt you. So, I’m sorry. I’m sorry for being chickenshit. And I’m sorry for not apologizing to you sooner. But—fuck, Bucky, I just—I didn't wanna go another day, another battle, without you knowing. That's what I'm here to tell you."

They stay like that for a little bit, silent, the both of them, while Steve's words hang heavy in the air; while the emotional exhaustion of that day—of the weeks of tension before, of the months preceding even that—threaten to overtake the both of them, like the vast, inescapability of the pitch-black sea.

"Hey," Bucky says, softly, one hand moving to cup Steve's face, "Dolores and Nancy can lock up. I'll make it up to them later. Let's get you home."

---

Getting a ride in Brooklyn, they find out, is much easier to do when you're carting around a wounded national hero in half his uniform. They arrive at Steve's place without a hitch, and, given how much Bucky is worrying over him as is, it's a small blessing.

"Thanks for taking me home," Steve says, as Bucky helps him onto the couch, "Can't give you the full tour, but guest bathroom's first door to the right. My room's gonna be at the end of the hall, to your left. Don't think we'll need it, but I should have a first aid kit under the sink, in my bathroom."

"You have a nice place," Bucky says with a nod, looking only at Steve, and not at all at his living room.

Steve nods back, or at least, tries to. He looks over Bucky, who's already begun rolling up his sleeves, looking like he's ready and eager to jump into action, with Steve's direction or without it. "I'm sorry for getting dirt and dried blood all over your nice sweater."

"You can buy me a new one," Bucky jokes, making his way to Steve's bedroom. "Or maybe I'll
just steal something from your closet while I'm there. What do you think?"

"I think I'd love to see you in one of my getups," Steve calls out. "I think red, white, and blue would be fitting for you. Might be a little bulky for the library, but you'd look good. Now, how do you feel about Kevlar?"

Bucky comes back after a minute, tossing a nicely-folded pile of clothes Steve's way with a quick flick of his wrist. Steve hasn't seen so much of his prosthetic before. It's sleek, and rude as he knows it is, Steve can't help but watch the way it moves, mesmerized.

"Very funny, Rogers," Bucky says, apparently not noticing, or too concerned with Steve's welfare to care. He's in the middle of tying his hair up into a little bun when Steve looks away from Bucky's arm. How he does it so quickly and gets his hair to look so nice, Steve has no idea. "Now get changed. I'm assuming you keep your fridge and pantry stocked, yeah? 'Cause I'm gonna make you some soup."


"It's for the soul, Rogers. Now go get changed outta that thing. You smell. I'm gonna take over your kitchen. Yell if you need me," Bucky says. He pauses. "You don't—?"

Steve rolls his eyes. "I know how to get dressed while injured, Bucky. This ain't my first fistfight."

"Steve—"

"Seriously, Buck, I'm fine," Steve says, half-harangued, though a soft, small little part of him loves being fussed-over. "Go, go make some soup."

"Yeah. Okay. Alright," Bucky says, sounding not entirely convinced of Steve's being fine, but making his way to the kitchen, anyway.

"Tell me the truth," Steve asks—just loud enough for Bucky to hear over the clanking of pots and pans and whatever it is he's doing in there—as he starts to get changed, slowly but surely, wincing only when he had to bend his bad arm. It wasn't so bad. The ache and sting that shot through his body whenever he moved was at least getting better. The pants just had so many zippers. So many different parts. Maybe Banner had the right idea, with those ugly purple trunks. "Is this the worst date you've been on?"

"You telling me this is a date?" Bucky asks from the kitchen.

"It can be, if you want it to be," Steve calls out.

Steve thinks he can hear Bucky chuckle, under his breath, before he calls out to him. "Let's see if you can get some food and rest in you first. Then, we'll talk."

Steve mutters a fine, with a little huff, and goes back to changing. It's hard, especially when he has to take off the sling, but he's able to manage. He's done more with less mobility, before. He moves slow, reveling in the way that clean clothes feel on him, and wrapping a blanket around himself once he's settled and feeling relatively clean.

That settled feeling has its downside, though, and eventually, the day's events take their toll on Steve. Before he knows it, he jolts awake before he even realized he's dozed off, and he has to readjust himself, forgetting, for only half a second, that the humming voice coming from his kitchen isn't a threat, but someone special to him. And good thing, too, because the second that Steve's nerves settle down, Bucky comes back into Steve's living room, with what looks to be the
best soup Steve has ever seen.

"Here," Bucky says, setting down a tray laden with comforts: a pot of coffee, two mugs, and a near-overflowing bowl and a spoon. \"Eat this. Lemme know if you want more. You're not getting up tonight. You need to be resting.\"

\"Thanks, Buck,\" Steve says, feeling all warm at his edges, the temporary panic he'd felt earlier nowhere to be found.

Bucky nods, and heads back into the kitchen, returning after a few seconds with a bowl of his own and a sleeve of saltine crackers. As Steve takes some of the crackers, he can feel Bucky watching him, noticing, out of the corner of his eye, that Bucky does not start eating until after he does. All of the attention makes Steve's heart soar. He feels like he's constantly blushing, as he and Bucky, wordlessly, eat their dinner, only the sounds of the city outside between them.

\"So,\" Bucky says, breaking that silence, suddenly. Gently. \"This is a date.\"

He says it plainly, not looking up at Steve, as he pours some coffee into a mug. Steve swallows, and Bucky, as if to make a point, \textit{sips}. Something about his tone, the way he draws out the \textit{So}, speaks without saying: \textit{We are going to talk.}

\"Yeah. I mean. Like I said, it is if you want it to be,\" Steve says, sheepishly. Quietly.

Bucky hums, nodding. Staring straight ahead. \"And that night a few weeks ago was—?\"

Steve winces. \"Buck, I—I’m—\"

He’s sorry. Sorry beyond belief. But that’s not going to cut it, no matter how many times he says it. That’s not going to cut it at all.

\"—I’m a—I know I’ve been sending—I haven’t been—I just. I’m sorry, Buck,\" Steve says, all the eloquence of before gone, all of it spent on his confession. \"For everything. For the other night. For the last few weeks. For right now. It’s just—I’m not so great with this—the whole—\textit{words. Feelings.}\"

Bucky gives Steve about a second’s pause before he speaks, frustratingly, almost \textit{eerily} unreadable, in the ways he gets sometimes.

\"You do know that \textit{TIME} magazine ranked that speech you gave during the whole Hydra-in-S.H.I.E.L.D. thing in the top one-hundred speeches of all time, right?\" he asks, eyes still trained straight ahead, as he undoes his bun and shakes out his hair.

Steve feels like a cliché the second the words are out of his mouth. \"That’s \textit{different.}\"

\"Uh-huh,\" Bucky says, sounding unconvinced. \"And that thing today, back in the library, it was —?\"

\"I—that was—it was different.\"

\"Okay,\" Bucky says. Then, without a pause, \"The other night really fucking hurt, Steve.\"

\"I’m sorry, I—I know.\"

\"And this isn’t the first time you’ve done something like this.\"

\"I—I know.\"
“And you know, showing up bleeding at my job puts me in a really bad position if I didn’t want to accept your apology. You know that, right?”

Steve winces. That, he didn’t know. Or at least, he didn’t think about it.

Of all the things he didn’t overthink, going to Bucky immediately after leaving the hospital was not one of those things, and looking at it now, with Bucky sitting on his couch next to him, looking like the most natural thing in the world, he can see how it works as a power play. He didn’t intend it, of course—but it could have been. And Bucky isn’t letting him off the hook for it. As he shouldn’t. Steve, not for the first time in this friendship—relationship—whatever it was going to come out to be, is having to face the fact that he is an idiot.

Compared to his ego, the bruises on his ribs don’t hurt so much.

“I’m sorry,” Steve replies, not for the first time. That night took a turn quicker than the day’s mission had. For a second, Steve considers ways to make his leave, to put an end the situation, before he remembers that he’s in his own home. That, and Bucky has had more of Steve’s cowardice than any one person deserves.

To his apology, Bucky just gives him a look.

“I—I really am sorry, Buck. I’m sorry for putting you in a bad spot. I’m sorry for not thinking. And I’m sorry for not apologizing to you sooner. I’m sorry for—for what must feel like being strung around. I’m sorry that I can’t be straight with you. No pun intended,” he says, and Bucky smiles at that, closed-mouthed, and not reaching his eyes.

It’s a start, Steve thinks, with a heavy, heavy sigh.

“And—” he continues, toeing the line carefully, ever-so-carefully, but knowing exactly what he needs to be say. “—I’m really, really sorry that I hurt you. I—I fucked up, and I fucked up real bad, I know. And I’m not gonna make an excuse for it. I just want to say—I’m sorry. I really, really care about you, Bucky. And I haven’t treated you like I do. So—I’m sorry. For—for everything.”

When Steve is done speaking—when all those things unsaid, dammed up for weeks, months—finally make their way out into the open, he feels deflated. And Bucky—unreadable, in the way that he has the power to become—says nothing.

Those dumb deep breathing exercises that Doctor Kaplan suggested were working really well, for once, judging from Steve’s decided lack of a panic attack. Now, all he needed to do was exhale.

After what seems like an eternity, Bucky lets out a deep breath, and Steve, as if on the same wavelength, does, too.

“Thank you for apologizing,” Bucky says, with a nod. It’s about as much of an I accept your apology as Steve will get. He doesn’t say a thing after that. And, as much as he itches to fill the silence, neither does Steve. For a while, at least. Instead, they sit there on Steve’s couch, the tension between them having ebbed, if only slightly, now that Steve has put all his cards on the table. They sit there in silence until Steve, determined to continue his streak of moving forward, of doing what he needs to do.

“So,” Steve says, his voice low. “What’s next?”

Bucky sighs, tucking a strand of hair behind his ear. Steve so, so wishes it were his hands going through Bucky’s hair, that it were his hands brushing against Bucky’s skin like that.
“I dunno, Steve. I—you and me? I want this. God, do I want this. Ever since you came into my DMs, ever since you became the only person who’s ever really listened, I’ve been dreaming of—of us. I had feelings for you-as-Grant before I realized you were you. And I still have feelings for you. I think the other night made that clear,” Bucky says, not looking at Steve. Something about that, about Bucky not meeting his gaze—makes Steve’s chest ache. “Or at least, I thought it did.”

And that, Bucky’s confession, as vulnerable as Steve’s—is a blow. The ache in Steve’s chest turns into a sting, sharp and, Steve fully knew, self-inflicted.

“But the thing is, Steve, I can’t tell what you want. I don’t know if you really want us or not. Each time I think I’m sure that you want me, too, you pull away from me. Like today, you tell me you want me, you tell me you wanna be with me, but only after a week of just friends? What do you want, Steve?”

“I want you, Bucky. I want you more than anything. When I’m on away missions, all I can think of is finishing up as quickly as possible so I can get back home to you,” Steve sighs, his hands shaking. “But—fuck, Bucky. I—I’ve never—I’ve never been with someone before, not like I wanna be with you, but I’m—I think—”

He sighs. Bucky is watching him now, those blue, blue eyes trained on him like the sight of a rifle. Steve doesn’t know if that’s better or worse than Bucky not looking at him at all. But he continues, anyway.

“I think I’m afraid, Bucky. Not of the world knowing I like you. If people and the press want to say something about me for being with you, they can do what they wanna do. But I—I’m afraid for what being with me will do for you. You’re gonna get caught up in the fallout of me, Buck. I’m afraid of you getting hurt because of me, and I don’t wanna expose you to that,” Steve says. He takes a long, shuddering breath, and lets it out, hoping that the tears don’t start. Not now. God, not now. He needs to say this, and he needs his voice to be clear, as he does. “And—I dunno. I think—most of all, I’m afraid that—I dunno. That I don’t deserve you.”

Bucky stares at Steve with an intensity that practically chills the room. Unblinking, Bucky fixes his eyes on Steve for almost a full minute before he sighs, no anger nor charm in his voice: “You’re a fucking idiot, Steve.”

“Sorry?”

“First of all, I’ve already gotten caught up in the fallout of you. This is why we’re having this conversation, Steve. And you know what? I think I’m doing just fine. So, we’ve already crossed that bridge. We’ve passed that bridge. We’re five miles beyond that bridge,” Bucky says, his voice as sharp as Steve has ever heard it. “Second. Steve. I’m a grown man. Do you not think I realize the dangers that come with being with you? Do you think I would’ve taken you home and made you soup if I didn’t recognize that being with you wouldn’t be like being with anyone else in Brooklyn—or, fuck, in the world? I wouldn’t’ve gone on all those walks with you if I didn’t recognize the probability of danger that you bring with you.”

Steve, not for the first time in his life, feels like an absolute idiot. And, not for the first time in his life, he knows he deserves it.

“And you know what, Steve? I’m okay with it. I mean—shit, Steve, I was military, too. I got this shiny metal arm to show for it, in case you ever forget. So, you know, I think I can handle myself just fine, thanks.”

Steve winces, only in part because of how glib Bucky was being about losing a limb. Bucky was
right. He really was a fucking idiot.

“And third of all, Steve. You deserve the fucking world. Not just because you’ve stopped alien invasions and Nazi takeovers, but just because—because you’re a great guy, Steve. Yeah, you get your head stuck in your ass sometimes, but other than that, you’re a great guy. And I don’t know how many times I have to hint this, or say this, or spell it to you, but Steve. I want you. Whether you think you deserve me or not, I want you. I want to be with you. Since the day I met you, I’ve wanted you.”

They’re close now, both of them having shifted to the middle of the couch, a physical corollary to finally—however difficultly—closing the deep emotional distance between them.

“So—” Steve starts, trailing off, his words failing him, as they tend to do, when it comes to Bucky. Luckily, Bucky knows just what to say.

“So, are we doing this, or not, Rogers?”

“I—” Steve starts, anxious and excited and determined, all at once. He wants to. More than anything, he wants to. The what ifs bounce and echo around in his mind, more a lowgrade buzz in the back of his brain, than anything. Bucky seems to have successfully beaten them into submission.

And with the noise in his head far less overwhelming, Steve Rogers, with all the bravery he has, finally makes his choice.

“Yes,” he breathes out, eventually, and it feels like the first time he’s been able to exhale in a long, long time. “Yes, we’re doing this. We’re—I’m—okay.”

Bucky nods at that. Steve swallows, still feeling like Bucky is waiting on him to make another move. “Now, before we—before we make this official. Can I ask you for something?”

“Anything,” Steve says, and he means it. If Bucky asked him for the moon, Steve would get in touch with NASA the minute he asked.

“Talk to me, Steve. Just—talk to me. Okay?”


“And give me credit, Steve. Give me credit for my choices. I’ll be patient and generous with you, if you be patient and generous with me. Okay, Steve? Promise me?”

“Promise, Buck,” Steve says, “I’ll—I’m gonna do my best. I promise you. I will.”

“So—” Bucky says, drawing that short little word out, slow. “Okay?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Steve says, feeling a little weepy. “Okay.”

“Okay,” Bucky says, sounding and looking just as exhausted as Steve, but seemingly glowing, all the same. “So, I guess—I guess we’re a thing now?”

“Yeah, I—” Steve starts, and he feels overwhelmed, just saying it. “I’d say we’re a thing.”

That’s when Bucky breaks out into a grin, wide and brilliant and the most beautiful goddamn thing that Steve has ever, ever seen. It’s enough for Steve to forget how banged-up he is, enough for the ease to dissipate out of his healing stitches and aching bones. Not for the first time, and surely not
for the last, Bucky has truly lifted the weight of Captain America, the weight of the world, off Steve’s broad shoulders. The only difference is, this time, Steve feels like he could just soar, because of it.

And Bucky—Steve’s boyfriend, Bucky!—looks just as happy. Even as he bumps their foreheads together again, just like Steve did in the library, all those hours ago, Steve can’t stop looking at him. Just looking at Bucky—at his infectious grin, at the little crinkle of the corners of his eyes, at the way his soft, brown hair frames all the contours and sharp edges of his face just perfectly—warms Steve all the way up.

“Good,” is all Bucky says, his voice low and tender and vulnerable. And that, more than anything, more than his concession earlier, is Bucky accepting Steve’s apology. That single word, more than anything, is Bucky saying to Steve, without the exact words: I forgive you. “Took you long enough.”

“Yeah, well, I just needed a little help,” Steve jokes. The laugh that he gets out of that—the low, soft, huff of a laugh—is worth both their weight in gold. And Steve was a dense guy, given the serum.

“You know,” Bucky says, after a moment, a timeless moment, one of soft, silent affection shared between them. His voice is almost a sigh. “Usually, I don’t come up to somebody’s apartment on the first date.”

"I'm not most somebodies," Steve replies, practically murmuring.

"For better or worse, you’ve got that right."

"Jerk,” Steve laughs, his voice dripping with open affection; there isn’t a hint of malice in his voice.

And then, as natural as if through the sheer force of the earth’s magnetism, it just happens. Steve leans in, eyes half-lidded, mouth parted, as Bucky, carefully, carefully, leans towards Steve, too. When their lips meet, it’s honest-to-God electric; Steve feels every nerve in his body, every cell, every molecule, light up, as if kissing Bucky were the catalyst to the very first sunrise. He tastes, faintly, of coffee, and his lips are just as soft as they look. It’s all Steve could have dreamed of and more; it all, faintly, still feels unreal, no matter how real Bucky’s face feels against Steve’s cupped palm.

“Wow,” Steve breathes, the second they part ways, like ripples, like waves, and not at all like the separating of seas. Bucky almost hides in his own hair, from the way he ducks. He’s not blushing, but he looks pretty damn close.

“Wow, you,” Bucky says, just as quietly. And they sit like that, quietly, comfortably, like they are the only two souls in the world. Steve, like a schoolboy, like Bucky is his first brush with love, looks away—torn between being unable to look directly at Bucky, and being unable to look away.

“Hey,” Steve says, quietly, “Could you—I mean—”

“Yeah?” he asks, all attention on Steve.

“Could you stay with me? Just a little bit longer.”

“Yeah. Yeah, of course, Steve,” Bucky says, wrapping his left arm around Steve’s waist, gentle.
He says it in a way that makes it seem like he had no intentions to leave, anyway. “Of course.”

Steve hums happily at this, slumping his head against Bucky’s shoulder. He feels exhausted, but content.

“Wanna watch a movie?” Bucky asks, his voice low.

Steve nods, though he can already tell he’s not going to be able to make it through whatever they watch. “I’d like that, yeah.

“Alright. You wanna pick?” Bucky asks, and Steve shakes his head. “That’s fine. I think there’s a Katherine Hepburn movie on Netflix, anyway.”

There is, indeed, a Katherine Hepburn movie on Netflix, and Bucky puts it on, as promised. It’s a fine enough movie, Steve’s sure, but he’s not paying any attention to what’s happening on screen. Instead, he’s taking in the moment—taking in Bucky, at his side, in Steve’s apartment, in their own little peaceful corner of their very much chaotic city. At least for that moment, the weight of the world and the incredible pressure that weight put on him, feels lifted. For the first time in a long time, Steve feels like he can let his guard down.

And with that, before he knows it, Steve, floating higher than he can ever remember, drifts off to sleep.

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Steve wakes up late into the morning, feeling rested. Feeling renewed. And, in spite of it all, feeling good.

Then, the ache of the previous day sets in, and he feels significantly less so.

Steve slumps into his pillows, grateful for the ludicrous softness of his mattress and all the excessive comforts the new century had to offer. Grateful, that is, until he slowly realizes:

He’s not in the same place he fell asleep.

There was no way that Bucky could have carried him to bed, not without him remembering. It would be damn-near impossible for an average person to carry Steve undisturbed, especially given how much he’d been put through the ringer the day before.

Panicked, Steve retraces the previous night, looking back to each moment—to dinner, to Bucky’s ultimatum, to pouring his heart out, to their first kiss—and finds himself equal parts assured that last night was real, and horrified at the prospect of it all being a dream. Perhaps too fast than he should have, considering his injuries, Steve throws his sheets off himself in one slick movement, hoping beyond hope that he wasn’t so out of it after stumbling out of Avengers Tower that he made up the entire evening.

Steve’s heart drops the moment he makes his way to his living room, only to find it completely, impeccably, in order. No dishes scattered around his coffee table, no pillows strewn on the floor, nothing. Not a single fold on his throw blanket seems out of place. As tears of frustration quickly threatening to overtake him, Steve looks over his kitchen, hoping to see something—anything—as a sign that Bucky was there, only to find it equally unassuming. Everything is clean. Even the sink is clear.

Just as he’s about to give up hope, just as he’s begun the first stages of that familiar, spiraling cycle of self-blame and self-doubt—This? Your hurt? All on you, my friend, all on you for letting your
guard down like this—Steve looks to the stovetop, and he sees it: proof. On his stovetop, tucked onto the one burner he never uses, is proof that the previous night actually happened, physical and undeniable, in the form of his stockpot, wonderfully out of place, a bright orange post-it note tacked to its lid.

With a deep, shuddering breath, Steve makes his way into his kitchen. He picks the post-it off the lid, smiling, relieved. Bucky's handwriting is neat and familiar, and all of Steve's worries melt as he reads the note, leaving behind nothing but comfort; warm, fuzzy, loving comfort.

Steve —

Sorry about ditching without saying goodbye, had to get back to my place to get ready for work & I didn't wanna wake you. I’ll stop by after work tonight.

Soup's for you. Should be enough so you don't have to cook for today. Call and/or text me if you need me. Or if you just wanna talk. Either way :)

Stay in bed. Rest up. Don’t do anything stupid ’till I get back.

— Bucky

There's a little heart after Bucky's name. It's simple, it's sweet, and Steve couldn’t be happier. He decides his breakfast is going to be a bowl of Bucky's soup and a nice, strong pot of coffee, and he makes a mental note to start that—but not before snapping a picture of the post-it note and DMing it to Bucky.

@sgr_art: You're the best. How did I get so lucky?

Bucky likes it immediately.

Chapter End Notes

i promised i would make this chapter less painful, didn’t i?

jumping straight into the things for this chapter:

- again, just like last chapter, a billion thanks to my writing partner/beta reader/editor, emily for helping me through this really pivotal chapter. and for reminding me of details i consistently forget, with how many moving parts this fic has (and will have). i cannot emphasize my absolute gratitude enough.
- i’ve also been solidifying and fine-tuning the details of where this fic will be going, both in the long and short-term, so, if you’re curious: this isn’t quite close to the end. my projections still go to about – eh, about 120k? which. this did not start out as potentially 120k. again, as this fic moves forward, keep an eye on the tags and the rating changes. because they will change. that is a hint.
- i had (and have) a lot of difficulty when it comes to the more military-like stuff of the avengers universe. i’m hoping to be better at it in the future, but for the time being, hopefully this bit worked? i’m still reconsidering rewriting it, even now. anyway, i’m not an expert strategist, i just write ‘em. hopefully they’re something resembling good.
- as far as i know, there isn’t actually an abandoned nuclear launch site in the middle of new york bay, however, there are lots of nuclear test and plant sites near high-
population centers along the atlantic coast of the united states. the closest thing in reality to this situation, though, is the shoreham nuclear power plant, off long island. initially, i had claire as steve’s nurse, but i decided against it, seeing as not only have i only ever watched the first season of luke cage so i’m not too familiar with her character, but also because i don’t think she would be working at stark industries/with the avengers if she was given the offer. so: shiela, who i’m going to pretend is sharon’s cousin.

- when i first started outlining this chapter, desk set was on netflix, which i thought was a pretty funny reference for this fic. it's not on there anymore, but know that's probably what they're watching. probably.

- speaking of libraries, i will be visiting the Greatest City In The World™ later this summer for reasons of both "i need to get out of the los angeles and greater southern california area bubble before i start screaming in public” and to do some research at the new york public library's archives. i’m breaking out my pink tulle skirt, and if that gives you any indication to the fun/self-care:research ratio of my trip, there you go.

anyway, that's it for now. getting parts of this fic done is my project for camp nanowrimo, but it's been slow-going, given that i've been taking more grad classes this semester than i have in previous semesters. gotta get through that coursework done soon, you know. so, just a reminder that i don't have a posting schedule for this fic because i can't promise that it will get done in any sort of set way, but i do try to update fairly frequently on my tumblr tag for this fic.

all that said — thank you a billion times over for all the love and patience with this fic as it continues. it means, truly, the most. all the comments, all the support, it seriously, means more than i can ever say. thank you so much, again <3
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

date night.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Everything seems brighter and warmer and more, after that night, after laying things on the table, after making things official. After that night, Steve’s life is a wonderful blur of naps and check-ins with the team and spending time with Bucky. It feels like he’s floating outside of time, until it’s some days later and Steve, dressed to impress, has a chance to wait. He hums a little song to himself, doodling little nothing-drawings on his phone as Natasha, trying her hardest not to look too obviously amused, watches on. They’re in a conference room in Stark Tower, about an hour before their first team press appearance since the attack. Steve is expected to field questions. He’ll probably get most of the questions. He’s not worried.

"You look pretty happy for someone who almost drowned," Natasha says, in the same tone as fine, I’ll bite. Her hair is pulled back in a neat bun, and against the all-black pantsuit, she exudes don’t talk to me.

"Yeah, well," Steve says with an easy shrug, his body having already healed the brunt of his injuries. "Who knew that getting beat up a little would win me a first date and a boyfriend?"

Natasha’s eyes widen. It’s probably the first time that Steve has seen her that openly surprised. He tries not to be smug about it. “Come again?”

“Get your ears checked, Romanov, I’m not saying it again,” Steve says, but he’s smiling. Barely thirty seconds into talking about Bucky, and Steve is already smiling.

"Is it—?"

"Cute librarian. Mister Bucky If You’re Nasty," Steve answers, ducking his head, as he’s already beginning to feel a warm blush tingling at the tips of his ears.

"I can't believe it," Natasha says. She sounds half blown away, surprised that it ever even happened, and half like she’s just barely holding back the inevitable finally.

“You should,” Steve quips back, feeling like he’s bouncing.

“You have a boyfriend.”

“I do.”

"Wow,” she says, as if the knowledge of Steve has a boyfriend has finally settled, comfortable in her mind. “Well, congratulations, you."

"Whff rr wrr clbrtnf frr?” Clint asks, interjecting suddenly—having arrived in a hurry, with an equally flaky pastry in his mouth and about four coffees balanced precariously between his hands.
He’s wearing a t-shirt to the press conference, which usually wouldn’t be a problem, if it didn’t look like he’d slept in it.

"Steve’s got a boyfriend," Natasha says, apparently capable of parsing Clint’s strawberries-and-cream filled gibberish. She sounds almost singsong. Steve, overwhelmed with a nausea-inducing combination of boundless pride and unspeakable embarrassment, wishes he’d drowned in the New York Bay. Pride wins out, and that moment, anxious as it was—as it could have been—passes.

"What! No way!" Clint says, excitedly, his pastry dropping out of his mouth. It lands pathetically on the floor, leaving pathetic little flakes of puff pastry scattered on the coffees. "Aww."

Natasha pilfers two of the coffees from his grip—the two not solidly in his hands—and keeps one to herself, settling the other on the conference table. Clint does the same, and if he bends down to pick the pastry up and starts eating it again, Steve chooses not to notice.

“So, what happened? Were you halfway to the light before you realized you’d never asked this guy out?” Natasha asks, as she’s about to take a sip from her coffee.

“That’s—that’s actually not far-off,” Steve replies, bashfully, and, muffled by her coffee cup, Natasha snorts.

“Hey. Good on you, man. You deserve someone nice,” Clint says, in between chews. Natasha makes a disgusted noise, and he shrugs. Steve considers texting Bucky about it, about how Natasha and Clint know Bucky and Steve are dating. He decides against it, when he hears the conference room door open again; it doesn’t matter, Bucky will hear about it soon enough.

"Sorry I'm late, my Uber driver didn’t—" Sam says, entering the conference room in a stylish-looking suit, sharply-tailored and Air Force-blue. He pauses for a moment, then glances, from Steve to Natasha to Clint, realizing that he’s missed something. "Why's everyone smiling?"

"Steve's got a boyfriend," Natasha says again, grinning. At this point, Steve thinks she just likes to say it. And though he won’t admit it, at least, not to Natasha, he likes to hear it.

Sam’s jaw drops open at that, almost theatrically, before he breaks out into that infectious, familiar grin. He approaches Steve, wrapping him up in a tight hug, one that completely betrays his faux-offended tone. "And I wasn't the first person to learn about this? Cold, dude."

“I was going to tell you when you got here. Both of you,” Steve says, as they both pull away, sending Natasha a look. She just smiles at him with a dangerous twinkle in her eye.

“Can I at least ask who?” Sam says, as he pulls away, though he says it like he’s anticipating Steve’s answer.

"Hot librarian," Natasha replies for Steve, suddenly bumping Bucky’s status up from a mere cute librarian to a hot one.

"Hot Librarian," Sam repeats, in a tone like he’s said it before, and Steve wonders when, if ever, the three of them agreed on calling Bucky Hot Librarian. The things that went on behind his back truly took on a life of their own. "Congrats, Steve. I’m really happy for you. How about you let me take you two out tonight? I wanna meet this boy before I head back home. Maybe give you two the same speech my parents gave me on prom night."

“I want to come,” Natasha says, sounding almost giddy. “I’ll be on my best behavior if you let me come. I promise.”
“As much as I’d like to see that, we really can’t,” Steve starts, and the blush is in full force now. He can feel it blazing a wildfire up from his navel to the tips of his ears.

“And why not?” Sam argues, good-naturedly. Something about how Sam ribs him like that makes Steve’s heart feel full. He’d wanted an older brother figure growing up, especially on the nights when his mother was out at work, and the world seemed too big and dark and full of bullies to handle on his own, even for him. And though Sam is younger than him by almost a century, it’s close enough.

“I’m taking him out to dinner tonight,” Steve says, wanting to hide his face in his hands, suddenly feeling all three pairs of eyes on him. “He made me soup and kept me company the night I got hurt, so—I dunno, it’s the least I could do. And—you know. I wanna take him out, too.”

“Treating him right. Good, good,” Sam says, and he might be joking, but there’s something serious and soft in his eyes. “I’m happy for the both of you.”

"Hey, is Hot Librarian really hot?" Clint asks all of a sudden, apparently having finished his floor pastry and, if the half-crushed cup is any indication, all of his coffee. "I mean, we all kinda agreed to call him that, but I’ve never even seen the dude. I just feel like it’s kind of weird if I don’t know if he’s actually hot or not, this Hot Librarian dude."

"He's got a name," Steve says, grinning, and he's flipping through his camera roll, looking for the picture they snapped during their ice cream walk. It's one of the few pictures of himself that Steve has, period, and the sole picture Steve has of both him and Bucky.

"Huh. Hot Librarian is hot," Clint says, "Kate says that a man-bun usually indicates only the fuckiest of dudes, and don’t get me wrong, I tend to agree, but Hot Librarian looks like a nice guy. Makes it work."

“Thanks, Clint,” Steve says, not a hint of irony to his voice, because goddammit, he was now officially seeing the greatest man in all Nine Realms, or however many Thor always insisted there were, and if he could shout it from the rooftops, if he could shout it from the edge of the universe, he would. But he’s willing to settle for showing Bucky off to his teammates, since he can’t.

“So, what’s he like?” Clint asks, as he’s brushing the crumbs off his shirt, and pulling himself to look more rumpled rogue with a heart of gold and less just ate a pastry off the floor. He might be the one asking, but Clint is asking on behalf of everyone in that room. Steve doesn’t mind; as he thinks about all the things that Bucky does, all the things that Bucky is, Steve has to resist the urge to sigh all dreamily and lovestruck and like an absolute cliché.

“He’s—nice,” Steve manages, after a while, because Bucky is. And being with Bucky is. But he’s more than that, he’s more than Steve can put into words. Bucky is nice, and that’s not a lie. But that’s not all he is. Not even close.

From her seat on the table, Natasha snorts. “That’s eloquent of you, Rogers.”

“Just like Shakespeare,” Sam adds.

“You sure waited for twelve nights,” Natasha adds, cheekily, cheesily. It’s not a particularly good joke, but she and Sam high-five, anyway.

“Yep,” Steve says, ducking his head to hide what must be a considerable blush. He could continue gushing about Bucky all day, but given how his words are already failing him, Steve decides to leave things at that.
“Huh,” is Clint’s response. “That’s nice that he’s nice. I’m happy for you, man. I really am.”

Clint’s earnestness hits Steve in a way he didn’t expect, and his blush is back in full force again. The tips of his ears and his cheeks feel white-hot, and he looks away, shoving his face back into his phone so as to calm himself down—it isn’t like Captain America could show up, blushing bright red, on national television, after all.

That plan goes entirely out the window when he sees a new message from Bucky.

BUCKY [3:53 PM]: Good luck out there. Can’t wait to see you later <3

As if involuntarily, like a muscle spasm, like the beating of his heart, Steve feels himself heave out a small, soft sigh. He can feel the way that the other occupants of that conference room try not to turn and look. He can also feel the way that he doesn’t care. Either way, his blush is gone, having dissipated into a warmth that fills up his entire being.

“Hate to be that girl, but it looks like Stark’s incoming,” Natasha says, nodding at a gaggle of reporters incoming, and elbowing Steve, gently, as she does. He pockets his phone, carefully setting it to silent, and smiling, still. Sam does the same thing, and Clint straightens his shirt. Sitting up properly, without a pastry hanging out of his mouth, he looks presentable, business-casual, even.

“Think the reporter from *The Daily Bugle*’s going to try something again?” Steve asks. Natasha rolls her eyes, dramatically.

“Let him try,” is what she replies, all smiles and razor-sharp edge at the same time.

“How do I look?” Sam asks, just before Stark and the seemingly ever-present buzz of press surrounding him breaches the press room. Natasha licks her thumb, then wipes away a bit of dirt that even Steve didn’t realize was there.

“There,” she says, then, looking him over once more, “Perfect.”

“Places, everyone,” Steve says, just a little bit sarcastically, but for a minute, he’s transported back to his days as a chorus boy, to bright blue tights and learning how to apply makeup in five minutes, tops. His heart aches for a time long, long ago, if only for a second. It doesn’t consume him the way that the ache used to.

Not when he has a future—a very close future—to look forward to.

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After a relatively-smooth press conference, with the reporter from *The Daily Bugle* just barely missing out on asking a question this time, Steve slips out of the Tower and makes his way back home, stopping only to take a selfie with a couple teenage girls, hovering as close to the Tower entrances as security lets them.

When he’s back at his apartment, Steve combs through his closet the precision usually reserved for delicate missions with superspies. He wonders, not for the first time, if calling Natasha for her insight would be a good idea. He decides, not for the first time, that it probably wasn’t.

Steve spends more time trying on different outfits than he’d like to admit. He usually didn’t think twice about what he wore, but this was a date, and with Bucky. Somehow, eventually, he decides on something—a soft, yet well-fitting red Henley, jeans, and a black leather jacket. It’s nice enough to fit in to a nice restaurant, tight enough to be sexy without being obscene, and casual
enough so that Bucky—coming straight from work—won’t feel underdressed. It’s a good compromise. Good enough for a selfie, Steve thinks, popping his ass just so as he snaps a picture, before sending it off to Natasha.

Her response arrives five minutes later, as Steve is brushing his teeth: a string of peach emojis, followed by a string of sparkle emojis. Toothbrush hanging out of his mouth, Steve manages a one-handed reply, in turn in the form of a single winking emoji.

NATASHA [6:39 PM]: You’ll tell me how it goes, though

ME [6:41 PM]: It’s just dinner. But you know I will, regardless.

NATASHA [6:45 PM]: Sure, sure. And when I do undercover missions in stilettos, it’s because they make me feel COMFORTABLE

ME [6:46 PM]: Come on.

NATASHA [6:48 PM]: You said, to your new BOYFRIEND)))))))

NATASHA [6:53 PM]: In all seriousness. You look good. Be safe.

Steve smiles that text, smiling at Natasha’s fondness. The genuine nature of this text was not lost on Steve, nor was the fact that Nat’s genuineness came easier when passed through the medium of technology. Maybe it gave her a level of distance. Maybe she just had trouble putting things into words. Whatever it was, Steve cherished it.

ME [6:56 PM]: Thank you, Nat.

ME [6:56 PM]: :)

NATASHA [6:58 PM]: Talk to you soon. Use protection, grandpa))))

Steve shakes his head, but he replies to her reply, regardless, sending two emojis—a winking face, and a kissing face—before pocketing his phone, grabbing his keys and his motorcycle helmet and making his way of his apartment, into the early evening, into the date awaiting him.

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It’s been a while since Steve has gone for a ride on his motorcycle. It’s been even longer since he’s had a passenger with him.

As he parks his bike outside the library, he feels his hands tingling, and not because he can’t handle the kick of the engine. Maybe this was a bit much, he thinks to himself, as he tries to catch a glance of Bucky from where he’s sitting. He doesn’t even know if Bucky would be comfortable on his bike. His thoughts begin to rush, and before he can stop himself from catastrophizing—a phrase his therapist used at almost each one of their meetings—Steve is already doing the mental calculus it took to determine how long it would take him to go back home and just take the subway back to the library. He’s so lost in his own thoughts that, for a second, he almost misses Bucky coming out of the Martinelli.

But of course, he doesn’t. Steve wouldn’t miss Bucky in a crowd if he’d been blindfolded. He’s spent enough time thinking about Bucky—about the sharpness of his jaw, about the intense blue of his eyes—that Steve is half-convinced that he had him memorized. He was just drawn to Bucky. It was like instinct, like it ran through his blood.
“Hey,” Steve says, with a soft smile. Just looking at Bucky smiling at him made that anxiety ebb, if ever-so-slightly. He sits up straight, pulling his shoulders back and settling his hands on his thighs. Bucky looks him over, and Steve, underneath his helmet, beams with pride. He might be unsure about the bike, he knew for a fact: he looked good.

“Hey,” Bucky says, striding over to Steve’s side. He looks impressed, and Steve is somewhere between excited and relieved. There’s something very tantalizing to the way that Bucky runs his fingers, gently, almost delicately, along the bike’s side panel. “Nice ride.”

Steve nods, ecstatic underneath the cool mask of his helmet. He shifts on the bike, moving to unhook the passenger helmet from the back of his bike. He hands it to Bucky, and adds, with a little wink, “Only the best for my best guy.”

“Jeez,” Bucky says, and he ducks his head, and he almost looks like he’s blushing. “Warn a guy before you come on that strong, will you?”

“Nah, I don’t think I will. You wouldn’t believe how cute you are right now,” Steve says, and Bucky already has the helmet on, but from the way his eyes crinkle and his gaze darts away, Steve can tell he’s smiling.

“Shut up and drive,” Bucky yells from underneath his helmet, and he settles behind Steve, his big hands latching on tightly to Steve’s waist. That gentle weight—the knowledge that Bucky is there, he’s there, is enough to make Steve feel, in spite of everything, at ease, the uncomfortable tingle in his hands turning into a warm, distinct flutter in the very core of his being.

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They have their first real dinner date in the same restaurant where they had their first unofficial date. Steve considered taking Bucky somewhere far nicer—or, at the very least, more formal—but given that Bucky was coming straight from work and given that going to a five-star restaurant on their first date might have been a little too much, Steve decided to go back to a place more familiar.

Besides. After what happened the last time they’d shared dinner with one another at this restaurant, Steve thought it best to try again. Start all over again, in the same place, as it were.

They don’t sit in the very same booth where Bucky first tried to really reach out to Steve, but it’s just as cozy, and they’re pressed just as close. When Bucky smiles up at Steve, he brushes his foot up against Steve’s ankle—equal parts flirty and so, so sweet.

Steve orders the same thing as last time, his regular order of two plates, while Bucky gets the steak and mashed potatoes. It is only when the waiter asks for their orders that they are not entirely enamored with one another.

“You looked good at the press conference today,” Bucky says, dragging his gaze, ever-so-slowly, across Steve’s body, briefly pausing once his gaze meets Steve’s chest. Steve is very, very proud of that, and if he pulls his shoulders and leans forward, just slightly, to give Bucky a better view, there isn’t any harm in that.

“Yeah?” Steve asks, making sure to add a flirty little lilt to his voice, the verbal version of a raised eyebrow.

“Yeah. Not as good as you look now, but,” Bucky replies, smooth, and Steve smiles up at him through his eyelashes.

“You’re looking pretty good, yourself,” is what Steve replies, and Bucky tucks a strand of hair
behind his ear in a half-exaggerated, half-genuine aw, shucks movement.

“Jeez,” is all he says, and Steve wants to kiss him right there. He could. They’d already kissed before. But he doesn’t—not because he’s not in the mood, but because he remembers he needs to tell Bucky something.

“Speaking of the press conference,” Steve says. He draws that phrase out, longer than it should have been, a little residual guilt settling in his throat as he speaks. He felt fine in the moment, back in the Tower conference room. He felt confident, all those hours ago, telling his team about his new relationship. But now, somehow, telling Bucky makes him feel nervous—it makes him feel like he’s still keeping secrets. “I told the team about you.”

“Oh,” is all Bucky says, his voice entirely flat—neither angry nor impressed. So, more than a little guilt settles in Steve’s throat, then. A lot of guilt. Steve tries not to think about how he’s ruined this relationship before it’s started. He tries, this time, not to catastrophize. If only because Bucky is actually in front of him this time.

“I was gonna text you,” Steve tries to explain. I was going to tell you, not that that’s an excuse, he almost adds. “But I thought I’d tell you in person. I—I uh, I hope that’s okay?”

“Of course,” Bucky says. His voice is gentle, kind. Almost overly so, perhaps in an effort to comfort Steve, if the furrow of his eyebrows means anything. Steve heaves a heavy sigh from deep in his chest. Bucky’s eyes bounce from Steve’s face, to his chest, and back again. He looks concerned, as much as he was checking out Steve’s tits just seconds before. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

Steve shrugs, following Bucky’s presumable lead, trying to play it cool. “Thinking back on it, we never really talked if we wanted to, you know. Go public. With anyone. And, you know, my team, they’re—uh.”

“The most high-profile people in the world?” Bucky asks, and he’s smiling. That’s a little comforting, at least.

“Yeah,” Steve admits. “Yeah.”

“I mean,” Bucky says. He pauses, taking a brief sip of his water before he continues, “I like my privacy, but it’s not like you held that press conference specifically to announce you and I are a thing. Telling your teammates is fine. They’re high-profile, but if anyone is trustworthy, it’s gotta be them.”

“You’d be surprised at the things that go on behind my back,” Steve says, with a laugh. Bucky looks surprised at this, but he laughs, too, and before Steve can explain, before he can mention how clearly over the moon he’s been for Bucky over these past few months, their food arrives. That’s the end of that conversation. For the time being, at least.

Bucky eats voraciously. He was seemingly hungrier than he’d let on earlier. Not that Steve is any better. He pauses from shoveling pasta in his face, briefly, to ask Bucky how his day was. There’s a little bit of mashed potato on Bucky’s lip when he replies. It was a good day, an uneventful day, a day he spent entirely waiting for their date. When Steve leans forward to dab Bucky’s lip with his own napkin, it feels as natural as ever, and from the way Bucky laughs—soft, gentle, fond—Steve can tell Bucky feels the same.

God, what a pair they were.

Eventually, Steve finishes off his pasta, far quicker than he’d expected, but then again, he’d only
had coffee and a big bowl of oatmeal for the day. Bucky is still working on finishing off his dinner when Steve, half-lost in his thoughts, blurts out: “Hey, Buck?”

“Mm?” Bucky asks. He swallows his mouthful of steak and mashed potatoes, seemingly remembering his better manners. “Sorry. Yeah?”

“Remember when you asked me for a few things, back when—you know?” Steve asks, waving his hand around, vaguely.

“When we decided we were going to deal with our feelings like big kids and actually talk to each other?” Bucky asks, and Steve snorts. Bucky looks proud of that. “Yeah, yeah, I do.”

“I need to—can I ask you for a few things?”

Bucky nods. “Yeah. Go ahead.”

“I just—I’m gonna need you to be patient with me, okay?” Steve says, “Like I said, I’m not good at this whole—this—*feelings*. I’m trying to get better, but—it’s—I need you to be patient with me,” Steve says, willing all the strength he can muster to look Bucky in the eye. “Don’t let me get away with hurting you, or doing bad things, or even just having my head in my ass, but I—I also need you to be patient with me. I know that’s a lot to ask, but I need that. Okay?”

“Yeah,” Bucky says, gently. He reaches across the table, putting his hand on Steve’s arm. It’s so, so very warm. “Yeah, Steve. I can do that.”

Steve smiles at him, and somehow, it feels like catharsis; a release Steve hadn’t realized he’d needed until then. “Thank you.”

“So,” Bucky says, looking Steve straight in the face, those blue, blue eyes bright and intense. “You can give me credit and talk to me and just—just be honest with me, and you can expect me to be patient and everything with you? Yeah?”

“Well, when you put it that way, it sounds like we’re trading off.”

“I’m okay with that,” Bucky says, with a little shrug. “But that’s where we’re at, yeah?”

Steve nods. “Yeah.”

“Alright. Good.”

“Good,” Steve says, smiling, trying to swallow down big, sloppy tears of pure, unadulterated joy. “Now eat your damn food, Barnes. I’m not asking for a box for three inches of steak.”

“Yes, sir,” Bucky says, and Steve laughs. He feels at ease—more at ease than he’d ever felt before.

What remaining steak and pasta Bucky had left untouched are gone in mere minutes, and his empty plate is gone just as quickly. The wait staff were really keeping an eye on them. Two visits in less than a month from Captain America would do that. Not that Steve would ever feel less weird about it.

They’re left to each other, to the comfortable silence of a crowded restaurant where the only people who would matter, the only people who could ever matter, at least, for them, was them. Bucky takes Steve’s hands in his, lacing their fingers together, as if he had no intentions of ever letting go. Steve squeezes his in return, and even though Bucky’s right hand never had any sort of give, the
gentleness with which he brushes his left thumb against Steve’s skin was give enough.

“So,” Bucky says, breaking away, briefly, to absentmindedly tuck a stray strand of hair behind his ear, all but bouncing with a familiar nervous, excited, warm energy.

“So,” Steve echoes, smiling. He’s torn between missing Bucky’s hand in his and fawning over the way that Bucky’s long fingers thread through his own hair.

“We’re—" Bucky starts. “We’re dating.”

“Yeah,” Steve says, and wow, does that give him the butterflies, finally being able to admit that. “Yeah. We’re dating.”

“Can I call you—I mean—are we—boyfriends?” Bucky asks. He doesn’t sound as insecure as Steve felt earlier, but it’s close. “Or—or is it too early for that?”

“We’re—I’m—I mean. I’m comfortable with you calling me your boyfriend, if you want to. I mean—we were practically going on dates already, so at the very least, it’s accurate.”

“Okay. Yeah. Okay. So. You’re—” Bucky starts, and he lets out a soft, breathy laugh, as if the words are funny, in their own, unbelievable way. “You’re my boyfriend.”

“Sure am, Buck,” Steve replies, not looking away from Bucky for a second. “I’m your boyfriend.”

Bucky’s eyes light up like fireworks at that, at Steve finally saying it. He looks like he’s just been gifted the world, on one hand, and like he still can’t believe that what’s happening in front of him is real—isn’t a beautiful dream—on the other. As if he’s not the best thing to happen to Steve in a long, long time. As if following him on Instagram all those months ago wasn’t the most important decision that Steve made since burning both S.H.I.E.L.D. and Hydra to the ground.

“Which, you know, Buck—that also means you’re my boyfriend,” Steve says, and it’s like he’s on the Cyclone, the rush of excitement completely overtaking him as he lets himself give in to the drop, as he says those words, all exciting and liberating and terrifying at the same time. He can’t help but grin as he thinks to himself, giddy as a child—isn’t it something, this feeling?

And Bucky just looks at him, eyes wide, like he still, still, can’t believe it. “Wow.”

“Yeah, I know,” Steve says, in earnest, “How’d I get so lucky, right?”

“Shut up,” Bucky says, slugging Steve on the arm, soft, softer than Steve—no stranger to getting punched—could ever imagine a punch could ever be. All Steve can do is laugh, all soft-eyed and warm-hearted and infatuated if anyone ever was.

They sit in a comfortable silence, left hands tangled together, for what could have easily been forever. For Steve, the world stopped turning, and everything just went hazy and soft. Bucky had that effect on him before they were dating, no doubt, but now that they were formally together? It was all that much more intense. Everything was just more now, with the knowledge that they were together. That they were each other’s person.

It’s only when a waiter drops off their check that Steve drifts back to reality. As he goes to grab it, Bucky moves, too, just as quick. They end up both holding onto separate ends of the check, locking eyes with the intensity of rivals, not, as they had both negotiated earlier that night, boyfriends.

“Lemme pay,” Bucky says, his grip on the check like a damn vise.
“No,” Steve says, tugging the check his way. Somehow, Bucky still hasn’t let go. “Buck. Come on.”

“You come on, Steve, you paid for dinner last time,” Bucky says, “Besides, you drove me here.”

“It was literally like, fifteen minutes with traffic, Buck, it was nothing.”

“Rogers,” Bucky says, very kindly, but very seriously. Steve tries to tug it his way, and still, somehow, Bucky still hasn’t let go. Christ, he has a strong grip. “I will flip this fucking table.”

“Yeah?” Steve asks, raising his eyebrows, a challenge in a single word. “Would you, though? Because I’d like to see you flip this table, Barnes. I’d really love to see that.”

Bucky makes a face. Steve, feeling like he’d won something, smirks, tugging the check his way, inching it closer.

“Just let me pay for your fucking food, Steve.”

“Buck, I eat a lot. And I get paid a lot. If you really wanna make it up to me, lemme get a kiss from you when I drop you off at your door. But I’m not letting you pay for this. And unless you’re actually gonna flip that table and get us kicked out of this lovely restaurant, I’m not gonna let you pay for this one, Buck. So don’t even try.”

Defeated, Bucky heaves out a sigh. “Fine. But I’m paying next time. Swear?”

“Swear,” Steve laughs, slipping his card into the little plastic slot in the check folio. The waiter picks it up just as quickly as ever, and Steve leaves just as hefty a tip. Bucky pouts the entire time, though not out of any real frustration.

Which, given all possible options, in all possible iterations of that dinner, Steve can live with.

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The night is still young when they leave the restaurant, and as much as Steve would love to drive the entire length of Brooklyn with Bucky by his side, he makes his way to drop Bucky off at his apartment—straight back by ten, like a responsible date. Steve parks his bike in an empty spot near Bucky’s walk up, right underneath a big, leafy tree.

“I was gonna give you a kiss, anyway, you know that, right?” Bucky asks, as soon as he pulls off his helmet.

“Were you? However could I have known,” Steve says, as he pulls off his own helmet, friendly sarcasm dripping from his words. He smiles at Bucky, and that earns him another little punch, this one, with just slightly more weight to it than the previous one.

“At least walk me up to my stoop, if you’re gonna act like a punk,” Bucky says, as he dismounts.

“Oh, right, paying for your dinner, picking you up, dropping you off. Total punk behavior,” Steve says, as he follows Bucky up to his stoop.


“But I’m your menace, right?” Steve asks, following Bucky to his stoop on long, eager strides.

“Damn right.”
“Then I can live with that,” Steve says, and oh. They’re at the stoop already. Bucky seems disappointed that it’s all over, too. He doesn’t go inside, not yet, nor does he give Steve his kiss goodbye. They both stand there, not speaking, as the world goes on all around them.

“Well,” Bucky says, eventually, brave enough to be the first one to break the silence.

“Well,” Steve says, in echo.

“I had a great time tonight.”

“I, uh—I did, too,” Steve replies, and suddenly, he’s stumbling, flailing, he doesn’t know what to do. So he just keeps talking. “And I—we’re gonna, I—”

“Steve,” Bucky says, bracketing Steve’s face in his hands. “Just—lemme kiss you, alright?”

Steve blinks, and he nods, feeling all the breath leave him at once. He leans in, trying hard to still the frantic beating of his heart in his chest. He leans in, parts his lips, and can feel the ghost of Bucky’s lips over his, and—

—out of nowhere, a pigeon decides that’s the perfect time to shit all over Steve’s jacket.

“Shit,” Steve hisses, pulling back as quick as he can. Bucky, once he realizes what’s happened, snorts a half-aborted laugh, which Steve would find entirely charming if it weren’t for the fact that his jacket is covered in bird shit.

Who is he kidding. He still finds it entirely charming, even with the bird shit on his shoulder.

“Sorry, it’s just—shit, and your jacket, and—” Bucky starts, before trailing off, looking a little embarrassed, making an expression that can only, truly be described as adorable. Steve would grab Bucky by the waist and kiss him, if it weren’t for the fact that he has pigeon shit all over his jacket.

“Sorry, I—uh. Here, let’s—let’s go inside.”

Bucky lives on the fourth floor of his five-story walk-up. The building is old—probably just a little bit younger than Steve—and making the way up to Bucky’s apartment, Steve can’t help but feel nostalgic. He can’t help but think of a city long gone by, a city he left behind when he told Abraham Erksine how all he wanted to do in the war was to do good. The fact that Bucky—Steve’s very twenty-first century boyfriend, who he met in a very twenty-first century way—lives in an old pre-war brownstone feels like symmetry.

“Here we are. Home, sweet home,” Bucky says, sheepishly, as he unlocks the door. “I know I have leather cleaner somewhere around here, I just need to find it. You can make yourself comfortable while I get it, if you want. And—uh, sorry about the mess. And if it’s a little chilly. I didn’t think you’d be coming up.”

He says this, even though his apartment is damn-near spotless. The only thing close to a mess being the throw blanket strewn across Bucky’s couch and an admittedly-cluttered coffee table. It is a little bit chilly, but nothing unusual or unbearable. Bucky’s apartment is very nice, actually. Steve opens his mouth to say something about it, but Bucky has already disappeared, going on about how pigeons taking a tactical shit on one’s favorite jacket is supposedly considered good luck, and not a disastrous capper to their first real date, apparently.

Steve takes that as an opportunity to peek around Bucky’s apartment. The entryway is tidy, with nothing of note except for two pairs of locks and a chain on Bucky’s door. As he makes his way into Bucky’s claustrophobically-small kitchen, which, despite its size and relative lack of light, Bucky seems to have packed as many plants into as possible. Much like Bucky’s living room, it’s

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tidy, but lived-in, a few dishes on the drying rack and a couple containers of protein powder on the counter speaking to that fact.

On Bucky’s refrigerator, there’s even more clutter, but nothing that Steve would categorize as a mess. There are a few faded receipts from electronics stores, a couple bills clipped together, and few cards and postcards from different places in the South and the Heartland, all held up by colorful souvenir magnets. One card, though, gets Steve’s attention: a crisp photo of a brown-haired, blue-eyed family, all dressed in equally-tacky neon ski gear, down to the two chubby-looking dogs. One is a German shepherd, and the other is a pit bull, and they both have Steve’s shield pattern on their tags. Framing the photo is a flannel-print frame, with a few important words in a generic cursive script: *Happy Holidays from the Barnes Family.*

The Barnes family, notably absent Bucky.

Seeing that card makes Steve so very sad, so very suddenly, realizing that Bucky was just so good and his own family was sending him holiday cards, like he wasn’t blood, like he was just above a stranger. Despite his better manners, Steve couldn’t help but reach out to read whatever the rest of the Barnes family could have possibly written to their own—seemingly estranged—son. Just as he’s about to pull the *Indiana: Cows, Corn, and Race Cars* magnet away to grab the card, Steve hears Bucky padding down the hallway, leaving Steve seconds to get out of the kitchen.

He whips around the corner, and sees Bucky there, in the middle of his living room, a bottle of leather cleaner in one hand, and a package of wet wipes in the other.

“Oh! There you are. I thought you left,” Bucky says. “Here. Leather cleaner and wet wipes. So you don’t have to touch the bird shit with your hands.”

“Thanks,” Steve says, and he wastes no time cleaning his jacket of any and all traces of pigeon shit.

“Checking out my plants, were you?” Bucky asks, watching Steve carefully, carefully dab at his jacket with a wet wipe.

“Nah,” Steve says, “Your magnet collection.”

“Oh! Those? My sisters send ‘em to me,” Bucky laughs, “Along with the postcards.”

“Yeah? That’s sweet of them,” Steve replies. He pops open the cap on the leather cleaner and squirts a generous amount on another, shit-free wet wipe. “That them on the Christmas card?”

“Yep. All three of them,” Bucky replies. “And my folks.”

“Ah,” Steve says, trying hard to keep his voice neutral.

“Don’t worry. I won’t make you meet ‘em. They don’t like coming to the city,” he says, with a shrug. “And I don’t like going to Indiana, anyway.”

“That’s a shame, Buck,” Steve says, as Bucky takes the dirty wet wipes from him and moves to toss them in the kitchen trash can. And Steve, of course, follows.

“I FaceTime ‘em. It’s no big,” Bucky says, as he washes his hands. Steve hums, noncommitally, and Bucky stands in the kitchen doorway, drying his hands with a colorful kitchen towel.

“I’m glad,” Steve says, softer, perhaps, than he intended. “I’m real glad, Buck.”

“Thanks,” Bucky murmurs, just as gentle, looking over Steve carefully.
They stand there for a moment, silently, the energy of the night changed, but still emotionally intimate, nonetheless. After a while, Bucky tucks the dish towel in his back pocket, and moves, closing the gap between him and Steve.

“Hey. Thanks for dinner tonight,” Bucky murmurs, pressing his forehead against Steve’s. Gentle as can be, almost gentle enough so that Steve doesn’t notice, Bucky takes Steve’s fingertips in his hands, as if pulling Steve in even that much more closely. “I had a really great time.”

“I’m glad,” is what Steve is able to get out, though it sounds almost flat, at least, to him, given that what Steve really wanted to say was, I could take you out to dinner every night, as long as it would make you even half as happy as tonight has made me. But words fail him every single time, when it comes to Bucky. Good thing that Bucky seems to understand.

“Sorry about what happened with your jacket,” Bucky says, earnestly.

“It’s nothing. Besides, it let me see the inside of your place, so maybe it really is lucky, after all,” Steve jokes, soft. Bucky smiles at this. “Thanks for letting me up.”

“Hey, thanks for taking me home,” Bucky says.

“Had to make sure you got back safe. Had to make sure you didn’t get abducted, you know. It’s a dangerous world out there.”

“I think I can handle myself,” Bucky says, “But—thank you.”

They pause, sharing another silence, sharing another moment, entirely lost in one another.

“Well, hey,” Steve says, eventually. Reluctantly. “As much as I’d love to stay, I should probably let you get some sleep.”

“Yeah. And you’re parked in my neighbor’s spot,” Bucky says, “I don’t want you to get towed.”

“Oops,” Steve laughs.

“But before you go,” Bucky says, “I think I owe you something.”

“Yeah,” Steve murmurs, his heart pounding wildly in his chest. He has to remind himself that he’s not going to have an asthma attack. “I think you do.”

Bucky leans in, his pretty pink lips parted just so. Steve barely has to think as he gravitates towards him, his body practically moving on autopilot, moving on some deep, inborn instinct. When their lips touch, it feels fantastic. It feels electric. It’s like they were built to slot together like that, Bucky’s hands on Steve’s waist, Steve’s hands cupping Bucky’s face, as they both share an honest-to-God breathtaking kiss. It’s almost better than their first kiss, Steve thinks, as he pulls away to breathe.

“I—” he starts, and he all of a sudden doesn’t want to leave.

“Good night, Steve,” Bucky says, with a smile.

Steve nods, and he lets out a soft, lovestruck sigh. “Good night, Buck.”

Chapter End Notes
hi everyone, long time no see. it's been a hard few months for me. i know it’s as if i’m always saying that, but, it’s been a really, really hard few months for me. i know i'm not actually accountable to anyone but myself, but i guess an explanation, however vague, would help.

know that just because i’m not updating this, doesn’t mean i don’t intend to finish it. i've been trying to work very hard getting chapters done ahead of time so that i can have them on something like a schedule, but everything is pretty much falling apart right now, and i can only get so much done. the words of encouragement have been very loved and appreciated. and i mean it, i really do. eventually, i will get to responding to all of them with as much care as i can muster. but also know that i won’t now—and can’t ever—be able to give you a timeline on when the next chapter or chapters will be up. i have a couple beyond this chapter written, but i can’t focus on this fic exclusively, especially when i have other writing projects—even other fics—that i have signed on for.

so yeah. it's good to finally update, but know that i can, as stated in the first chapter, ever be on any sort of schedule or be consistent. especially with how everything is pretty much going right now.

with that said, the usual notes:

- matt fraction hawkeye is and always will be the hawkeye i write. i know that’s gauche in fandom these days, but i can’t help it.
- not necessarily an inspiration for this chapter, but if you want to feel the same sort of lovey fuzzy warmth that these two feel for each other, tank and the bangas’ npr tiny desk concert performance of “rollercoasters” is probably the best way to represent that feeling.
- a little nyc news for you (that is actually directly related to this fic, actually) in that new york city introduced the culture pass, where library card holders of the brooklyn, queens, and new york public libraries can reserve free admission passes to museums and other institutions. that's so incredibly important for keeping these institutions accessible, and while it does little to solve the root issue of inequality in nyc (both in general and re: museums specifically) it’s a good thing to do, i think. but then again, my perspective on it is limited: i’m not a real new yorker, i just write about ‘em.
- many, many thanks to my beta reader/co-author/best friend em, who took one look at this and made me realize that i italicize everything far too frequently too often, oops.

beyond what has already been written, the next few chapters are a little bit fuzzier, as i’m trying to really seamlessly tie them to everything that has happened up until now and everything that will happen after them. hopefully i can get them finalized and written quickly, but i'm going to respectfully ask for patience. thank you for the patience up until now, and thank you for all the care. i'll try to get this updated as soon as i can, and thanks for sticking with me up through it.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

love: awkwardly, earnestly, early.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

As spring stretches on—not into summer, not yet, it’s far too nice to be summer—Steve and Bucky become lost in each other’s orbits. Their relationship, officially, at least, is young, but like Steve himself, it exists within simultaneity. Their relationship is somehow both very young and recent and fresh, and they both, somehow, hit the beats of an old couple; Steve, at least, already feels like he’s been with Bucky forever in the best kinds of ways. Theirs isn’t like the passion of most budding relationships, where everything is a haze of intense physicality and heightened emotions. It’s not like they’re fucking non-stop. They’re not even fucking at all, is the thing. It’s almost as if they’ve skipped that stage of their relationship and instead, settled into the stability and emotional vulnerability that most partnerships require years to develop.

And for Steve, at least, that’s fine. More than fine. It’s great. He was just willing to be with Bucky, whether that being was sexual or not.

Besides, it gave him more time to figure out the whole thing about supersoldier sex with a regular, non-enhanced, easily-breakable human.

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Just as he’d been doing before they started dating, Steve tries to bring Bucky lunch at least once or twice a week. It’s usually easy, on the days that he’s coming back from the Tower, to buy Bucky something nice and take a walk through the tiny park that they’ve claimed as their own. But this week, Steve is running late.

Literally running, because, through a non-stop parade of errors—including Stark spending an entire forty minutes trying to argue with the battle plan Steve and Fury were working on based on some of Nat and Clint’s intel, unexpected MTA service changes, five percent battery life, and, of all things, an actual parade—moving on foot was the fastest option to get from Manhattan back to Brooklyn.

When he arrives at the Martinelli, Steve is sweaty, short of breath, without lunch, and, when he does some poking around, without Bucky.

Glancing around the library, Steve sees no Bucky, and no other staff—it’s only when he considers going into the employees only area when he sees Doreen, a spring in her step and a hefty, spiral-bound manual with a bright blue sheet of paper for the cover in her arms.

“Hey, Doreen,” Steve says, flagging her down. He jogs over to her, and she waves, one-handedly.

“What’s up, Cap? How can I help out? Can’t answer any questions about the library catalog, but I could help you if you have like, computer issues,” Doreen says, just as chipper as when Steve last
“Actually—” Steve starts, with a sigh, “Do you have a charger I could borrow? My phone died and I didn’t get a chance to text Bucky to tell him I would be late.”

“Oh, for sure!” she says, producing a portable charger and a cable out from her bright red Empire State University fanny pack. “Here you go.”

“Thanks. You’re a lifesaver,” Steve says, and she beams at that, or, rather, she beams somehow more intensely than previously. It’s infectious. Steve can’t help but smile at her when he plugs his phone into the charger. “You wouldn’t happen to know where he is, would you?”

“He left to get lunch like, ten minutes ago,” she says. “He said he wouldn’t be long, tough, so he should be back soon.”

“Doreen Green, you are truly a lifesaver.”

She shrugs. “ **You’re** the lifesaver, dude. Bucky sits in his office and has Sad Desk Lunch whenever he’s not with you, and it’s seriously depressing to watch, so I’m glad you’re here, actually.”

And that’s not surprising to Steve, though he never before considered what Bucky’s lunches were like when he wasn’t there. Perhaps he assumed Bucky just skipped them, given how he always catches Bucky munching on granola bars and trail mix and dried fruit and the other shelf-stable snacks that he keeps stashed away in different parts of the library.

Eventually, Doreen leaves, scurrying off when an older patron asks for help in setting up an email account. Steve considers taking some time to look around the Carter archive exhibit upstairs when Bucky arrives, complete with what looks to be his lunch.

“Buck,” Steve calls out, as loud as is reasonable in a library.

“Oh!” Bucky says, his head snapping up. “Hey, Steve.”

“Hey, Buck,” Steve says, glancing down at the plastic bag in his hand. Two burritos and a side-order of tortilla chips. It’s a lot just for one person, and not quite enough for **one plus Steve**, but it’s almost perfect for two. “What’ve you got there?”

“Oh. Uh—lunch?” Bucky asks, glancing down at his bag. He blinks up at Steve, looking lost, frightened, almost, but for what, Steve couldn’t be sure. That passes, though, and instead, Bucky’s expression melts into something more straightforward: a sheepishness that Steve can only describe as **adorable**. “For—both of us?”

Steve smiles. “That’s real sweet of you, Buck.”

“It’s the thought that counts, right?” Bucky asks, before reaching in and handing Steve a burrito. Instead of a **yes**, Steve kisses Bucky on the lips, briefly, softly, before pulling away. They were, after all, at Bucky’s **work**.

“Come on,” Steve says, taking Bucky’s hand, “I’m not letting you eat in your office if I can help it.”

Bucky makes a face, a pout that’s about as serious as it is **actually** malicious, which is to say, **not at all**. “Doreen got to you, didn’t she?”

Steve shrugs, feigning as much innocence as he can. “Who’s to say? Maybe I’m just interested in
eating a nice burrito with my boyfriend.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Bucky says, but when he does, he says it with a smile. “Lucky for you, I want to eat a burrito with my boyfriend, too.”

Steve hums happily at that, happily and fulfilled. Sure, he might need to stop to get a sandwich on the way back to his apartment, but there was another fullness that came from sitting and having lunch with Bucky that Steve wouldn’t ever turn down—even if it meant having only half a lunch.

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Sometimes, when Steve comes to the library, Bucky is busy doing archival work with the Martinelli archives or their rare books or other organizational work. On these days, Steve kisses him on the temple, drops off his lunch, and waits for him. If Bucky is too busy for lunch, Steve just pecks him on the forehead and tells him to have a good day, and they decompress about it when Bucky, sometimes later than his usual, arrives at Steve’s apartment.

Sometimes, though he’s not necessarily busy, Bucky will have a few errands to run, a few things to do. On these days, he lets Steve follow him, and Steve does so with a bounce in his step that echoes an over-eager golden retriever puppy.

On one of these days, Steve follows Bucky to the printing station, watching as Bucky deftly tosses his ID card around, letting it dance in the air like leaves and stray petals on the mid-spring breeze. His hands are quick and careful, and Steve could watch him do that for hours on end. What’s more, Bucky doesn’t even seem fazed as he does all this. He just continues to describe yet another cheap sci-fi novel about some galaxy-trotting spaceman and his blue alien wife. What’s happening with his hands is practically incidental.

That is, until he stumbles over a dip in the floor and his ID goes flying.

“Fuck,” he hisses, as Steve watches his ID slide all the way under the printer.

“Hey, language,” Steve teases, “We’re in a library, for chrissakes.”

Bucky sends him a look. “You and I know damn well you’ve said worse things on the way here alone.”

“Well, yeah, but I’m not the one who fuckin’ works here,” Steve laughs, and Bucky, with a resigned-sounding sigh, takes a yardstick—placed carefully next to the printer—and gets to his knees. “You want a little help?”

“It’s okay. I, uh. I do this pretty much every other time I go to print something,” Bucky says, though he looks like he’s struggling. Steve nudges him aside.

“Watch your hands,” is what Steve says in response, squaring his shoulders, gripping the printer on both sides, and lifting it up, carefully, not because it’s heavy—to him, at least—but because he doesn’t want to hit Bucky in the process. The space underneath the printer is surprisingly dust- and mess-free, save for Bucky’s lanyard and ID. Quickly, Bucky grabs the offending items, and Steve settles the printer back down, ever-gently.

“Thanks,” Bucky says, quietly, not meeting Steve’s gaze. Showing off the serum had that effect on people, sometimes, though he usually got the opposite reaction. Steve feels self-conscious, suddenly.

“It’s what I’m here for,” Steve replies, a little self-depreciatingly. Bucky looks back up at him and
smiles, before squeezing Steve’s hand, gently.

“What’d I do without you?” he asks, and to that, Steve beams.

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Since the New York Bay incident, hunting down the relics of Hydra has gotten more intense. Half the team is practically on a single-minded mission to find Hydra’s new leader, whoever it may be, and it’s tough. Not that it was ever easy to begin with, but the search for the new head of Hydra, the person who ordered the attack in New York, leaves Steve with far more sensitive intel work to take home. Not that he minds. Staying in with Bucky, ordering takeout, and keeping a movie on is nice. It makes everything feel a little bit more at ease; it makes everything feel stable.

Being with Bucky is wonderful in all its shades, even when they’re both sitting on Bucky’s worn couch, engrossed in work. Even when neither has spoken in an hour, even when the only noise between them is the violent patter of spring rain on Bucky’s windows, Steve still feels comfortable and satisfied and safe. Being with Bucky—just sharing space with him—makes Steve happy.

It’s when he considers that happiness—and when he finishes going through the documents that Natasha needed a second eyes on—that Steve realizes just how long he’d been at Bucky’s apartment.

“Shit,” Steve says, as he glances at his watch. It’s almost midnight. How neither of them noticed, Steve has no clue. How Bucky hasn’t kicked him out yet, Steve also has no clue. “It’s really late. I should probably get outta your hair.”

“It’s pouring out there,” Bucky says, sitting up straight, from his spot on the couch. He looks almost as if he’s about to follow Steve out the door.

“I’m not afraid of a little water, Buck. And you need to get to bed.”

“No, what I mean, is—” Bucky blurts out, looking unsure. Whatever reservations he might have, he pushes through them, carefully. Quickly. “You don’t have to go out in the rain at all. You can stay here with me. For the night, I mean. Just to wait out the rain.”

Steve blinks. That was—unexpected.

“Oh.”

Bucky looks unsure. He adjusts his glasses and moves to tuck his hair behind his ear. He must have been really nervous, if neither was enough of a release on its own. “I mean. If you want.”

Steve still can’t believe what Bucky is saying. He smiles. “Really?”

“I mean, not if you don’t want to,” Bucky says, “I’ll take the couch. I just washed my sheets the other day, too, so they’re clean. Not that I don’t wash them regularly, or that I’m living in filth, but they’re—they’re. They’re clean, is what I’m saying. I promise.”

“I’m not making you sleep on the couch in your own home, Buck,” Steve says, “I’ll take the couch. I’ve fallen asleep in places far less comfortable than a couch from Ikea.”

Bucky raises his eyebrows at Steve. “You know that’s not happening.”

“And you know that I’m not gonna let you sleep on the couch,” Steve insists, “So—”
“So, I guess you could take the bed with me,” Bucky blurts out, suddenly, immediately, “I mean, it’s gonna be tight. But I’m not letting you sleep on the couch.”

“See, I’d be happy to,” Steve starts, “But I don’t wanna keep you up. I mean—I can be a restless sleeper.”

“And so can I,” Bucky replies, without missing a beat.

It’s less an argument than it is a parry, a back-and-forth. A game. “I get weird dreams. Sometimes I talk in my sleep.”

Bucky shrugs. “Me, too. And unless you’re bad-mouthing me in your sleep, that’s nothing I can’t handle.”

“Well, okay. But the real problem here,” Steve starts, looking up at Bucky through his eyelashes. “I don’t have anything to wear.”

“Easy enough,” Bucky says, and he takes it. He puts his hand on Steve’s waist, and oh, does that give Steve the butterflies, the way that Bucky’s big, strong hands are so, so gentle but so, so steady. “You can borrow something of mine.”

Steve smiles, shaking his head. But he leans in and pecks Bucky on the forehead, just briefly, just once, angling himself carefully to get just the right angle. Bucky smiles, ducking his head a little, as Steve pulls away. “Alright. Yeah, alright. Thanks, Buck.”

“Of course, Stevie,” Bucky says, and that makes Steve buzz, hearing Bucky call him something so soft and so fond, and in person, too. “Now, come on. If you’re really serious about not keeping me up.”

Bucky tosses Steve a pair of sweats and a faded NASA shirt with only some coffee stains before slipping into the bathroom to take a quick shower before bed. Steve isn’t disappointed he’s not invited. Really, he’s not. Not when the shirt smells like Bucky’s detergent. He takes that time to lie on Bucky’s bed—which also smells like his detergent—and mindlessly scroll through Instagram.

Steve barely gets through the new posts on his feed when Bucky re-enters the bedroom, looking squeaky clean in a set of soft black sweats and a frayed gray NYU sweatshirt. He smiles at Steve, sheepishly, and they swap places: Steve goes to the bathroom—there’s a toothbrush, still in its packaging, set to the side for him—and he gets ready for the night. When he returns, Bucky looks like he’s been doing the same thing Steve was doing earlier: trawling social media, wasting time.

“We’re gonna have to tuck in real close,” Bucky says, once Steve comes in. He’s standing to the side, watching Steve, waiting for him to make the first move, waiting, seemingly, for Steve to set the orders around which he will bend. As if this wasn’t his own home. Steve sits on the bed, regardless, smiling up at Bucky as he does.

“What a tragedy,” Steve laughs, as he settles onto the mattress. Bucky follows, slipping his glasses off, gently, carefully, before squeezing in close, making himself small as he can against Steve’s chest. He’s a solid, sturdy weight against Steve’s chest, far more solid than Steve could have ever predicted. It unsettles him, in the most neutral sense of the word. He tries not to think about that too much.

“You’re comfortable, right?” Bucky asks, without turning around. Steve nods.

“Yeah, yeah, of course.”
“Okay,” Bucky says, as he turns his lamp off. “Lemme know if you’re not.”

Steve laughs. “I’m sure that won’t be a problem, Buck.”

“Well,” Bucky says, but he trails off. And Steve, as has become familiar, finishes what Bucky starts.

“Well?”

“Well,” Bucky says, and Bucky is faced away from him, but Steve is convinced Bucky is smiling. “Good night, Steve.”

That makes him smile, too. “Good night, Buck.”

In the dark, with Bucky all coiled and tense and small in the space next to his chest, Steve is hyperaware of Bucky’s body, or, at least, the weight, the beingness of him. That unsettled feeling in Steve’s chest buzzes uncontrollably, and he can’t find it in himself to relax. He wants to toss and turn and re-settle himself, but he can’t. Bucky’s bed is comfortable enough. And tight as the squeeze is, sharing Bucky’s bed isn’t uncomfortable. That, itself, is very nice.

It’s being the big spoon that’s the problem.

“Buck?” Steve asks, quietly.

Bucky looks over his shoulder at Steve, the bed creaking underneath him as he moves. “Mmm?”

“I—um—I—” Steve starts, then, feeling embarrassed. “I wanna be the little spoon.”

“Oh,” Bucky says, his big blue eyes almost reflective in the low light. “Yeah. Sure, lemme just—”

He moves until he’s mostly off the bed, and Steve moves, too, so they can switch places. It’s awkward, given how small Bucky’s bed is, but they manage.

“Better?” Bucky asks. He rests his left hand against Steve’s hip, and it isn’t cold, it isn’t hard, it isn’t unpleasant, it’s gentle. It’s light. It’s just like what Steve would expect of Bucky. Tucked underneath Bucky, Steve already feels so much more at ease. All he can do is hum, content and halfway to sleep.

When Steve wakes up the next morning, it’s still dark. He’s still tucked against Bucky’s side, and even in his sleep, Bucky’s touch—the way he holds Steve’s waist—is still feather-light. It wouldn’t be difficult, Steve thinks, to break away from him, to follow his body’s schedule and go for his regular morning run. But something else stops him—the fact that he didn’t bring his running shoes, for one, but something more natural, something more inherent. Though his body’s rhythm might have been telling him it was time to get up, Steve’s instinct told him that all he wanted to do was stay there, tucked in all small and soft and safe in Bucky’s bed.

Slowly, Steve shifts, trying not to rock the mattress too much. He grabs his phone, turns the brightness down as low as it will go, and tries his best to check his emails without waking Bucky up. That lasts a solid five minutes or so before Bucky shifts, blinking awake.

“Mm,” Bucky murmurs. He lets out a low, soft sigh, before his eyes flutter open, brilliant blue, even in the low light. “Oh. Hey. You’re awake.”

“Morning, Buck,” Steve says, shifting to peck Bucky on the forehead, though a little sloppily. “I didn’t wake you up, did you?”
“No, no, I usually get up around this time,” Bucky says, his voice all low and sleep-strained, rich in all the ways his daytime voice usually is, except to an extreme. It knocks the breath right out of Steve. “How long’ve you been up, Stevie?”

Steve shrugs, trying to keep it casual. It’s too early, Rogers. “Not long.”

“Mm,” Bucky says, and he pauses, eyes closed, and Steve almost thinks he’s fallen asleep again until he speaks. “You hungry? Lemme make you some breakfast.”

“Buck—that’s—” Steve says, and he feels like he’s about to cry, with how sweet his best guy is to him. “You don’t have to do that. You’ve got work.”

“I can be ready for work in ten minutes,” Bucky says. He sits up, stretching, and Steve’s eyes immediately trail down to the slight sliver of skin that peeks out when Bucky does. “You wanna take a shower? You go take a shower, I’ll make breakfast.”

“You’re such a fucking prince, Barnes,” Steve says, and Bucky—still sans glasses, which, wow—laughs, shaking his head.

“I’m a dope with morning breath, is what I am,” he replies. Before Steve can open his mouth to say anything, Bucky shoves him, gently. More a nudge with a little oomph to it than an actual shove. “Now go take a shower. Or at least move so I can get outta my bed.”

“Yeah, yeah, alright,” Steve says, feigning a huff. Bucky rolls his eyes at him, but his smile stays. Even as he throws Steve’s clothes at him. Which, given that Steve could easily have stood there all day, fawning over Bucky, lit up all soft by the early morning light, was probably for the best. He takes a quick shower—and if he gets a little handsy in Bucky’s shower, that’s for him and him alone to know—and pulls on his clothes from the night before, luckily still looking fairly presentable, even with a few new creases and wrinkles.

By the time that Steve leaves Bucky’s bathroom, the smell of pancakes has filled the entire apartment. In the kitchen, Bucky—still in his sweatshirt and sweatpants, only this time, with an apron over them—has made a small mountain of pancakes and scrambled eggs.

“Here,” Bucky says, scooting one plate over to Steve. “I’m gonna get dressed. There’s coffee in the pot, if you want it. Creamer’s in the fridge, there’s sugar next to the pot.”

Steve smiles. He wants to kiss Bucky. He wants to spend all day kissing him. “What did I do to deserve you?”

All Bucky does is smile, bashful, as he undoes his apron and makes his way out of the kitchen. That’s a better kick than all the energy in the world.

True to his word, Bucky is ready for work in less than ten minutes. By the time he comes back, Steve has already dug into his pancakes and entirely finished his eggs. And not without good reason: beyond the fact that Steve’s morning hunger is damn-near insatiable, Bucky makes the best pancakes Steve, in all his years, has ever tasted. They even fill him up far more than a stack of pancakes usually does; probably because they’ve called POWER CAKES, is Steve’s guess. As Bucky settles down to start on his breakfast, Steve slows, and finish up breakfast together, wash their dishes together, and leave Bucky’s apartment together. It’s not Steve’s daily morning run, but it’s a routine that Steve settles into like a second skin; it’s a routine that he would be more than happy to get used to.

They arrive at the library far too quickly. The real world—life—comes cutting through that
pristine, perfect morning they had far too quickly. Steve doesn’t want to go back to his apartment. And he definitely doesn’t want to go back to the Tower. But he has to. And Bucky has to work, too. Even if staying with Bucky was the only thing he could ever have wanted.

“Well,” Steve says, with a sigh, “Guess this is it.”

Bucky nods. “I’ll text you, yeah?”

“Of course.”

They stand there, neither wanting to make the first move; neither wanting to pull themselves apart.

“I, uh,” Steve says, eventually. “Have a good day at work, Buck.”

“You too, Stevie,” Bucky says.

And he will. He knows he will.

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After that, Bucky starts coming over more. The bulk of their dates take place in Steve’s apartment, which is fine. Better, even, despite Steve reminding Bucky that he likes that tiny apartment of his, actually. And he does. It’s tight, but it feels lived-in. Like someone’s home. But space is an issue, especially as they begin falling asleep with one another more.

Not sleeping with each other. Falling asleep together. Sex still isn’t happening. Steve is still okay with it. Waking up next to Bucky—Bucky, who looks like a goddamn revelation in the morning, with his caramel-rich morning voice and his intimately soft touch—makes the entire lack of sex thing secondary, if even that. Steve would trade the whole goddamn world for the chance to tuck against the soft fabric of Bucky’s sweatshirts. He would trade anything and everything for the peace he felt on those evenings and lazy afternoons they spent together, with Bucky’s left arm a steady, solid weight across his waist, that closeness leaving him feeling small and special and safe.

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After a particularly-bitter screaming match with Tony about AI and algorithms and the right way to destroy Hydra, Steve heads straight to the library for lunch with Bucky. When he arrives, it’s much later in the day than he would have hoped. Maybe that, too, was part of what went into him snapping back at Tony. Maybe they’d both been frustrated and tired and testy, having worked through lunchtime without even a coffee break. Because of that lateness, Steve, instead of bringing lunch with him, brings cookies to the library. It’s enough for two, even a two that included Steve.

Kamala is sitting at the circulation desk when Steve arrives. She’s doing homework, it looks like, but she waves excitedly when she realizes it’s him, her energy not flagging for a second, even if she is going through the more tedious parts of a physics problem.

“Hi,” Steve says.

“Hi, Mister R—” she starts, until she realizes what’s coming out of her mouth, until she remembers their last conversation. “I, uh. Steve. Hi.”

He nods at her, a good job without those words. “Is Bucky here?”

“Oh, no, he called in,” Kamala says, looking genuinely disappointed. “Said it was another one of his migraines.”
“Oh,” Steve says, trying hard to make his voice sound level. He didn’t realize Bucky got migraines.

“Yeah,” she says with a sigh, “It sucks, too, because he said he was gonna help me with my physics homework yesterday. But it’s okay. I’ll just wait for Miles to arrive to explain it to me.”

“Wish I could help you there,” Steve says, apologetically. “Now, if you ever have a history project, I’m your guy.”

And at that, her eyes sparkle. Kamala looks up at Steve like he’s given her the greatest gift on the face of the Earth. She looks up at him like Steve looks at Bucky, except entirely platonic and still a little bit hero-worshipping. He would have to steer her away from that. Slowly.

“Thank you so, so much,” she says, her voice awed. Steve acknowledges it with a smile and a nod. Hero worship aside, Kamala was just so eager, so earnest, he couldn’t help but be charmed by her enthusiasm.

“Well, hey, while I’m here, you want these?” Steve asks, shifting the subject quickly, though doing absolutely nothing to shift away from Kamala’s beaming admiration. He sets the little paper bag of cookies right in front of her, and her eyes somehow, sparkle even more. “I got ‘em on the way over. I imagine he’s not gonna be wanting sugar if he’s already got a headache.”

“Oh my gosh,” she says, peeking inside the bag. “Is this—is this a confetti cookie?”

Steve nods. “Should be a few in there. And double-chocolate, too.”

Kamala looks up at Steve, her eyes wide as the cookies he left her.

“Are you—are you my fairy godmother?”

Steve barks out a laugh at this, far too loud to be appropriate for a library in the middle of a weekday afternoon.

“Kamala, if I’m your fairy godmother, you and I are both in big trouble,” Steve replies, and she laughs at this, through a mouthful of confetti cookie. With that, Steve decides it’s time to leave. After all, he still had a boyfriend with a migraine to check on. After grabbing a cookie to snack on, he says goodbye to Kamala, sending Bucky a text message right as he makes his way out the door.

ME [1:22 PM]: Heard you had a migraine. Want me to stop by? I’ll pick you up some soup on the way.

Given that Bucky has a migraine, Steve doesn’t expect much, and it doesn’t seem like he’ll get much, when Bucky does not respond with his usual timeliness. But just as Steve is about to round the corner to the subway station, he gets a response.

BUCKY [1:37 PM]: That’d be nice. Thanks

A second response comes quickly after that: a string of emojis in different degrees of illness. Steve wants to reach through the phone and pet Bucky’s hair. But given that he can’t do that, he does the next-best thing: he stops by his favorite Vietnamese place, buys two giant containers of pho—and enough shrimp rolls to cater a small dinner party—and makes his way to Bucky’s place, not missing a beat along the way.

Once at Bucky’s door, Steve taps against it light as he possibly can—so light that, for a while, he
doesn’t think Bucky heard him. Just as he’s about to knock again, Steve hears the chain slide and the two locks tumbling, and soon, he’s face-to-face with a tired-looking Bucky.

“Hey,” Steve says quietly, as Bucky slumps his head against Steve’s shoulder. He’s still wearing his glasses, even with a migraine, and he’s dressed in his black sweatpants and another NYU sweatshirt—this time, in what Steve’s sure is the most obnoxious shade of purple in existence. If he stares at it too long, he’s pretty sure he’ll get a migraine, too. “How’re you feeling, bud?”

“Better,” Bucky murmurs, his voice muffled against Steve’s shoulder. “This isn’t the jacket a pigeon shit on, is it?”

“No, no, it’s not,” Steve says with a laugh. “You’re good.”

Bucky hums. “Okay. Good.”

He puts his free hand against the back of Bucky’s head. It feels damp, like he’d just taken a shower. A cold shower. “You eat lunch?”

“No yet,” Bucky says, making his way back into his apartment and flopping back onto the couch. “Well, here’s some soup for you, then. I got shrimp rolls, too. There’s dipping sauce if you want it, but I think some of it might have spilled.”

“That’s okay,” Bucky says, his voice half-muffled by the pillow he’s pressed against. He’s a sorry sight to behold. Steve puts the food on Bucky’s coffee table and runs his fingers through Bucky’s hair, ever-gently.

“Hey,” he says, quietly, “I’m gonna wash my hands. Lemme know if you need anything.”

Bucky makes a low noise of agreement. That’s probably the best he was going to get, but Steve takes it, anyway. He makes his way to Bucky’s bathroom, careful not to make any more noise than he has to. There’s a noticeable change in temperature when Steve enters Bucky’s apartment. Steve doesn’t think much of it. He doesn’t even think much of it when he steps on an ice chip on his way out of the bathroom—it might have been a little strange, but however Bucky was coping with his migraine, it was his way of coping.

They eventually eat lunch, and Bucky seems hungrier than usual, because he finishes his meal just as quickly as Steve. When he moves to throw away the trash, Steve stops him, tidying up for the both of them. Bucky smiles sheepishly at this, and he lies back on the couch again, eyes closed, though clearly not sleeping.

“Is there anything else I can do for you, Buck?” Steve asks, once the coffee table is trash-free.

“No. Thank you.”


“It’ll—it’ll pass, eventually,” Bucky says. “It’s just miserable while I’m waiting for it to.”

“Can I spend the rest of the day with you until it does?”

Bucky nods. “Yeah, I—I’d like that.”

With that, Steve takes out his phone, and Bucky shifts on the couch, laying his head in Steve’s lap. They sit there for a while in a comfortable, still silence, Steve absentmindedly running his fingers
through Bucky’s hair and stroking his head the entire time. After a while, Bucky’s breathing steadies—he’s fallen asleep, sprawled out and relaxed, with his head comfortably settled in Steve’s lap. Steve doesn’t move—he doesn’t even try. He just continues looking through Natasha’s intel, sometimes pausing to check Instagram or local news sites.

And if Bucky begins to murmur in his sleep, offering Steve brief—though incoherent—fragments of his old life, that’s a concern for another time.

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Even after that, Bucky still goes to Steve’s more than Steve goes to Bucky’s. Before they know it, Bucky is spending most nights at Steve’s, and there’s evidence for that. There’s a toothbrush next to Steve’s in the cup by the sink. There’s a stack of library books on Steve’s counter that he’d never checked out, and that he never had any intention of reading. There are little post-it notes that make their way into all of Steve’s things. Steve loves these, especially. There was a blue one on the fridge reading: Drank all the milk, I’ll pick some up after work.

There was an orange one on Steve’s sketchbook with a crudely-drawn portrait of Steve—as Captain America—and a little speech bubble saying: You should put me on Instagram! followed by a smiley-face.

One morning, there’s a green one on Steve’s microwave that said, in Bucky’s tidy, ever-familiar handwriting:

Clear off some space on the counter before dinner tonight. I got you something :)

They’re not special, not really, except they are, to Steve.

When Bucky arrives on Steve’s doorstep that evening, he has one hand behind his back, and a paper bag in the other.

“I got you a surprise,” is what he says, grinning. Steve looks him up and down.

“Is it the chicken I asked you to buy on the way over?” Steve asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Two surprises, then,” Bucky says, as he hands the bag over—two rotisserie chickens and a couple containers: one of corn, one of mashed potatoes, and some gravy. There’re some brownies in there, too. Surprise number one. Steve smiles.

“Okay, come in. Lemme see the second surprise,” Steve says, and Bucky beams, all but bouncing inside.

“Voila,” he says, producing a small, leafy thing from behind his back. Now that was a surprise.

“You got me a plant!”

“It’s, uh,” Bucky says, standing like he doesn’t know what to do with his hands. “It’s a clipping. From one of mine. Or, well, it was. It’s taken root now, so it’s kind of its own thing.”

Steve carefully, carefully looks over the plant. It’s so, small, and so, so green. Bucky shifts, a little bit awkwardly.

“It’s not much, but you know, I thought the counter could use a little color. And, you know, it’s green,” he starts, “You don’t have to—if you don’t like it, you really don’t have to keep it, rea—”
Steve cuts him off there. “Buck. Shut up. I—I love this thing.”

Bucky blinks, as if he’s surprised at Steve. “You do?”


“Oh. Okay, great. Good. I’m—” he starts, before letting out a deep breath and grinning that perfect, pearly, infectious grin of his. “I’m—really, really glad.”

“We’re gonna figure out a place for this later,” Steve says, putting the plant down next to the bowl where he keeps his keys. “But first, let’s eat. I’m starving.”

They do that, and they find a place for the plant, too. It’s easy, slotting that tiny sprig of green in its little orange pot into Steve’s kitchen. It looks natural. It looks like it belongs there. It evokes the same feeling in Steve’s heart as seeing Bucky’s toothbrush next to his. After that, the rest of the night is routine. Bucky takes a shower, and Steve sketches a little something, listening to the white noise of traffic humming by through open windows. The days have been hot in New York City—a sign of summer on the horizon—but nights and mornings are still cool. Sometimes, though he knows it unlikely Steve thinks he can smell the sea air from his apartment. He thinks back to almost a century ago now, to sweaty summers on Coney Island. He thinks to the future, to a date along the Boardwalk with Bucky one day.

And then, as if on cue, Bucky arrives, settling down next to Steve. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Steve echoes in response, looking up from his tablet, briefly. They sit there, Steve reading through some new intel straight from Fury, and Bucky, seemingly lost in his thoughts. Eventually, Bucky breaks that silence, sudden as he is quiet.

“Steve?” he says, and he sounds very, very serious, underneath the smile he’s put on. “I wanna ask you a question. But before I ask, I want you to know I don’t mean anything by it. You don’t have to answer it if you don’t wanna, and you’re more than welcome to tell me to fuck off and go home if you don’t wanna answer it or if you don’t think it’s appropriate.”

Steve looks up from his tablet as he speaks. “First, you know I would never ask you to do that, especially after you brought me a plant, and second, you know you can ask me anything, Buck.”

“Do you ever miss it?” Bucky asks, “You know, from before—all this?”

Steve has to pause, to take a deep, deep breath. Now this, he wasn’t expecting. It was as if Bucky read his mind, or, more reasonably, that with the breeze coming in, he was feeling just as nostalgic.

“I mean, sometimes I still think I’m that guy. You know, from before. Sometimes, I’ll wake up and see myself in the mirror and get shocked again,” Steve says, “It’s gotten better though. I’ve been in this body for a while now. Now, as for missing the Forties—I can’t say I do. The food’s better. I don’t gotta worry about lead poisoning so much. And Netflix? The internet? Fan-fucking-tastic, Buck. But most importantly? More important than all of those things combined?”

Bucky is looking at him like his life hangs on what Steve will say next.

“ln the Forties, I wouldn’t have met you,” Steve admits, softly. Bucky is so, so close. “We couldn’t have had—well. This.”

And with that, Steve kisses him, gently, deeply, drinking in the way that Bucky gasps against his mouth. When the pull away, Bucky still looks at Steve with that same intensity, that same
dedication, but there’s not the same fear there. There’s not the same uncertainty as before.

“Can I tell you something?” Steve asks, setting his tablet aside. “Same caveat, but for you.”

“What is it?” Bucky asks, his pupils blown all wide, looking at Steve like he’s his world.

“I—I don’t think I’m prepared to take care of this plant,” Steve says, with a laugh. Bucky’s jaw drops, and before Steve can say anything, Bucky slugs him. Gently, of course. But he slugs him.

“Punk!” he yells, “I thought you were being serious!”

“I am being serious!” Steve yells, or at least, he tries to yell, through his laughs. “I’ve never had a plant before!”

“Idiot. Asshole. Asshole-idiot,” Bucky says, but he’s smiling. He’s half-pouting, but he’s, nonetheless, smiling. “I’m gonna get back into my jeans and I’m going home.”

“Come on, Buck,” Steve whines. Playfully, he grabs onto Bucky’s wrist, though he is very careful to make sure that his touch is light enough for someone non-enhanced to break from his play-grip. “Don’t say that. You know I can’t sleep without you.”

“Fine. But I’m doing this because depriving Captain America of his sleep would go against my citizenly obligations, not because you get a pass for being full of shit.”

Steve nods, pseudo-seriously. “Thank you for your sacrifice.”

“Punk,” Bucky murmurs, as he settles more comfortably into bed.

“Jerk,” Steve parries back, settling into the warm, familiar crook of Bucky’s arms, happy as he’s ever been.

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As spring moves on, pushing into summer, Steve’s art—what little of it he’s able to produce, anyway—begins to change. Or, rather, what changes is not Steve’s art style, but the subjects of his sketches themselves.

Steve, if his sketches are any indication, is very, very horny.

When this shift began, exactly, is unclear to Steve. But the moment of recognition, the moment of realization, will remain in his memory, stark in its clarity and dense in its role as emotional epiphany.

It’s a hotter-than-average late-spring weekend, even for a city that gets notoriously hot in the summers. Bucky is staying over, as he is almost every weekend now. Steve is curled up in his favorite armchair, and Bucky has taken up the entire couch, his long legs sprawled along the length of it, as he thumbs through a paperback that he and Steve bought on a whim from a local bookstore earlier that day. Though it’s hot, he’s still in a comfy-looking sweatshirt, though its material has worn thin in places: at the cuffs, in the shoulders. Maybe that’s how Steve realizes, given how he finally registers the way he’s been gazing at the pull of Bucky’s shoulders against that worn fabric. Or maybe it was the creeping, sticky-heat of almost-summer, signaling to him that he needed to really look at what he had been drawing. Or maybe still, it was just time; maybe his subconscious was finally ready to pull the sheer extent of Steve’s need to his conscious.

Upon realizing that he’s staring—gawking, in his own goddamn home—Steve breaks away from
Bucky, immediately burying his nose in his sketchbook. Immediately realizing that what he’d
drawn for himself, mindlessly, to himself, wasn’t much better.

There’s page upon page of half-fleshed out sketches of want: big hands grasping muscular thighs,
broad shoulders and strong arms, half-familiar faces mid-gasp, caught up in moments of ecstasy.

And dicks. Lots and lots of dicks.

Slowly, Steve shuts his sketchbook and sets it aside, feeling very, very self-conscious all of a
sudden. He wonders if Bucky has seen these. Bucky had never asked to look at Steve’s sketchbook,
though he’d put post-it notes on it and regularly hand it to Steve on the days that Steve was too
lazy to get it for himself. Maybe Bucky hadn’t seen these, and so he hadn’t brought it up. Or
maybe he had, but he just didn’t want to make the first move. Or maybe he had seen them, and he
didn’t want to make a move at all.

Feeling like a voyeur—instead of someone who was in an emotionally-intimate relationship with
the guy—Steve peeks back up at Bucky, as if making full eye contact would betray his secret,
lustful thoughts. Steve had always admired Bucky’s ass, and those long, long legs of his, but
looking at him, all sprawled out and comfortable like that, makes something low and warm in
Steve ache. Bucky doesn’t hold himself like it, not at the library, anyway, but he takes up a lot of
space. His shoulders are broad, but he looks soft, though that may have also been a function of
Bucky wearing a sweatshirt and matching joggers. Which, though baggy in the crotch, left just
enough to Steve’s imagination to let it run wild.

Fuck.

The arrangement of their relationship was comfortable, at least, to a point, and it wasn’t
conventional by any means. They were dating, but they’d never had sex. They’d fallen asleep
together, but Steve has never seen Bucky naked. They were emotionally-intimate, but physically,
they were practically still just friends.

Somehow, the prospect of figuring that out—of navigating whatever boundaries Bucky chose not
to push while, at the same time, expressing his own desire for intimacy—was intimidating, maybe
even scary, for Steve.

But not impossible. It would take time—maybe more time and gentleness and planning than any
mission he’d ever planned—but it wasn’t impossible. And if Steve couldn’t tell himself that, well.
Maybe it was time to hand over his shield.

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After weeks of trawling through pages and pages and pages of documents and intel reports and
intercepted communication, the Avengers find a lead. It takes a whole lot of digging and a whole
lot of dead ends, but they find a lead. And Steve—in his professional duty as Captain America—
gears up to chase that lead to its end.

Natasha calls Steve, her voice tinny from her burner phone purchased somewhere across the world.
There was going to be an attack, but before that, there would be a trade-off. Hydra would get
weapons of war and all the instructions to aid in their construction, all for a briefcase of money, a
duffel bag of drugs, and an empty promise to install these scientists into whatever formal structure
Hydra would implement once they’d conquered the world. The scientists were amateurs when it
came to negotiation. Nat would have taken the deal down herself, if it weren’t for one thing: the
demanded the presence of two very specific people, a confirmed Hydra higher-up called Vermis,
and someone called Schmidt. Someone who, from the way the scientists spoke of them, from the
way that Vermis referred to them, seemed to be the leader of all of Hydra. The big boss themselves.

As quick as he is to gear up for a mission, Steve hates to leave the city at this time of year. It’s an almost-perfect time, save for the heat: it’s before the formal beginning of summer, before the incoming perennial wave of tourists breaches their city shores, before school is out for students and the universities become empty, hollowed-out shells for the months-long break.

It’s before Steve has had a chance to speak with Bucky about the whole intimacy thing.

Not that he’d made any concrete plans to talk to Bucky about it. Not yet, anyway. And not that it matters now that Steve is packed and about to leave his apartment—and about to leave his boyfriend—for an away mission across the Atlantic Ocean. They can talk about sex when he gets back. For now, he just wants to look at Bucky for as long as he can before Natasha honks her horn at them.

“I’m assuming you won’t be able to call or text me, huh?” Bucky asks, holding Steve’s hands in his.

“Unfortunately, no,” Steve says, “This place is out in the middle of the Sokovian wilderness, and even if there was service, I can’t risk getting intercepted.”

“Okay. Yeah. Of course,” Bucky says, with a nod, as if saying any more would be too much.

Steve nods. “It’s gonna be okay. Rough, but it’ll be okay.”

Bucky nods, but that doesn’t seem to convince him, from the way he’s biting his lower lip. It’s so cute. It breaks Steve’s heart. “You take care of yourself, okay?”

“No, hey, Steve. Just—promise me, okay?” Bucky says, his voice going soft and fragile and vulnerable in that moment; his voice telling Steve I need to hear you say it, without Bucky speaking those words exactly.

“I promise, Buck.”

“Oh, okay,” Bucky says, still clearly unconvinced. “Good.”

Steve nods, rubbing circles in Bucky’s hand with his thumb. “Okay.”

He wishes he could stay there forever. He wishes he wouldn’t have to leave Bucky for a day. But he can’t. A ten-second-long honk from outside reminds them of that. It’s Natasha’s signal to Steve that it’s time to go.

“Hey. Don’t do anything stupid ‘till I get back, yeah?” Steve half-jokes. There’s something bittersweet to stealing that from Bucky, but in that moment, it feels right coming out of Steve’s mouth. And to that, Bucky laughs—all soft and sentimental and so, so exhausted—against Steve’s cheek. This credit, Bucky’s laugh—and the lingering smile that follows it—makes Steve think that things are going to go alright.

“How can I?” he asks, “You’re taking all the stupid with you.”

And if that wasn’t an I love you, be safe, Steve didn’t know what was.
i promised i would post an update before the end of the year, and here we are. i know i haven't replied to all (or any, really) comments from last time, but know that i've read all of them, and all the continued encouragement and kind words mean a whole, whole lot to me. my life has still been chaotic and busier than i ever could have forseen, and it's gonna be busier come 2019, but i know i'm gonna manage. somehow. and it really is thanks, in no small part, to all the support from everyone, both regular commenters to this fic, and to the stevebucky fic community on twitter. but more on that in a bit.

with that, some notes:

- the cookies steve brings to the library are probably from a local bakery/deli, because local bakeries are all always a godsend. (but know that they also might be from the momofuku milk bar, because their strawberry lemon cake is literally the best cake in the world, and i live and die for that incredible unified #aesthetic).
- POWER CAKES are a real thing, in case you didn’t know, and they are a window into an aspect of american masculinity that is both exhausting and fascinating. em and i incorporate them into fic a lot, and they will be showing up in another fic soon enough. (maybe more. who knows!!)
- speaking of em, once again, a thousand thanks to her for being a great beta. her notes for this chapter were great, as always, and made me laugh out loud more than once.
- if you want to see a sketch of a sad sack of a bucky slumping around his apartment in a migraine, phoenixgryphon made a sketch of him here. poor bud.
- i spent way too much time doing research on minor members of hydra that i could use for this than i’m happy with, so i give you: count otto vermis, 616 villain who has not shown up in the MCU, and has not shown up in any marvel comics for a hot minute. i've collected and read through the full brubaker buckycap run, but damn, if i still gotta do secondary research for these hydra goons. lmao.

that's all, for the time being. since it's has all of a sudden gone and fucked the whole hell up since the last time i posted a chapter, know i'm still on tumblr, even as the tumblr exodus was (is?) a thing. i'm a bitter ender, i hate goodbyes, and i cut my teeth on that dumpster fire of a site, so i'm not going anywhere until the thing's gone. at the same time, i'm happy to see a new community, and i'm also on stevebucky fandom twitter as @aka_spacedog. i'm having a lot of fun on there, when i'm on, and i'd love to interact with more people. come for the hot librarian fic updates, stay for my thirst-tweets about a certain big big actor boy’s tits and thighs.

here's to 2019. keep fighting the good fight, find your underground, and punch up with your full body weight and more. that's what steve rogers would do, and dammit, that's gonna be -- that's gotta be -- how we keep on. strength and solidarity to you in the new year, everyone. we're gonna kick ass.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

caramel and cactus.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The mission to intercept the swap and capture Hydra’s new leader goes straight to hell.

Natasha, Steve, and Wanda land in friendlier territory, twenty minutes from the Sokovian border. They enter the country—and Sokovia’s premiere STEM institute—under the guise of being grad students who’d wandered across the border and maybe were a little intoxicated, to boot. Wanda really sells it when she sobs about losing her keys to her lab and ruining her experiments and chances at publication. The catastrophizing she does is spot-on, Steve thinks, as someone prone to catastrophizing himself.

After that, they take what intel they can and Nat takes down one of the younger co-conspirators: a graduate student studying under the scientist in question, young and embittered and feeling entitled to the world. He folds easily enough and goes along with their plan, even getting a little bit weepy and apologetic about working for Hydra. Wanda and the graduate student convince the principal scientist—the man who the graduate student is working under—that Wanda is a cousin from the countryside who’s just as ready to sell out to Hydra as the sad, overworked graduate is. Wanda, getting better at her job with every mission, deftly sends information back to S.H.I.E.L.D., right before leaving the weak-link graduate student in custody of some junior agents permanently stationed in Sokovia, secure in the knowledge that Fury will pick the guys up on the way back.

From there, with a vague idea of Hydra’s plans, Wanda is able to meet back up with Steve and Natasha, if only briefly, before she heads off with the Hydra-scientist. Together, with Wanda’s intel, Steve and Natasha manage to travel to the site of exchange, stopping frequently and doubling back. All the while, they explore the region and its terrain, hoping to predict where, exactly, the site will be. Hydra was clever enough not to give out all its secrets out at once to just anyone. Eventually, Nat seems to find a place: the decimated remains of a small castle in the Sokovian wilderness, not on any map, not visible from any satellites, and known only to locals and people looking for it.

Clever. But not clever enough.

Hydra is already there when Nat and Steve find the place and send their coordinates back to Fury. They’ve turned the ruins into a fully-functioning mobile base, complete with makeshift barracks and a weapons hold. The castle—or, what was left of it, given the ravages of time, centuries’ worth of war, and nature’s aggressive reclamation—wouldn’t withstand a firefight. Part of Steve thinks that was the plan.

Part of Steve knows how messy this mission would be, how unprepared they would be, before Wanda even arrives.

The swap happens just as Hydra and the scientists had planned, at least, at first. As they talk and
Steve makes quick, quiet work of the low-level grunts patrolling the parameter, while Natasha takes the men—and it’s practically all men—working inside. But as she’s scraping their servers for as much information as she can, things start to go south. Steve, while still clearing out the grunts, acts as Nat’s lookout as they both count down the minutes to Fury’s ETA. It’s hardly ten minutes to Fury’s arrival when Steve notices a string of wires, deftly-camouflaged, running along the perimeter of the room. He traces their origin point, and quickly realizes their purpose. The entire place is rigged to blow. Hydra really was planning on being caught, after all.

And that’s when it really goes to hell.

Steve and Natasha get out of the castle just before it blows. The scientists, in their shock, aren’t able to react before bullets start flying. Wanda manages to shield some of them, but not all of them. Not even most of them. Vermis and the woman grab the weapons they’d traded for—modified versions of reverse-engineered Chitauri weapons—and Steve, Natasha, and Wanda are forced to on the defensive, outnumbered, but unwilling to back down, even still. Luckily for them, reinforcements arrive: Fury, in a sized-down Helicarrier, flanked by S.H.I.E.L.D. agents still loyal to the cause.

Things begin to look up from there. Minimally, but they begin to look up. Steve manages to dodge a blast from Vermis’s modified Chitauri gun, and, working quickly, he hits it out of his hands with a deft throw of his shield. He’s able to knock Vermis unconscious with the same blow, and, with the bulk of the Hydra grunts neutralized, he turns to the woman who came in with Vermis, the presumed leader of Hydra.

Dressed in an all-black tac suit, with her red hair pulled into a tight ponytail, she looks like a violent mirror image of Natasha. It doesn’t send a chill down Steve’s spine, but he tenses upon that dissonance, and upon the realization that, beyond a surface-level similarity to Natasha, the new leader of Hydra is familiar. Steve makes eye contact with the woman, brief, but enough to confirm his suspicions, and she snarls at him, before throwing something at him. Something glowing and beeping and, Steve realizes, explosive.

Everything happens very quickly after that. He remembers Wanda screaming. He remembers moving to jump on the grenade, his first instinct being to cap the explosion with his shield. He remembers, out of the corner of his eye, the woman getting away. He remembers the beeping speeding up, and then an ear-piercing screech fills the forest.

And then he remembers floating, cradled by the warm red glow of Wanda’s kinetic powers. With her powers, she’s grabbed him and has tossed the grenade into the skyline at the same time. She drops Steve—not softly, but not as rough as being torn apart—and focuses her attention on the bomb, trying to diffuse it. She encircles it with her energy, and a muted boom shakes the forest, knocking everyone to their knees, and throwing Wanda back about thirty feet.

They aren’t dead, but the leader of Hydra is gone. Many of the scientists are dead, and a centuries-old castle is destroyed. The mission was, in Steve’s view, a wash, at best.

At the very least, they now know who the new leader was. She isn’t a stranger. Steve knows that face, that snarl.

Schmidt. Cynthia Schmidt, born Cynthia Smith. Viewed herself as the “daughter of Red Skull,” and had the politics to back that claim. She was once a high-ranking S.H.I.E.L.D. agent, revealed to be one of many Hydra sleeper agents in high places. Highly-trained, ruthless, and violent to a fault, Schmidt knew how they worked, she knew their moves, she knew their ethics. She knew they were going to try to avoid as many unnecessary casualties as possible. And that’s how she got away.
“Fuck,” Steve growls as he gets up, before cuffing Vermis’s unconscious body. He moves to help Wanda up. She looks exhausted. Natasha stares off into the forest, eyes narrowed, jaw set.

“Go,” she growls, dusting herself off and mounting Steve’s motorcycle. “I’m going after her.”

“Romanov,” Steve says, his voice a warning. “I’m not letting you go after her without backup.”

“I can handle her. I’m going to catch her.”

“Romanov,” Steve repeats, “Stand down.”

She doesn’t do that. Instead, she pulls out her phone and taps away. Steve’s own phone buzzes in one of his belt-pouches. He doesn’t move to check it. “I sent you a set of coordinates. It’s a safe house. If I’m not there by 0200 hours, then you can start worrying about me.”

“Nat,” Steve hisses.

“I know what I’m doing, Steve. Trust me on this, alright?”

He sighs. This wasn’t going to be a fight he could win. “Fine.”

“I’ll see you in a few hours.”

“Yeah. Yeah, okay.”

Steve turns his attention to Wanda. Fury has been watching them, aloof in his care, as he directs the agents on taking in Hydra agents that are still alive, and what to do with the dead.

“Hey,” he says to Wanda. She’s holding her head and squeezing her eyes shut. Steve isn’t sure if it’s because of the death or because of the sheer energy that what she just did must have taken. “You did great. How are you feeling?”

“I—” she starts, “I want to throw up.”

“Let’s get you in the carrier.”

“No, no, it’s okay—I just need to lie down for a little bit.”

“Lemme help you getting there, at least,” Steve says, and she doesn’t complain from there, instead, draping her weight against Steve’s body and letting him half-carry her inside. It’s a little awkward, walking back with her leaned up against him like a crutch, and Vermis under his arm like a sack of flour, but they manage to get inside the Helicarrier without any incident.

Once inside, Steve leaves Vermis with the rest of the Hydra agents, under Fury’s close watch. He nods at Wanda, and tells her she did a good job, and even in her sorry state, she manages a smile at him before they head to the other side of the Helicarrier. It’s a small one, designed for stealth missions like this one, so there aren’t bunks that Wanda can really lie on, but there’s a small med station with a fold-out cot that they manage to get her settled on.

“There you go,” Steve says. “How is it?”

“Better,” she says in a small, soft voice, and Steve is reminded of Bucky then, of the time that he sat with Bucky through a migraine, and his heart aches for home.

“Well,” Steve says, at that. “I should get going. Nat took my bike, so I’ve gotta make it to this safe house on foot.”
She shifts, propping herself up on her elbow to look up at him. “Steve? Before you go, can I ask you for one thing?”

“Anything.”

“Can I have a caramel?” she asks, looking embarrassed as she says it. Steve smiles at this, charmed. He unbuttons another one of the pouches on his belt and grabs a handful of caramels, handing them over to her with care.

“Thank you,” she says, as she pops one in her mouth.

“Thank you for the hard work today,” he says, making his way out.

“Be careful, okay?”

Steve nods. “I will be.”

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A couple hours and change later, Steve is at the safe house, its location precise to the footstep. He would have arrived earlier, if he weren’t trying to be careful; if he weren’t creeping through the woods with an eye out for any sign of life, of anything other than the wildlife following him. Like with all Natasha’s safehouses, it is more than it seems: underneath the false keyhole is a keypad, and Steve types in his authorization code quickly, and with ease. The door swings open into an atrium, and Steve gives voice authorization, wearily, before stepping into the main body of the safe house itself.

It’s bare-bones, as far as safe houses go. It’s one large room with an attached bathroom with one large sink, but no shower. Steve splashes his face with water—cold and metallic, but sterile—and sits on the couch. The clock on the wall—the only thing close to décor—indicates he has hours to go before Natasha is supposed to arrive.

Steve knows he should get some sleep. Before that, he knows he should try to clean the day’s grime and soot off him. A quick glance around the safe house reveals no clothes in his size, and he huffs, flopping on the couch while still wearing his filthy uniform. A little dirt and grime probably aren’t the worst things to get on the couch, he thinks, closing his eyes, trying to force himself to get at least a few minutes’ rest.

When Steve wakes up, it’s with a start, all the tense energy of the day’s mission roiling up to force him awake, like a pot of stew left to overflow. He sits up, quickly, taking stock of his surroundings. Still boring. Still safe. The clock has barely moved from its position when he fell asleep. Double-checking his phone confirms it: Steve still has a few hours before Natasha arrives.

He lies back down, staring up at the ceiling. It’s just as dull as the walls. He lets his thoughts drift: to Natasha, to Wanda, to Bucky. It hasn’t been long since he’s left Bucky. No more than a week—maybe a week and a half—at most. But now that the dust has cleared, now that their mission has more or less settled, all Steve can think about is Bucky.

Bucky, with his soft smile and his bright blue eyes and the way that he doesn’t stare. Bucky, with such a warm voice in the mornings and such a gentle touch at night.

Bucky, with those long legs and those thick thighs and that amazing ass.

Steve throws his arm over his eyes. All he had to do was think about Bucky’s ass and he was already half-hard. Fuck, he was in deep.
Somehow—and he doesn’t know how, exactly, it just seems to happen—Steve’s hand finds its way under his overly-complex uniform pants. Touching himself—just physically holding his growing erection in his hand—makes Steve burn, and whatever thoughts he might have had become subsumed by the sheer totality of Steve’s longing for Bucky.

Maybe it wasn’t appropriate to yank it until Natasha’s planned time of arrival. But Steve knows his body, he knows himself. If he doesn’t do something about this, it will settle in his bones for the rest of his waking hours, and a few of his non-waking ones, too.

Besides. It wasn’t like there was anything else to do for the next few hours, anyway.

Steve takes his time, keeping himself busy—idle hands, after all—until 0120 hours, forty minutes before Natasha was supposed to meet him at the safe house. Quickly, Steve finishes himself off, groaning low into the musty pillow he’d buried his face into. He considered himself lucky for small miracles, like the fact that the safe house was soundproof.

After washing his hands and lighting a match—there were no windows to open, and so that telltale smell was bound to linger—Steve checks his phone, happy to see a message from Natasha—proof that she was safe. Proof that she was on her way.

NATASHA [1:20 AM]: Lost her. Decided to stop and ask around about her in the nearest town. If she was staying in Sokovia it wasn’t for long. I’m headed back. ETA 15 minutes.

Steve washes his hands again and lights another match, just to be safe.

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When Natasha arrives, she looks exhausted. It’s so easy for her to look put-together. Seeing her looking wrung out is out of the ordinary, even for Steve. When she steps into the safe house, she makes a beeline to the fridge and downs the contents of a water bottle in one thirsty and desperate go. Steve just stands by her, not prodding her for details. As she stands in front of the fridge, blankly contemplating its contents—more water bottles and some pickled foods—Steve realizes that she can probably smell residual sulfur in the air. It wasn’t like there was any means of ventilation, given the safe house, nice as it was, was one with no windows. Natasha hums, and though she doesn’t say anything, Steve can’t help but think she knows.

He’s not proud.

Eventually, she lets out a sigh, running her hand through her hair. “I called Fury to pick us up. He should be outside in five.”

As exhausted as Natasha is, as exhausted as Steve is, nothing makes him feel better than hearing that they’ll get to leave soon. Nothing makes him feel better than knowing that he’ll get to be back in New York.

“Great,” is what he says. “Let’s go home.”

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Steve all but collapses once he gets inside the Helicarrier, sleeping through all but two hours of the flight back. By the time that they touch down in New York City, it’s still early evening, but Natasha—clearly burnt out—declares that she’s headed straight to bed, right after she makes sure that her lawyer didn’t forget to feed her cat. Though he has reams and reams of paperwork to get
through, Steve chooses to head home, too.

After all, he has someone just as important to him as Liho is to Natasha.

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"You remember to take care of the plant, Barnes?" Steve asks, the very moment he’s through the door and in his apartment. Home, sweet home. Bucky closes the distance between them quickly, looking like Steve just brought him the world. Vaguely, Steve is aware he smells like soot and mud and several days' worth of not showering. Bucky doesn't seem to care.

"You remember to take care of yourself?" Bucky asks, looking Steve over. He doesn’t even seem to mind that Steve stinks like high heaven, even after he envelops him in the softest, gentlest, most delicate hug Steve had ever been party to. The press of Bucky’s chest against his own makes Steve’s head swim, and it aches when Bucky pulls away. "Did you do your best not to get killed, again, or am I gonna have to ask your friends to keep a better eye on you?"

"God, I missed you," Steve says with a soft little laugh. He crowds in close, pulling them together once more, softly resting his hands on Bucky's hips. Suddenly, they're serious, all that levity having melted away to reveal this: a shared need for intimacy. Gently, Steve kisses him—just a soft little thing. Just for a moment; something that has the potential to grow into something more, from the way Bucky sighs at him.

"I missed you, too," Bucky murmurs, his eyes half-lidded and those long, dark eyelashes brushing against his cheeks. He’s staring at Steve’s lips—his own lips parted, as if in wanting—and Steve takes that as an invitation, pressing his lips against Bucky's.

Kissing Bucky feels, in itself, like a homecoming, all hot and sweet and everything that Steve needed, everything he’d been thinking about in his days away. Bucky, too, seems to have missed him, seems to have missed this, and he grabs Steve’s face in his hands, kissing him like he’s desperate, as if kissing him so deeply, as if pulling him into his orbit, will make it so that Steve will never have to leave. Things were quickly becoming passionate, becoming needy, and Steve echoes Bucky’s every move. Sure, he wanted to breach the topic with Bucky beforehand, but that changed; things were moving fine enough on their own, no conversation needed. Following instinct, following what he reads as Bucky’s cues, Steve trails his hands down to Bucky’s waistband, popping Bucky’s fly with a clumsy fumble of his long, artist’s fingers.

And then Bucky freezes.

"Hey,” he breathes, pulling away. Steve can't stop looking at him—Bucky is like the moon, all ethereal and perfect and bright, and Steve is a moth, drawn to him from something deep within his very core, within his very nature. Bucky's pupils are blown wide, his plush lips red from Steve kissing him. Steve can’t stop looking at them as Bucky speaks. "Hey, I wanna—before we go any further—can we—can we talk about something?"

"Anything, Buck. Anything," Steve breathes, and he would steal the whole sky for that boy. He would.

It is a while before Bucky speaks; there is clearly something heavy on his mind. Steve’s hands, again, find his, and Bucky threads their fingers together, squeezing Steve's hand tightly, like a lifeline, before he begins again.

"Can we—I think—"
He takes a deep breath, as if to steady himself. The tension that has crept up into Bucky’s shoulders is visible. Steve thinks he feels it embodied in his own shoulders, too, as if it is his own pain, his own burden to take on. Eventually, after the span of a short forever, Bucky heaves out a sigh, his shoulders sagging, not with energy of relief, but rather, with the weight of defeat.

“I think I wanna take things slow,” Bucky says, eyes darting away from Steve, if just for a second.

Steve, then, too, feels that same weight. It feels less like collapse and more like a shake-up, a tremor. And much like in the wake of a tremor, Steve stands there, trying to find his bearings once again. He blinks. “You mean—”

“I mean, I don’t—” Bucky manages. Each word seems difficult for him. Steve wants to kiss him again, he wants Bucky to feel alright. He wants to make Bucky feel safe, to feel right. But he doesn’t move, he just continues watching Bucky carefully, adoringly, as Bucky pauses, chewing on his lower lip. A lower lip that is very, very pink. “I don’t think I’m—it’s not you, it’s just—I’m. I’m not ready.”

And there it is. The other shoe, dropped.

"Oh. Oh.”

“I—” Bucky says, “I’m sorry.”

He wears that I’m sorry like it’s the heaviest thing in the universe. His body—all six-foot-something of it—speaks that.

“Hey no, of course," Steve says, eventually. He drops his hands, giving Bucky a little space. "No—sorry. I should have—"

"Hey," Bucky says, grabbing Steve by the forearm and pulling him back towards him; pulling him close. Pulling him in, as if begging him not to leave. "We can still do this."

He kisses Steve on the lips, soft and intimate.

"Just not the sex thing?" Steve asks.

"Yeah," Bucky says, fondly. "For now."

"You—you know, we don't have to, ever, if you don't want—"

"For now, Rogers," Bucky says, pecking him once again, this time, softly, on the lips. “I want to. Eventually. I just—I need some time, alright?”

And that, somehow, makes Steve feel a twinge of something soft and vulnerable in his heart; that, somehow, makes him feel warmer, more wanted, than anything they’ve done before. The guilt still remained—it loomed, even, fierce and foreboding, over Steve as he began to reconsider their entire night together so far—but that small spark of warmth helps it from becoming overwhelming. He smiles, then, not a half-smile, not a smile that doesn’t reach the eyes, but a small, genuine, though truly exhausted smile. Steve pulls Bucky in close, wrapping his dirty, sweaty arms around Bucky’s waist and burying his nose in the crook of Bucky’s neck. That clean, familiar scent and the feeling of Bucky’s hand rubbing circles in the small of his back feels almost as intimate as physical intimacy with Bucky, and Steve revels in it.

"How 'bout I get us some dinner?” Bucky asks eventually, his voice the ghost of a murmur. “We can eat some pad thai and watch half of Legal Eagles and then ignore the last half of it to make out
Steve hums into Bucky’s neck, all but burrowing into that spot. "You know, I think I’d like that."


Steve laughs. He doesn’t want to pull away. He doesn’t ever want to pull away, especially not after that conversation they just had, but he does. He has to, so he does. “Alright, alright. Just don’t start the show without me, yeah?”

The way Bucky smiles at him makes that small, warm feeling ever the more all-encompassing. “Stevie, you know I wouldn’t do that for the damn world.”

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Steve falls asleep immediately after finishing his pad thai. The rest of the night is a hazy, half-conscious blur. The most he can remember is Bucky mentioning something about some actor having played Steve in a war drama several decades ago. By the time Steve wakes up, it’s three in the afternoon, he’s in his bed, half-dazed and painfully alone.

Which, of course, leads him to immediately reach for his phone.

As he glances through what he’d missed in his sleep—news alerts, a few things from Natasha, a rare text from Sam, and a single “S” from Clint—Steve smiles when he gets to Bucky’s messages. They’re nothing outside of normal: Good morning, How are you?, Look at this line from this sci-fi pulp I’m reading, Dot says welcome home. But it’s exactly because of that normalcy that Steve is so taken by them. Before he knows it, he lets out a small, almost wistful sigh. He taps out a quick response before getting out of bed, forcing himself to start the day, no matter how late it is.

STEVE [3:11 PM]: I’m sorry, I just saw these. I just woke up.

About halfway into a truncated version of his morning routine, Steve gets a response. He rinses his mouth out, puts away his toothbrush, and picks up his phone.

BUCKY [3:23 PM]: Jetlag, huh?

STEVE [3:26 PM]: That, and the mission left me worn out.

BUCKY [3:31 PM]: Ouch

BUCKY [3:32 PM]: I’m sorry, Stevie

He can practically hear Bucky, his low, rich voice drawing out each syllable in that little cutesy nickname that Steve gets embarrassingly-soft about.

God, he missed this boy.

STEVE [3:34 PM]: It’s fine. I’m feeling better now. I’m going to eat and try to get some work done. Can I see you later? Call me a sap, but I miss you.

BUCKY [3:40 PM]: Aw, Steve <3

A chain of heart emojis follows that. Steve feels like an unbelievable sap, grinning widely at his phone and wanting to cradle it close to his heart, but he doesn’t mind. So, he’s a sap. Anyone else would be, too, if they were dating Bucky.
BUCKY [3:44 PM]: I might be a little late coming out tonight, but if you want, we can grab something to eat?

STEVE [3:47 PM]: Yeah, that sounds great. Let’s do that.

BUCKY [3:49 PM]: :)

BUCKY [3:59 PM]: Welp

BUCKY [3:59 PM]: Someone keeps trying to watch porn on the library computers so I’ve gotta give an awkward talk

BUCKY [4:00 PM]: See you tonight?

Steve actually laughs out loud the second he sees that. He’s glad he hadn’t made his instant coffee yet.

STEVE [4:01 PM]: Have fun, stud. I’ll see you tonight.

STEVE [4:01 PM]: <3

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Steve doesn’t ask for the porn story when he arrives at the library that night. Not immediately, anyway. Instead, he just wraps Bucky in a tight hug, breathing in the scent of him, as if he needed to re-immerses himself in it after being gone.

When they leave the Martinelli, they run into a perennial problem of living in the city: neither of them knows what they want to eat for dinner—all they both know is that they’re not in the mood to cook—and neither of them wants to be the one to decide. Which, in theory, has an easy enough solution. They agree to choose on the way back to Steve’s. Reasonable enough in theory, but in reality, in the sticky heat of an awfully-hot spring evening, might have been a bad call. The second they step out of the air conditioned train car, they’re hit by a wave of subway-scented pre-summer humidity.

“I feel so gross,” Bucky says, moving to put his hair up the second they step out onto the sidewalk. Steve doesn’t blame him; it’s hot and humid, and Bucky is wearing a sweater. With the sleeves rolled up, yes, but it’s a sweater, nonetheless.

“Want me to call you a ride?” Steve asks. Bucky shoots him a look.

“For a fifteen-minute walk?” Bucky asks, scoffing. He almost moves to roll his sleeves down, as if in spite. “What am I, Rogers, a tourist?”

Steve shrugs. “Hey, this one time, a friend and I took a whole five-minute cab ride from her favorite pizza place to her apartment because her feet hurt.”

Bucky huffs. “That’s different.”

“Nah, it’s not,” Steve says, “I think my stubbornness is just rubbing off on you.”

“Damn,” Bucky hisses, deadpan. “I think I need to take some vacation time. You know, reevaluate my life, go on one of those soul-searching trips that they make all those awful movies about.”

“Shut up,” Steve laughs, and he nudges Bucky, gently. So, so gently. As if a direct casualty of that early heat, that shove melts, and Steve’s hand drifts, finding its way into Bucky’s own hand, as if
on instinct. As if that were where it always belonged.

They walk a while, occasionally pointing out possible places to go. Nothing they come across sounds like what they’re looking for. Not quite, anyway.

Eventually, about two blocks away from Steve’s apartment, Bucky, still looking a little bit sweaty, points out a bodega to Steve.

“Hey, can we stop by there for a sec?”

“Well, I dunno about dinner at the corner shop right now,” Steve replies, voice dripping with sarcasm. “I mean, shit, Buck, we don’t even have reservations.”

“Shut up,” Bucky says, somehow sounding sweaty. “I’m getting a water.”

“Alright, alright. Let’s go, then.”

They stop into the bodega, and the sudden burst of air conditioning, after their walk, is a welcome comfort. Bucky makes a beeline to the back of the shop, and Steve, falling into childhood habits, goes straight for the candy aisle. He knows he shouldn’t load up on sweets before he eats a real dinner. But the bright, colorful wrappers are so welcoming, and without dinner sorted, it’s tempting.

“Hey,” Bucky calls, from across the store.

Steve peeks over the rows to find Bucky. “What?”

“You wanna go on an ice cream walk?” He asks, holding up two sundae cones, the same ice cream from the last time they went on an ice cream walk.

It’s a full five seconds before Steve can get words out, he’s too charmed by Bucky—by the fact that great minds think alike, by his remembering of the ice cream walk weeks before, by the way he’s looking at Steve. He grins at the prospect of it, of everything, of the possibilities that being with Bucky held.

“Are you serious?”

To that, Bucky shrugs. “I mean, we didn’t decide on a place to get dinner, and I’m hungry and sweaty, so, you know. Birds and stones.”

“Ice cream for dinner?” Steve asks, but he’s already crossed over to Bucky’s side of the store, already closed that distance between them, already practically agreed to it, just from the way he’s leaning into Bucky’s personal space. “You really are something, Barnes.”

Bucky looks up at him, less sweaty and more dewy, his eyes looking even lighter, even more entrancing, underneath that harsh bodega lighting. Only Bucky could look even prettier under a half-flickering fluorescent light. “That’s not a yes or a no.”

“Then yes,” Steve says, low, their lips practically already touching. “On one condition.”

“Yeah?” Bucky murmurs, his long, dark eyelashes brushing his cheeks just so. He leans up, practically pulling Steve down into a kiss—

But then Steve pulls back, grinning his most smarmy grin that he possibly could put on. “Get me a cactus pop, would you? I’m not really feeling a sundae cone today.”
The moment passes quicker than Steve expects. There’s no long, gasping pause, and, thank God, no awkward silence between them. Instead, Bucky—sharp as a tack and quick on his feet—realizes what Steve has done within seconds, and reacts in turn.

“Fuck you!” Bucky laughs, shoving Steve aside. It’s rougher than Steve would expect, even in its playfulness. Maybe he’d just underestimated just how mad-without-really-being-mad Bucky would be after he’d left him hanging like that. But Steve pulls away from Bucky’s reach, peals of laughter escape his chest like so many soap bubbles, floating away in the summer air. Bucky is smiling, too, but he’s trying hard to look put-upon. Trying, and only partially succeeding.

“Come on, what’d I say before, watch your fuckin’ language, Barnes,” Steve replies, grinning wide.

“Nope. No. Fuck you,” Bucky says, letting the cooler door fall closed with a loud thump. “And fuck your cactus pop, too.”

“Aww, come on, Buck, gimme my cactus pop!”

“Get your own fucking cactus pop, Rogers,” Bucky says, and to his credit, he’s good at keeping his voice level, because smile as he might, he doesn’t once sound like he’s about to break into laughter. “And while you’re at it, pay for these, too. You owe me as much.”

“Fine, fine, okay,” Steve concedes, over-dramatically, “I’ll buy your sundae cone. And your water, too.”

“You’d better,” Bucky says, handing over his bottled water and sundae cone, and, in one deft movement, slipping his now-empty hand into Steve’s back pocket. The noise that Steve makes isn’t flattering, not by any means, but luckily for him, no one else in the shop seems to hear. And if they did, Steve’s sure they wouldn’t care.

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The walk to Steve’s apartment is mostly-quiet. Though Bucky’s hands are now both busy, Steve still feels that lingering touch, that brief closeness. It’s a hint to something more, something that could be, something that, at least for the time being, at least, until Bucky says otherwise, could not be, and never was.

And with that thought, with his cactus pop halfway to dripping down his arm, Steve suddenly feels a pang of something sharp and uncomfortable in the pit of his stomach. It’s a mix of confusion and guilt and want and frustration, and before he can stop himself, he pulls Bucky close, wrapping his arm around that surprisingly-solid waist, and he speaks, slow and soft.

“Hey,” Steve murmurs, as he and Bucky make their way down Steve’s block, Bucky a familiar presence at Steve’s right.

“Hey,” Bucky echoes, teasingly, in that way he does.

“I—” Steve starts, the words, briefly, catching in his throat. “Uh. Let me know if we do something you’re not ready for, alright?”

“Yeah, of course,” Bucky says, without missing a beat. His tone is light, and his attention seems to be on making sure he finishes his sundae cone before it melts. Bucky’s levity is reassuring, but it doesn’t do much to assuage the churn in Steve’s stomach. Steve sighs and finishes off his cactus pop, less because he’s hungry for it, and more because he wants something to chew on. It doesn’t take long for Bucky to notice how keyed up Steve is, to his credit. In fact, Steve’s barely started chewing up his popsicle stick when Bucky pulls off to a secret, secluded little space between
buildings, and sends the both of them screeching to a halt.

“Hey,” Bucky says, herding Steve along so that they’re facing one another. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s not—it’s nothing.”

Bucky frowns. “Steve. Remember what I asked you? Back when we agreed to us? Talk to me, Steve.”

And Steve wants to. He does. But with Bucky confronting him like that, all gentle and patient and careful, somehow, it leaves him struggling to find the right words. It leaves him feeling like there’s a set of right words to choose from, as if there’s a right answer to give to Bucky, as if it’s a test he’d studied for his entire life, and yet he still is, somehow, unprepared.


“It’s stupid.”

“Yeah, well, I say stupid shit all the time, and you put up with me.”

“Shut up.”

“Come on, Stevie. Please.”

Steve chews his lip, and somehow, somehow, manages to meet Bucky’s eyes. He lets the words tumble out, and he feels like the wind’s knocked out of him. “It’s not—it’s not something I did, is it?”

“What isn’t something you—?” Bucky echoes, his eyebrows bunched up in confusion.

“The whole—” Steve doesn’t know how to even put it. “You know. Us.”

He makes a vague motion, one that probably wasn’t descriptive at all, but that Bucky seems to get.

“Oh!” Bucky exclaims, finally getting it. That energy would be adorable, would be contagious, if it weren’t for the mess that passed as Steve’s emotions. Hell, it still is, even in spite of that. “Oh, the sex thing? No. No, of course, it’s not.”

“Swear on my Ma?”

“Swear on the beautiful, talented, wonderful ghost of Missus Sarah Rogers, who raised the sexy, sexy paragon of virtue and justice before me today.”

Steve rolls his eyes, but that smile he’s getting makes him blush. “Buck.”

“I swore on your Ma, Steve,” Bucky says. “And I meant every word I said there. So, there. You know I’m not lying.”


Bucky looks over Steve, silently, before moving to brush his thumb along Steve’s jaw, gentle. Steve wants to kiss him, but then, Bucky is speaking, gentleness and care heavy on his voice. “Trust me, Steve. You can’t—you won’t hurt me. If you do, you’ll know. I’ll let you know. Okay? Gimme some credit, alright, pal?”

“Yeah,” Steve manages, with some difficulty. He wanted to give Bucky credit. And he would. But
his nervousness about them together, about himself, is making that hard. “Yeah. Alright.”

“And it’s not that I don’t think you’re gorgeous. I think you’re very sexy, Steve. I have thought that, for a long time,” Bucky says, matter-of-factly. “You were my first crush and my sexual awakening, and if my dad knew all the things I did with his Cap memorabilia when I snuck down to his office at three in the morning, seven days a week, from ages fifteen to nineteen, he might have put the whole damn collection up on Ebay by now.”

“Christ,” Steve laughs, in spite of himself.

“Sorry—was that—was that crossing a line?”

“Probably, but I’ll allow it.”

“Anyway,” Bucky says, laughing a little, looking embarrassed. “But you know what I’m saying, it’s not like I’m not—it’s not like I’m not attracted to you. I am.”

That admission sets Steve’s heart aflutter. Sure, it might be obvious—after all, they are together—but hearing it, from Bucky, still makes him feel so deeply. As Bucky works on finding his words, Steve watches him carefully, as if Bucky will slip and give him hints to his being. As if watching every single one of his micromovements would make Bucky would be any easier to decode.

“I just—” Bucky starts, trailing off with a sigh. “It’s like I said. It’s been—it’s been a while. And I just need some time.”

“Okay,” Steve says, because that’s all he can say. Maybe he was dwelling too long on this. After all, it must be weird, on Bucky’s end, have spent decades fantasizing about a guy and finally have to live up to the reality of sex with him. Especially if that guy is a supersoldier, with a supersoldier dick. Maybe Bucky’s hesitancy is for the best. For both parties involved. As much as Steve still feels at fault for it, anyway.

Bucky hip-checks Steve, effectively knocking him out of the path of an oncoming emotional spiral. “Now. Let’s get back. I’m gonna sweat through my goddamn sweater if we don’t get out of this heat.”

Steve’s first, gut-instinct thought, is how much he’d like to see that. He bites down on that instinct. At least, at first. Instead, he follows Bucky back to his apartment building, trying to figure a way to channel that same degree of want into something less. Into something, for lack of a better word, more appropriate for the configuration of their relationship. Something following, careful as possible, in Bucky’s lead.

“Hey Buck?”

Bucky, face half-buried in his cone, turns. Even in the low, ozone-filled city lights, his eyes shimmer so clearly. Steve almost loses himself in them. He would lose himself in them, if he weren’t so anxious in working through what he has to say.

“I, uh,” he starts, trying to figure out his words. He has never been good with words, not when they have to do with Bucky. Not when they are about something like this. “Not to try to push you, I want you to know that I respect your choices and you don’t have to do anything that you want to do —”

“Spit it out, Rogers,” Bucky replies, with a laugh. “You’re not gonna offend me any more than you did in the bodega.”
“Well, I—uh,” Steve starts. He clears his throat, forcing himself to look Bucky head-on. “I think you’re very sexy, too.”

Maybe it’s the haze of the traffic lights, bouncing off the buildings surrounding them and reflecting onto Bucky’s cheeks, but there, in the early evening darkness, Steve swears that he sees Bucky feel that burn, that need, too.

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Steve’s apartment welcomes the both of them home, the whole place comfortably-cool without the stale, sterile air-conditioned taste of the bodega. Bucky takes a much-needed shower, and they order some pizza and wings and lounge around on Steve’s couch, all close and gentle and intimate in all the ways that they will let themselves experience intimacy. Eventually, Bucky begins to nod off, and they both make their way back to Steve’s California King to settle in for the night.

The heaviness of the air makes it clear that it’s about to rain, but they keep the windows cracked open, anyway. As Steve tucks in, settling comfortably into what he’s come to understand as his space against Bucky’s chest, he feels keyed up. Unlike Bucky, who dozes off within minutes, Steve can’t seem to find sleep. Maybe it’s the buzz of static in the air, a hint to the changes in weather oncoming. Or maybe it’s the residual jetlag, signs that his body is still stuck in a continent and hours away.

Or maybe it’s Bucky keeping him up. Not Bucky himself, of course—but the idea of him, of being with him, of the limits that Steve needed to be so, so careful to respect, especially now. Especially going forward. Because Bucky, despite his time in the military that he didn’t speak about, despite the unyielding steel of his prosthetic, is fragile—he’s flesh and bone and so, so breakable.

He’s only human.

And the boundaries Bucky has drawn—the lines that he has carefully, gently laid down for Steve, to be moved and lifted and redrawn in some indefinite future—makes that all the more important for Steve to remember, even as Bucky seems so sturdy a shelter from the storm.

Chapter End Notes

happy palentine's day, everyone!! or valentine's day, if it is where you are right now. i'm happy to have finished this chapter just in time for valentine's day, as was my goal. i'm still busy as always, but i'm trying to do a better job at work/life balance. it's not successful, absolutely not, but hey. i'm trying.

my valentine's gift to you, some brief notes:
- as per usual, thank you to em for being a great beta, as she always is. for this chapter especially, she very kindly but firmly steered me towards a place where this chapter was more legible. (as she was beta'ing my work, i actually beta'd one of her fics, tease me, squeeze me, which is GREAT AND YOU SHOULD READ RIGHT NOW)
- speaking of em, this chapter was nearly named "ice cream walk with me," à la twin peaks, and i blame em's partner (who is VERY into twin peaks). i almost feel bad for not calling it that, lmao.
- cynthia schmidt/sin is a character from the comics, one of the few woman villains that's part of the captain america mythos. her silver age character background is super fucked up. it's obviously not the character biography that's going on here, given that
she's not actually the daughter of the red skull, but still.
- nat taking a cab from her neighborhood pizza place back to her apartment is based on
  the true story of my cousin and i taking a cab from joe’s pizza to her apartment (which
  was a short train ride and an eleven-minute walk away) because our feet hurt. lmao.
- upon writing this, i felt like i’d jumped from a wholly different universe because i
  couldn’t find cactus pops ANYWHERE and that they were a thing i made up, but i
  finally found proof that they are a thing that exists. i could have SWORN that they’re
  sold in the united states, but apparently they’re not. oh well. i’ve written far more
  inaccurate stuff in here about new york city alone, so i’m keeping the cactus pops in.
- not to spoil too much, but from here on out, there's going to be more allusions to
  sexual content and/or more sexual content. from here, there's probably going to be
  more explicit discussions, too. maybe. who's to say. anyway, keep an eye on that
  rating.

in addition to the work and writing i’ve got to do for grad school, i’m going to be
contributing to the stevebucky au big bang, so keep your eyes peeled for that. my fic
for the big bang isn't necessarily in the same line as this fic, but i think it's a neat idea.
if you like this fic, i like to think you'll like that fic, too. hopefully.

happy love day, and know i love you all <3
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

à la nôtre.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As late spring transitions into summer proper, more and more, Steve begins to think of his apartment as their apartment, as his and Bucky’s shared home.

They haven’t made it official, not yet, but Bucky is there more often than he isn’t. His presence is everywhere—in his books on the coffee table, in his socks in the hamper, in his plant next to the kitchen window, in his ever-present scent in the folds of Steve’s sheets.

Bucky goes back to his own place, of course. But whenever Bucky leaves, whenever Steve is left sleeping alone, it takes all he’s worth not to send the draft text message that somehow, always, reappears, ever-relevant: Can’t wait ‘til you come home.

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"So. Sam is gonna be in town next week," Steve says, one early summer Saturday. It doesn’t feel like summer, at least, not in the moment. There’s a light pattering of rain against Steve’s windows, and everything feels lit with a hazy, almost-too-bright gray. It’s not a sad day, but a lazy one, and whatever plans either of them may have made, whatever plans may yet be, fall away. Instead, they stay in listening to Steve’s record collection, lounging around on the couch, letting Netflix run, and ordering in.

"Sam. Sam. He’s the Falcon, right? The one you met by aggressively outrunning him when you still lived D.C.?” Bucky asks, between big, sloppy bites of the jerk chicken he’d gotten delivered.

"Yeah. He and Nat—Natasha, the Black Widow, you know, the one who walks her cat—they suggested we go out for drinks on Friday night," Steve says, swiping a plantain from Bucky’s plate. He shouldn’t have, given that Bucky tries to give him more plaintains, after that, but Steve finishes the stolen one, regardless. "They wanna meet you."

Bucky pauses. He sits very, very still and very, very quiet for a moment, as if trying to find the answer in the grooves of the styrofoam box in his lap. He stays like that, statue-still, until eventually, speaking up, his voice small and quiet and just a hair’s breadth away from wavering, "Your friends wanna meet me?"

“They’ve wanted to meet you ever since I told them,” Steve says, “Even my not-friend friends want to meet you.”

Bucky stares at Steve, his big, blue eyes unsure and full of a palpable anxiety. It breaks Steve’s heart. He shifts on the couch so that he’s sitting up, though a bit awkwardly, then pecks Bucky on the forehead, right at the spot where he carries his worry.

“We don’t have to spend the whole day with them. Just dinner. Maybe drinks. Coffee, if that
doesn’t work. And we can leave early, if you feel uncomfortable, we’ll—we’ll come up with something, like a code word.” Steve says, hoping he hasn’t crossed a line, hoping that all the respect he’d been careful to give Bucky’s boundaries hadn’t been just betrayed in this one act. “We don’t have to, if you really don’t want to. Just—it’d mean a lot to me if you could meet them, and if they could meet you.”

“I—” Bucky starts, but he still looks, sounds, and, from where Steve is touching him, feels unsure. Just as Steve is about to begin apologizing, just as he’s convinced he’s ruined everything, and just as he thinks to walk it back, Bucky lets out a breath, steady as a man on a wire.

“Yes,” he says, and when he smiles at Steve, despite his earlier uneasiness, it’s genuine. “Yeah, okay. That sounds great.”

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They don’t talk about it for the rest of the week. They have a whole week to go, after all, and they have other things to deal with, on top of it all: library events for Bucky, sifting through intel reports for Steve, and, for both of them, dinner plans, movie plans, ways to spend their time together and decompress.

But on the day of their meeting, on the day that Steve intends to introduce his boyfriend to the closest friends he could ever claim, that uncomfortable energy bubbles back to the service. From the moment that he wakes up, Steve can tell one thing: Bucky is nervous.

Bucky doesn’t seem to want to address it, no matter how jumpy or on-edge he very clearly is. Steve doesn’t push. He knows what anxiety feels like. He knows it far, far too well. Instead, he just makes a point to kiss Bucky on the forehead before he leaves for work, extra-gently, and tuck those loose, wispy strands of hair behind Bucky’s ear and remind him, You’re amazing. You’re going to be amazing. And I love you so, so much.

He’s not sure that Bucky is convinced. But Steve does know it helps, at least, in the moment, from the way that Bucky melts into the kiss, the tension in his shoulders ebbing, if only slightly.

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In the middle of the day, right between a training session with a couple junior S.H.I.E.L.D. agents and a meeting with Rhodes and Fury, Steve manages to take a lunch break. It’s not much of a real break, per se, but it’s a chance to have lunch. And for what it’s worth, the Stark Industries cafeteria serves up some pretty decent meatloaf. It’s not as good as the meatloaf from his favorite automat, back in the day, but it’s close.

After catching up with Cesi, the nice, grandma-like Filipina woman working the register, Steve settles into a nice, sunny, secluded spot in the cafeteria and takes out his phone. He files away low-priority emails, swipes away alerts, and likes a picture of Liho that Natasha has posted on her Instagram. Though he can’t read Russian, Steve has a feeling the caption is hilarious. It’s as he’s typing a response to Natasha’s post that he gets a text from Bucky: sudden, welcome, but sounding—even simply through text—anxious.

BUCKY [2:11 PM]: Where are we meeting Sam and Natasha

Steve copies and pastes Natasha’s text, sending the name and address of that night’s bar to Bucky. There’s a few minutes between replies, a moment of time that Steve dedicates to finishing his lunch. Just as he’s finishing off his mashed potatoes, a happy little chime that compels Steve to look at his phone.
BUCKY [2:18 PM]: That's

BUCKY [2:19 PM]: Very hip

ME [2:19 PM]: That’s what they’re telling me. :)

BUCKY [2:22 PM]: I don’t think I’m cool enough for that place Steve

BUCKY [2:23 PM]: They’ll ask me to leave

And if anything isn’t true, it’s that. Steve sighs, tapping out a quick, comforting reply.

ME [2:24 PM]: You’re plenty cool, Buck. And anyone who tries to make you leave will have to put up with me. There’s nothing to worry about.

BUCKY [2:25 PM]: l/:

That little emoticon, eyebrow and all, both charms and concerns Steve. Charms, because he can absolutely see Bucky making that face, but concerns, because Bucky is very clearly worried, even still.

ME [2:27 PM]: Are you okay?

BUCKY [2:27 PM]: Yeah

That, itself, was an indication that Bucky was not okay. Steve decides to push him on that. If only ever-slightly.

ME [2:28 PM]: Buck. Tell me the truth. Are you okay?

BUCKY [2:30 PM]: Yeah

BUCKY [2:30 PM]: I’ll be fine

Steve frowns. I’m fine and I’ll be fine are two very, very different things.

ME [2:31 PM]: Buck. If you’re not feeling ready, I can ask them if we can meet another time.

BUCKY [2:32 PM]: No no, it’s fine I’m just

BUCKY [2:32 PM]: Nervous, I guess

BUCKY [2:32 PM]: No need to be nervous, Buck. They’re good people. It’ll be fine.

Steve gets up to throw away his trash, but not before Bucky sends over a familiar image: that same green frog doll—Kermit, he’s learned it’s named—on its side, on fire. It’s funny, but it’s a diffusion technique, a way to back out of a serious conversation. And if anyone could recognize such a move, it’s Steve. He taps out a quick message, as he leaves the Stark Industries cafeteria, the least he can do, short of calling Bucky, unannounced.

ME [2:37 PM]: I promise you, Buck, you’ll impress them. Just like how you’re always impressing me. You’re smart and you’re kind and you’re gorgeous and you’re the best boyfriend anyone could ever ask for, and I promise, you’ll do great.

ME [2:39 PM]: And if shit really goes sideways, we can leave early. No questions
asked. But I think we won’t. Because you’re great. But we can do it, anyway, if you need it.

ME [2:40 PM]: Sound good?


It’s heartening, seeing Bucky’s concession, as worried as Steve is about having pressured Bucky—he almost wants to call Bucky, then and there, so they can hash things out, maybe not face-to-face, but voice-to-voice. Unfortunately, Steve knows he’s spent far too long a break than he should have, and, with what little familiarity he has with Bucky’s schedule, Steve knows that Bucky has done the same. So, instead of pushing Bucky even further, Steve does what he knows what he has to do: Steve reminds Bucky how much he loves him.

ME [2:48 PM]: I love you so much, Bucky. I do. Thank you.

BUCKY [2:50 PM]: I love you too, Stevie

BUCKY [2:50 PM]: <3

And maybe Bucky wasn’t entirely convincing. Or maybe he was. Maybe Steve was just too concerned for his guy. Either way, he lets out a little sigh, focusing on that heart, the little red emoji that brightens up his screen, and the text that accompanies it: I love you, too.

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They don’t walk back to Steve’s apartment together that night. As much as it makes Steve anxious, as much as it makes Steve feel, for a brief moment, like he’s done something that’s pushed Bucky too far too quickly, that he’s fucked this relationship up beyond repair, he tries to give Bucky his space. When Bucky eventually sends Steve an I’m here text, it’s already early-evening, just a couple minutes shy of sunset.

“Hey, Buck,” Steve says, as soon as he opens the door, pecking Bucky on the cheek. Bucky leans into it, hugging Steve’s waist tightly. There’s an anxiety that Steve picks up on his shoulders, but it’s not one directed at Steve.

"How do I look?" Bucky asks, doing a once-around in the hallway. He’s wearing a cable-knit mustard-yellow turtleneck, dark blue jeans, and a blazer that might be a couple shades too dark to match the pants. In a charming way, of course. “Too work-casual?”

"Just work-casual enough," Steve says, fondly. And because it’s true. Not that Steve is biased, or anything.

"Steve—" Bucky starts, his thick eyebrows furrowing.

"You look good, Buck," says Steve, as if he doesn't always think that about Bucky.

"I think I should ditch the jacket. And change the sweater. I think it's all too work," Bucky says nervously creeping into his voice. He shrugs off his blazer, folding it gently over his arm, in the most charming version of a hallway striptease that Steve can imagine possible. "Can I—uh. Can I borrow something?"

Steve smiles. He's already blushing before he jokes to Bucky, but he continues with it anyway. "Maybe the shirt's not the problem. Maybe you should just—uh. Get into my pants."
"Steve," Bucky says with a look. Steve winces at himself. It's not the smoothest he's ever been. It's not the smoothest anyone has ever been. It may very well be the worst thing anyone has ever said, in the history of all romance, ever. Aphrodite should strike him down, just for that. He wouldn’t blame her if she did.

"Yeah, sure," Steve says, more seriously, gladly barreling over his horrible attempt at humor. "Come in."

Bucky follows Steve closely, as if he were a strange newcomer, one who was easily at risk for getting lost in the ever-familiar territory of the apartment that the two of them practically shared. As they get to Steve’s closet, practically a walk-in, and far too large for one person alone, Bucky keeps his distance, like someone new. Like someone estranged.

“What do you wanna borrow?” Steve asks, thumbing through his shirts, in all their relative monotony.

“Uh,” Bucky says, his tone the verbal equivalent of worrying at his sleeves. “I dunno. Whatever you think will impress your friends. You pick for me.”

Steve gives Bucky a once-over, thinking through which of his shirts would, on Bucky, impress his friends, mostly Natasha, the most. Eventually, he settles on what is probably the most neutral ground possible: a fitted red Henley, the one that he wears when he needs to look presentable but doesn’t have the mental or emotional energy to actually put an outfit together. Playfully, he tosses the Henley at Bucky, who, for his part, even despite all his concerns, his anxieties, catches it without fumbling.

"Thanks," Bucky says, and he turns away from Steve, walking towards Steve's guest bathroom as he pulls his sweater off over his head. Steve blinks, his mind going entirely fuzzy when he sees that flash of skin. Bucky's back—or, what he sees of it, before Bucky rounds the corner—is all corded muscle and broad shoulders, and it completely blindsides Steve.

He doesn't know what he expected. He doesn't know he was expecting anything. Now, looking at Bucky, Steve doesn't know how he could have possibly missed it, after months of dating the guy. Suddenly, Steve doesn't feel like going out, even to see Nat and Sam.

"Steve," Bucky says, perhaps a few minutes later, yanking Steve out of his thoughts and into the difficult-to-process reality of his boyfriend, the one he’s been sharing space with for the better part of a few months, having very-carefully hid the fact that he’s jacked. All the while Steve is having a moment of crisis, Bucky, on the other hand, is clearly still conflicted about the outfit, even with the new shirt. He’s clearly still unaware of what he’s doing to Steve.

If being surprised by Bucky’s back sent Steve into a tailspin, it's not much better from the front. Bucky is built, his bulk filling out Steve’s soft red Henley with ease. There’s not much left to the imagination; Bucky’s got a thick, muscular chest, massive biceps—only one of which is prosthetic—and a tight, extreme shoulder-to-waist ratio that turns all of Steve’s thoughts into a warm, hazy fuzz. All this time, Bucky was hiding all that beefcake under those big, loose sweaters and colorful button-ups of his. After all this time, Bucky was big and broad and nothing like the mousy librarian stereotype, and Steve, somehow, despite sleeping next to the guy, had practically no idea.

And now, it takes everything in his power for Steve to keep his hands off him.

"You look—" Steve breathes, eyes focused on how his shirt—his own shirt—is struggling over Bucky's broad chest.
"Obscene, is what his brain offers.

"You look good," is what he settles on. Right. *Good* is good enough. "Amazing."

"Better than before? Not too casual now? I don't look like an underdressed mess, or anything?" Bucky asks. He’s absentmindedly smoothing the Henley, running his fingers along and over his stomach. Steve tries not to stare. It’s hard, given he’s only now noticing he can make out *muscle definition* under that shirt.

*Fuck.*

"You—you look incredible, Bucky," is what Steve is able to get out. His eyes glaze, if just for a second, as he looks over Bucky just one more time, but he quickly forces himself back to reality and herds Bucky out the door. They need to get to the bar, and soon. Before they do something they might regret. "Now let's go. We’ve gotta get into Manhattan soon. Nat and Sam are waiting."

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The bar Natasha chose to meet at is a hip-yet-casual one, where a person could get a booth without bottle service, and where the price of Moscow mules is only a *little* over-inflated for their hype. It’s increasingly rare in the city, especially in Nat’s part of Manhattan. Sam and Natasha are sitting at a booth when Steve and Bucky arrive, and they wave, enthusiastically, when Steve finds them in the crowd.

"Hey. Wait," Bucky says, grabbing Steve’s hand suddenly.

“What’s wrong?”

“I just—your friends—I—“ Bucky says, clearly struggling with something.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay,” Steve says, softly. Soft as he can, given the din. He repeats himself, louder this time. Just because he has enhanced hearing, doesn’t mean everyone else does. “It’s okay, Bucky. It’s okay. And if it’s not, I’ll tell them you’re feeling sick, and we can turn around and go home.”

“No, we don’t have to do that.”

“Buck,” Steve starts, “I—I don’t want to do this if you don’t want to. I feel like I’ve pushed you into this, and I’m sorry about that, but—let me know if you want to do this or not, okay? I won’t be offended if you don’t wanna. But tell me what you need, okay? Tell me if you want this.”

“No, no, I—I want this. I want to meet your friends. But—” Bucky starts, “I—it’s about Nat.”

Steve frowns. “What about Nat?”

“I—” Bucky starts, looking, for all his bulk on display, very, very small and very, very anxious. Steve puts his hands on Bucky’s waist, pulling him in close, intimately so. Whatever Bucky was about to say—for whatever reason—Steve was going to be there for his boyfriend. It was making Steve anxious, himself, not knowing what Bucky was going to say, what he could *possibly* say. But whatever it was going to be, Steve was going to be there for Bucky.

“What is it, Buck?” Steve asks, his voice as close to a murmur as he can manage it.

Bucky opens his mouth, as if to let Steve in on a deep, buried secret. The possibilities fly through Steve’s head all at once, like a barrage of possibility. *They met before? She set him up with Steve,*
somehow? They, perhaps in the longest of shots, dated at one time? Steve is so busy thinking through the likelihood of these possibilities, of all possibilities, that he almost misses the slight shift in Bucky’s expression, a very subtle wave of calm that settles over his features, like a veil, like a mask.


Steve frowns. This can’t be the end of Bucky’s anxiety. Steve knows it. And he knows he has to follow up on what Bucky has to say about Natasha. But instead of saying that, instead of prolonging this awkward, uncomfortable conversation any longer, Steve just asks Bucky, point-blank: “Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” Bucky says, with a nod. “I’m sure.”

Steve, like Bucky moments earlier, opens his mouth to say something, but then closes it, just as Bucky had.

“Okay. I’m trusting your judgement. Just like I promised I would,” Steve says. “But—I want to keep this conversation going, okay?”

Bucky nods, once more. “Okay. Now, lead the way and introduce me to your friends, Rogers.”

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“Look who it is!” Sam calls out, as soon as Bucky and Steve make their way to their table. “Finally made it, huh?”

“Grandpa’s slow,” Natasha snarks, raising her eyebrows as she sips at her drink. It’s sunset-colored and fun-looking, with a bright red cherry bobbing on top.

“Yeah, yeah, we’re not the ones who decided we’d have to commute for drinks,” Steve says, shooting her a look. She grins around her pink-and-white striped paper straw, stained burgundy by her lipstick, and Steve can’t help but grin back. Because, God, he wishes they could do this more often. He wishes they didn’t have to wait until long weekends and post-mission debriefs to do catch up over drinks and laughingly-expensive bar food. He wishes he could have introduced the three most important people in his life much, much earlier. Steve wishes, not for the first time, that he could have something approximating a normal life. He doesn’t wallow in that thought, instead choosing to revel in this moment, a moment as close to normalcy as three of them will ever get.

“Anyway. Nat, Sam, this is Bucky. Bucky, these are Nat and Sam.”

“Hi,” Bucky says, holding his hand out to shake. He and Sam share a firm handshake, but when it comes to Natasha’s turn, Bucky is clearly very, very careful to be very, very gentle, almost as if he’s afraid to break her. Which, Steve knows, the stories he’s told of Natasha speak to someone who doesn’t need to be handled delicately.

“So, you’re Bucky,” Sam says, as Bucky settles in the seat next to Steve. As if that was a secret, Bucky ducks his head, smiling a little smile as he tucks his hair behind his ear, left hand glinting in the low light of the bar.

“That’s me,” he says, smiling at Sam, tense in the same way as someone facing their first meeting with the parents. It’s the closest thing that they have to such a milestone, Steve quickly realizes.

“He’s said a lot about you,” Natasha hums. She looks him over with curiosity, far from the familiarity that Steve expected from her. Strange.
“Just the good stuff,” Steve adds, lacing his and Bucky’s fingers together underneath the table. “Promise.”

Bucky leans against Steve, anchoring himself in Steve’s orbit. Underneath the table, Steve begins rubbing small, lazy circles on Bucky’s palm, hoping that maybe, it will soothe Bucky, if just a little.

“Your boy can’t _stop_ talking about you. Not that I blame him,” Sam says, encouragingly, playfully winking at Bucky. There’s nothing behind it, of course. Not really. But Bucky laughs anyway, and even in the dim lighting of the bar, Steve can see Bucky beginning to blush.

“Flirting with me right outta the gate, _and_ in front of my boyfriend? Who is Captain America?” Bucky asks, just as playfully. Just as harmless. “Got some guts on you, man.”

“Yeah, well, _Captain America_ isn’t doing a thing to stop it, so,” Sam says pointedly, sipping at his bourbon on the rocks. He raises his eyebrows at Steve, and Steve can only shake his head.

“You and I both know that there’s _no way_ you’re doing a long-distance relationship, Wilson,” Steve says.

“Hey! I can make exceptions,” Sam replies, defensively.

“The question is, can Bucky make an exception? The Amtrak runs both ways, you know,” Natasha cuts in. “Now. If he’s willing to make an exception for _Manhattan_, on the other hand—”

She trails off, giving Bucky exaggerated bedroom eyes as she sips at her drink. Sam throws back his head in a laugh, bubbly and infectious. Steve finds himself laughing, too, and Natasha simply smirks around her straw, sipping her drink in a _delightfully_ subdued version of a prima ballerina, bowing before her adoring audience.

Bucky, though, just laughs awkwardly. _Uncomfortably_, more like. Natasha quirks her eyebrows, slightly, and for a brief second, she and Steve make eye contact, sharing a moment with one another, a conversation, a quibble, in that shared gaze alone. Steve suppresses the urge to sigh, and squeezes Bucky’s hand gently, pressing a kiss against his temple.

The rest of the night goes on like that, or in that same sort of rhythm. Eventually, Steve orders for Bucky and himself—locally-brewed beers for the both of them, though Bucky’s is far less bitter than Steve’s. The beer makes Bucky loosen up, if only by degrees—he talks about the Martinelli, and other libraries in the city that he likes, and the time that he went to the Library of Congress. Sam and Bucky continue to get along like a house on fire, but for whatever reason, Bucky seems cool to Natasha, cautious of her, even. He’s not rude, of course, but he keeps her at a distance, always answering her with an awkward laugh or a degree of sincerity that is clearly not what Natasha is looking for. It’s strange. Very strange, indeed.

Eventually, Bucky sets aside his half-finished beer and stretches, broad chest and thick, muscular bicep straining underneath the tight red Henley. Underneath _Steve’s_ tight red Henley. A shirt that fits him _completely differently_. A shirt that _he_ doesn’t fill out in the same way. It almost, honest-to-God, makes Steve drool.

“Well,” Bucky says, his words forcing Steve back to reality. “I gotta get home. Work, you know.”

“_Boo_,” Sam says, as Bucky stands. He’s exaggerating how disappointed he is, but Steve can tell that Sam genuinely likes Bucky. Steve can tell that Sam is genuinely disappointed that Bucky won’t be spending more time with them.
“Gotta make a living,” Natasha says, with a little shrug, her entire body language as neutral as possible.

“Want me to walk you?” Steve asks, standing as he speaks. He takes Bucky by both his hands, his touch gentle, reassuring, telegraphing, *Thank you for coming. You did good.*

Bucky shakes his head. “Nah. I want you to catch up with your friends. Besides, I gotta stop by the grocery and pick up a couple things before I go home.”

“Well—” Steve starts, looking at Bucky, carefully. Searching for any signs of joy or distress; searching, as he had been doing the whole night, for any hint of how Bucky feels. “Alright. But, uh. This was nice. I’m glad that you got to meet Nat and Sam. So—thank you for coming, Buck.”

Bucky smiles at Steve, slow and warm and *genuine*. “Thank you for bringing me, Steve. It was nice meeting everyone.”

Steve allows himself a sigh and a smile, feeling, briefly, relieved. “I’m glad. I—I’m glad, Buck. I really am.”

“I’ll see you soon,” Bucky says, with a nod. He pecks Steve on the lips, gently, before waving goodbye to Natasha and Sam. “It was nice meeting you.”

And with that, Bucky leaves, disappearing, almost expertly, into the scattered crowd before them.

"So," Steve says, grinning wide, his chest feeling light and airy, "What do you think?"

"He's a nice guy. A little *shit*, but so are you," Sam says, with a laugh, "I'm glad you have him. Make sure you keep him."

"Mm," Natasha hums. She has the look about her that seems like she's hiding something, holding her cards a little too close to her chest. Steve's seen it before, and he knows she's not sharing. Not if he doesn't coax it out of her.

"What do you mean, *Mm? Good Mm? Bad Mm?*" Steve asks, trying not to pry too much too quickly.

"It's a good *Mm*, Rogers," she answers, quickly and curtly.

"Nat. Natasha," Steve says, putting his hand on her forearm, gentle as he can possibly be, "If you don't think he's good for me, you have to tell me."

"Rogers—"

"Please, Nat," Steve says, and he knows that look she’s giving him, he knows that, *damn your big, American puppy-eyes* look. It only works half the time, at most. But he’s gotta try. “I wanna know."

She sighs, making a little face. "He's a good guy. I can see you like him. And he's over the moon for you. And not in the starstruck way, not in the way that groupies are. But in the way that means he genuinely likes you. It's just—was he acting a little—shifted around me, do you think?"

"Shifted?" Steve asks. As if he doesn’t know. As if they didn’t share that *look*. "What do you mean?"

"Shifted. Stiff. Uncomfortable. Awkward when it comes to small talk,” Natasha answers, her tone
almost rote.

Steve shrugs. “Well, he was nervous about this whole thing. I—I dunno, I feel like I kind of forced him into it. So.”

Natasha shrugs. “You didn’t threaten him with a breakup for it, did you?”

“No,” Steve says.

“And you didn’t say he had to come?”

“Well, no, but—”

“I know what you’re going to say, Steve. And it’s wrong. The two of you are grown men. He chose to come here. If he didn’t want to come, that’s his fault,” she says, sternly, almost sounding annoyed. If Steve didn’t know her better, Steve is sure that her words would sting. But coming from Natasha, her curt tone and candor are a form of love. As she steals Sam’s now-empty glass, tipping it back to chew on some ice, Steve sighs. Natasha was right. That promise that Bucky made Steve keep—give me credit for my choices, be patient and generous with me—echoes loud in Steve’s head. He feels bad all over again, for a different reason.

Once more, Steve sighs, feeling himself deflate a little as he does. The thrumming of the music and din filling the bar is almost too much, and all he wants to do is go to bed. A moment passes between the three of them, not awkward, not tense, but right on the outer edge of uncomfortable, the natural, unavoidable result of a dispute between friends.

“Well, let’s be fair to the guy,” Sam says, breaking that silence in the way that only he can. “Maybe Bucky’s just intimidated by pretty girls. He does work in a library.”

Natasha laughs a little at this, visibly easing, if only slightly. Her nose bunches up when she does, making her laugh less like the girlish trill she uses when she’s faking it, and more like an unflattering little snort. It’s endearing, and it’s genuine.

“Well, shit,” she says, deadpan. Playfully. She gestures smugly, Sam’s glass still in her hand. “Maybe my suspicions are unwarranted, then. Beefcakes afraid of pretty girls. Guess that’s another thing you and him have in common, huh, Steve.”

“Hey now,” Steve chides, and he takes a sip of his drink, too. It won’t do anything for him, and he isn’t under the impression that it will. But it’s a nice thing to have; a cool, comfortable weight in his hand to ease the tension of introducing his boyfriend to his best friends—and learning that maybe, just maybe, Natasha doesn’t think Bucky is all that great.

“Everyone knows the rumors are true,” she replies, easing back into a joking tone. “You’ve always been a mess when it comes to dating, Rogers. Especially when it comes to people you’re physically attracted to.”

“Yeah, well,” Steve laughs, “Guess you’ve got me there.”

Another lull in conversation passes among them, one less-easily filled by the three of them sipping at their respective drinks. The buzz of the crowd is less all-encompassing in Steve’s head. He’s grateful for that.

“It’s sure as hell not fair, though,” Sam says, eventually.

“What’s not?” Steve asks.
"The whole—thing," Sam says, making a vague circular motion starting at his shoulders, that eventually encompasses the area of his torso and chest.

"That Henley," Natasha purrs, grinning at Steve.

"It was about to pop off him!" Sam exclaims, "How does he get to look like that working at a library?"

"Bud, it beats me. Didn’t really realize it until he put it on as we were about to leave," Steve says, grinning through the budding warmth on his cheeks. "Not that I'm complaining."

Natasha tilts her head, catlike, levelling a look at Steve. "Wait. That was your shirt he was wearing. Rogers. Are you telling me—?"

Steve's eyes widen at the implication, realizing his face must be very, very pink. Sam raises his eyebrows and immediately reaches for his drink—a clear indicator of I'm sitting out this one.

"We didn't—! He just—he wanted to change his shirt, so I lent him that one. No harm, no foul, and definitely no. You know."

"Mm-hmm," Natasha says, dangling Sam’s empty glass in her hand dangerously cavalierly. "You know, we're very open about that kind of stuff now, Rogers. No need to be shy."

"No, really. We weren't doing anything. We—" Steve starts, suddenly feeling more embarrassed than earlier, "We, uh—we actually haven’t done—much of anything, really."

"Really," Natasha says, drawing out the word slow, in a tone that Steve isn't entirely sure he's comfortable with.

"Yeah. And it's okay. We're okay. He—he wants to take things slowly. And I don’t want to force him into anything. So—yeah."

“Huh,” is all Natasha says, chewing on that information, on that newly-revealed element of Steve’s personal life, like it’s a bourbon-soaked chip of ice.

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They continue to catch up, the three of them, tiptoeing around the subject of Bucky as they do. Sam regales Natasha and Bucky with stories of his civilian job, his real job, and for all its routine, Steve almost feels jealous. Natasha, on the other hand, has no interest in talking about any job, instead, spending a non-insignificant time talking about how Liho is doing very well on his walks, even taking the time out to show them pictures. Eventually, their conversation pitters off, and they all decide, collectively, that though the night still remains young, it’s high time for them to leave.

“So. What’s the rest of your plan for the long weekend?” Steve asks, as they make their way back out into the night.

“Well, I’m staying with this one over here, and she’s gonna take me to the Whitney tomorrow,” Sam says, nodding at Natasha. “Then, I’m gonna be spending the rest of the weekend with my brother in Harlem. Apparently, he’s got a surprise for me. My bets are on tickets to something. Now, if it’s a game or a festival, I don’t know, but he’d better to have spent too much money on me.”

“Well,” Steve says, smiling, that bittersweet feeling of a brief goodbye aching in his chest. “Hope you have fun the rest of the time you’re here.”
“Yeah. Of course. It was good to see you, man. Seriously,” Sam says, leaning in and hugging Steve tightly.

“Hey, I wouldn’t miss drinks with you for anything. You know that.”

“Thanks, Steve. And thanks for introducing me to Bucky. I’m—I’m really glad that you two are happy together. Really. He’s a great guy. And—” Sam starts, “It’s good to see you doing good.”

“Thanks,” Steve says, quietly. He didn’t realize just how much happier Bucky made him feel until Sam pointed it out, nor just how differently Steve must have looked from the last time Sam really spent time with him. It makes Steve’s heart swell, feeling overfull with feelings of fondness, for Bucky, yes, but also for Sam.

And for Natasha, too.

Steve gives Sam one last tight hug, making Sam promise to text him when he gets back to Washington. With that secured, Steve says a brief goodbye to Sam, before moving to Natasha, who, though just a foot or so away, seems engrossed in her own world.

“Hey,” Steve says. Natasha pockets her phone, looking up at Steve with her full attention.

“Hey yourself,” Natasha says, looking at Steve with her chin up in a parody of tough-guy swagger.

“Thanks for setting this up,” he says, before adding, “You giant fuckin’ bully.”

“Yeah, well, you know me. Just gotta wrangle you boys,” she says, sarcastically.

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever,” Steve laughs, softly. She smiles at him, and on anyone else, it might be just as sarcastic, but on Natasha, it’s fond. They share a beat of silence there, a warm moment of silent friendship between them, not the first, and though a clear closer to the night, not the last between the two of them, not by any means.

“Well,” Natasha says, quirking her head towards Sam. “This guy and I have gotta go. You know how it goes. Can’t get back too late. Otherwise, my roommate’ll probably kill me.”

“Liho would never,” Steve says, walking Natasha and Sam to the car.

Natasha makes a face. “Pah. He would. He’s got you all fooled. The jerk. Always sitting on my head at six in the morning, batting at my nose in the middle of the night. He’s got something planned. I’m sure of it.”

“Nah,” Sam says, confidently. “That’s just how cats are. It means he just loves you.”

Steve laughs. He’d never had a cat before, what, with the allergies before he got the serum, and the war happening after that, but from what he knows about cats—Liho included—that tracks. “What Sam said.”

“You two have no self-preservation methods, I swear,” Natasha says. She rolls her eyes, but, once again, does it with fondness. With that, she and Sam leave, two friendly faces disappearing into the blue-gray streets of a Manhattan evening. As he watches them leave, Steve, suddenly realizing that he doesn’t want to leave Natasha without thanking her fully, jogs up to them, closing the gap in a couple quick steps.

“Mm,” Natasha says, curtly. “I did it for you. And I’ll continue to do it for you, Rogers.”


“I know,” is what she says, and with that, before Steve can say anything else, she turns on her heel, walking away. No matter her ledger, her history, all her strange quirks, no one could ever accuse Natasha Romanov of being a fan of sappy pleasantries. No one at all. Didn’t mean Steve wouldn’t try to get all sappy on her, anyway.

“Love you, Nat!” Steve calls out, as she walks away, practically pressed against Sam.

“I’m gonna do a background check on him when we get home!” she calls out in response, not turning around.

“Please don’t!” Steve yells back. Sam lets out a peal of laughter beside her. She’s joking. Steve hopes she is, at least. Knowing Natasha, though, he could never be sure. Like it or not, that was Natasha.

And—awkwardness between Bucky aside—Steve wouldn’t change a damn thing about her. Not for the world.

Chapter End Notes

so, i was in washington, d.c. just as transitional weather season was in the "windy but warm" bracket, and it’s that time of year that I start thinking about fleet week, so it’s on the mind. this scene doesn’t technically track to be fleet week, since i think it’s probably later in the summer than that, but regardless, sam is traveling in the spirit of fleet week, of the official beginning of summer in new york. so!! even more so, it's on the mind!! i usually (though not always) happen to be in nyc when fleet week happens, which is always fun. i only got approached by a hot sailor in brooklyn once, though, and it was when i was cranky (because i’d gotten my favorite skirt dirty after being left to fend for my own in prospect park, and my feet were hurting, and i was hungry) so when he invited me to go to the botanical gardens with him, i couldn’t say yes because i would’ve been a spoilsport the whole dang time. not to mention, i already had dinner plans. whoops.

but anyway. back to fic, which is to say, more importantly:

- did you think i could ever possibly write stevebucky fic and not make bucky jacked as hell? of course not, that’s my very specific forever #kink thank you very much!! steve is surprised, but honestly, giant baggy grandpa sweaters will hide anyone’s figure, especially when ya boi’s got a men’s ~2-3XL chest but a smedium waist and he’s gotta look semi-professional but he’s always cold so really? that’s on steve lmao.
- (i’m also into the idea of the hidden/the liminal/the reveal so this hits both of those things for me—this was actually one of the first chapters that i started blocking out, so skeleton of this has been written for the two-plus years that hot librarian au has been in preparation)
- the last time i was in nyc, we had brunch at miss lily’s in the east village, which the boys definitely didn’t get takeout from, but know that’s what i was thinking about as i was writing this chapter. god, i miss jamaican food.
- since i don’t drink, em (who knows beer and breweries very well) kept me from
making a fool of myself, so once again, i want to emphasize my gratitude for her wonderful beta reading!!

- speaking of em, the graphic i now use on twitter for hot librarian au was made by her!! and it is amazing!! send her all the love you can, because seriously, this is my favorite graphic that has ever been made, ever, in the world.

- sam’s harlemite brother, gideon, is a canonical comics figure, though i hate his canonical story/backstory. i’m ready for a reboot of the wilson family, honestly.

- i’m sure we all know what the red henley looks like, but here’s a link to it again because goddamn, i just love to look at him.

- anyway, blah blah fic notes blah blah characterization blah blah character connections and emotional development

that's about it, for now. with this chapter, this fic is now at 100k+ words, which would have been inconceivable to me, even a year ago. thank you to everyone who has read this, and who has supported me through all the inconsistent posting schedules, the life crises, and angst between these two boys. and a special thanks to all the friends and allies who have helped me get back on my feet. to all of you, every single one of you, i just want to take the time out to thank you. grad school is always a series of rough patches, but especially when you’re doing particular types of work, and you live in particular bodies, it can be especially hard. the same thing goes for fandom, but in different ways. i could have never expected to have gotten this far in a fic. so—thank you, everyone. seriously, seriously, seriously. thank you.

see ya next time, loved ones.
Steve is in a dream.

Not figuratively, not in the way that people talk about *chasing their dreams* or *living their dreams* or *walking through dreams*, or whatever motivational speakers use to try to sell books. He is, literally, in a lucid dream.

It isn’t uncommon for him for Steve to dream like this; it’s something he figures is a combined result of the serum and the freezing. He used to get them frequently, in the first year he’d rejoined the world, in his first year in the future. They all but stopped coming once he’d gotten closer to Natasha and Sam and the familiar faces of his neighborhood—once he’d become *just lonely*, rather than *entirely alone*. But they still happen, once or twice a year, like solstices, or like the returning of a perennial friend. And this, Steve knows, the second he recognizes he’s in a surreal library on the edge of unfamiliar, is just another one of those dreams.

The library in Steve’s dream is built like an endless cathedral, all rows and rows of books with no end in sight, with just enough natural light streaming in from tiny windows up on high to keep Steve from stumbling along his way. Each step that Steve takes echoes loudly through the otherwise eerie silence, and each turn, each pathway, feels further and further lost from wherever it was he’d started.

Steve had dreamt he was his own mother during his last lucid dream. Before that, it was reliving crashing into the Arctic, over and over and over again. He hopes, maybe someday, he’ll get the chance to lucid dream a warm beach, or at least a nice pastry and some coffee.

The rows and rows of books, like layers and layers of a labyrinth, eventually make way to a smaller, brighter section of this dreamscape library, if only by degrees. It feels like familiar territory—it feels almost as if he’s back in the Martinelli, except bigger, and with a lot less light.

There’s a soft, rhythmic thumping noise, and Steve follows it, sfully unaware of what his subconscious has in store for him, but fully knowing that’s where he’s meant to be. Eventually, the noise feels close, intimately so, and Steve rounds the corner into a row, to find, of all people, Bucky.

Or, at least, Steve’s subconscious’s version of Bucky. This Bucky is wearing a tight black t-shirt —*tighter than Steve’s Henley, it looks like*—and equally-tight blue jeans. His hair is loose, and his
glasses are pushed up just above his hairline, as if he’d looked at something and forgot to push them back down. There’s a cart to his side of books he’s shelving, and he moves quick, but methodically, with purpose.

He might not be anything more than a manifestation of Steve’s desires, but nothing could argue with the way this Bucky fills out that shirt. Even in Steve’s dreams, Bucky looks good.

“Hey,” Steve says, moving to approach dream-Bucky. He looks up and smiles at Steve, and God, was he beautiful. Maybe this was going to be the one lucid dream he had that went well.

“Hey, Stevie,” murmurs Bucky, looking Steve up and down like a goddamn wolf. Steve almost checks to see what he’s wearing before he remembers that he’s in a dream, and it doesn’t matter. “What’re you doing here?”

“Trying to find you,” Steve replies quickly, as if on instinct. Bucky shifts to look at Steve, and Steve can’t help but watch him move, hypnotized by the way that his muscles shift underneath the fabric of that tight, tight black t-shirt. It’s practically painted on. Steve can count the ridges of the prosthetic from underneath dream-Bucky’s sleeves. Fuck.

“Well, you’ve found me,” he says, with all the subtext of a cheap Harlequin paperback. This Bucky’s voice seems to be permanently stuck in the low, quiet rumble of the real-world Bucky’s morning voice, the way he sounds right after he wakes up. It does things to Steve, even when real-Bucky’s got a truly tragic case of bedhead and he’s wearing a sweatshirt with coffee stains older than most of Steve’s furniture. With this Bucky dressed like he is, looking at Steve like he does, Steve never stood a chance.

“Yeah, I did,” Steve breathes, closing the distance between them. “Feel like I’ve been looking for you forever.”

He shrugs. “I’m a hard guy to find.”

“Nah,” Steve says, pulling in Bucky by the hips, pulling him in so that they’re close. “Just gotta be patient. And know where to look.”

And then, like that, they’re kissing, hot and passionate and handsy. Bucky pulls Steve in close, gripping his ass, and Steve has been waiting for this, waiting for this for so, so long, even if it’s not the real thing, it feels like the real thing.

“Buck,” Steve breathes, “I—I want—”

“Show me what you want,” dream-Bucky murmurs, and Steve begins to undo his belt, letting his long, delicate fingers linger as he moves to pop Bucky’s fly. Maybe it’s wishful thinking, based on what he imagines Bucky’s dick is like, but Steve still gasps when he pulls Bucky’s dick out of his pants—in part, because it’s enormous, but also, in part, because it seems like in Steve’s dreams, Bucky doesn’t wear underwear.

Steve sinks to his knees, his heart pounding in his throat and his mouth already going dry. Dream-Bucky threads his fingers through Steve’s hair. It’s long, like before the war, like before the serum, like it was when he was fragile and small, and Steve wonders, ever-briefly, whether this is his subconscious’ way of telling him something deep and fundamental about his being, or if it’s just telling him his current haircut sucks. Steve doesn’t dwell on it long, though, not when this Bucky moves his right hand to Steve’s jaw and tips his chin up.
“Do you want this, Stevie?” Bucky murmurs, gently running the pad of his thumb along Steve’s lower lip, sending sparks all the way down to Steve’s dick.

“Wouldn’t have gone looking for you if I didn’t,” Steve manages, his voice already going breathy.

“Alright, sweetheart,” this Bucky says, bringing the tip of his dick to Steve’s mouth, and oh, it must look perfect there, Steve thinks, as he parts his lips, taking it into his mouth.

Breathing out through his nose, Steve begins to move, slowly taking this Bucky’s dick down into his mouth, and pulling back, inching deeper and deeper each time he bobs his head back to take more, more of this Bucky. The noises that Bucky is making, low, soft yeses and mores and fucks drive Steve wild, especially in that tone, in that rumbling, throaty register that this Bucky—nothing more than a figment of Steve’s psyche, nothing close to the real thing—speaks in.

“Christ, you feel so good, Stevie,” Bucky moans, and Steve hums against his big cock, taking dream-Bucky down, down, all the way down, as he does. That earns Steve a little moan and a gentle tug at his hair, encouragement enough to keep going, to keep doing what he’s doing, and, on his end, to unzip his pants and take his own dick out, so he can take care of himself while he takes care of Bucky.

Bucky gets louder and more vocal as Steve speeds up his rhythm, which, in turn, makes Steve’s pace working his own cock quicker, more erratic. Eventually, Bucky takes over, rolling his hips against Steve’s mouth, gripping a fistful of Steve’s hair in one hand and anchoring the other on Steve’s shoulder. His grip is firm and steady and it almost hurts, in the way that feels so, so, good, and Steve, mouth occupied, can only manage a tiny, needy whimper.

“Fuck, baby—fuck, you feel so good,” this Bucky all but growls, as his thrusts get more erratic,
rougher, and Steve can’t help it, he *moans*, best he can, around Bucky’s big, thick cock. He feels close, he thinks they’re both close, as Bucky continues to fuck his throat, and he moans again, desperate, and *again*, when Bucky tugs his hair, just as full of *need* as Steve is, but in no way relinquishing control, not by a long shot.

“You want it, Stevie?” Bucky breathes, low, “*Do you want—*”

Yes. *Yes, he wants it. He wants it all.* And he must have made that clear, somehow, because with a few rough thrusts, dream-Bucky is gone, moaning low and breathless as he blows his load, hot and sticky and *good*.

And Steve—and Steve—

*And Steve’s awake.*

His sheets are sticky, but he’s still hard, *aching*ly hard, and sun is streaming in warm and far, far too bright, through his blinds. With a pathetic little groan, Steve gropes for his phone with one hand, as his free hand, somehow, already found its way under his waistband, groping at his junk. After that dream, after what seemed so *real*, Steve’s California king feels too big, too empty, and a boyfriend-shaped gap too lonely. He aches for Bucky’s warmth, for the solid weight of Bucky sleeping at his side, for the calming rhythm of the rise and fall of his chest while he sleeps—

—*For the rapturous feeling of Bucky’s cock buried balls-deep in Steve’s ass.*

The thought of *Bucky* sets Steve completely gone. A few more strokes and he comes, messy and whimpering and still, somehow, unsatisfying. Touching himself might have taken the edge off, but he still feels a smoldering in the pit of his stomach, like the soon-to-be wildfire remnants of a match that wasn’t properly put out. Steve didn’t know when Bucky would *actually* be comfortable with fucking him, but he does know one thing: thinking about Bucky is going to be his *entire day*.

Eventually, Steve manages to pull his hand from under his waistband and—in spite of every bit of him wanting to do anything but—forces himself out of bed. He pads over to his bathroom, washes his face, and brushes his teeth, all the while, wondering what Bucky’s hands would feel like wrapped around his cock.

This time, thinking about Bucky reminds Steve of something very, very real and very, very immediate. Namely, the seasonally-inappropriate turtleneck that Bucky left in Steve’s guest bathroom. Before he knows it, Steve, toothbrush still dangling out of his mouth, makes a beeline to the other bathroom.

As if a sacred object, Bucky’s sweater glows, illuminated by the soft almost-noon light coming in from Steve’s bathroom window. With a seriousness that belies the tenderness threatening to flood Steve’s heart, he picks up Bucky’s sweater, ever-gently, slowly, holding it close to his chest. The material is soft, the color of mustard seed, and it smells unmistakably of Bucky—coffee and paper and musk, tinged with something untraceable, something metallic and smoky and *familiar*.

And just as natural as Bucky’s presence lingers in Steve’s apartment, just as natural as falling for Bucky, Steve slips the sweater on, letting it settle loose and comfortable on his shoulders. As he stands there, enveloped in the warmth of Bucky’s sweater, Steve can imagine Bucky on a hazy morning like this, poking his head into the guest bathroom, smiling that hundred-watt smile of his, pulling Steve in by the hips, and kissing him deep enough for Steve to lose his breath.

Standing there in Bucky’s big, comfortable sweater, Steve can imagine Bucky finally, permanently, making this apartment his *home*. 
Steve sighs, deep and lovestruck like the big goddamn sap he is. He slips the sweater off, folding it up all nice and tidy, just like Bucky would want. One day, Bucky will get it back, Steve tells himself, as he tucks the sweater into his closet. One day.

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Texting Bucky after that morning feels—different.

Maybe it’s because of that new, visceral dream that he had of Bucky, and all the intense, all-consuming feelings it unearthed in Steve. Maybe it’s because Steve has finally realized that there’s so, so much more to Bucky than he knows, that there’s so, so much more to Bucky that he needs.

Or maybe it’s because Steve has finally realized—because of the Henley, because of the turtleneck, because of everything that Bucky is and has been—that he’s in far, far deeper than he ever could have even dreamed of.

Whatever the reason, Steve struggles to send a text to Bucky. For whatever reason, there is a seriousness about sending a late good morning text to Bucky that makes Steve struggle to find his words.

Eventually, Steve manages to send Bucky something. It still feels overly serious; it still feels like it carries with it the weight of the future of their relationship. But he sends it. Even if the text feels like holy confession, Steve sends it.

ME [12:33 AM]: I dreamed about you.

Admitting that to Bucky feels both shameful and exhilarating, somehow. It was like he was sharing a dirty little secret that Bucky could never know the full context of. Though the timestamp on the text says it was barely two minutes in between Steve sending the text and Bucky responding, it feels like there is an eternity between the messages. To Steve, it feels monumental, that late-morning admission.

And from the looks of it, Bucky doesn’t have a clue.

BUCKY [12:35 AM]: Can’t get enough of me, you’re looking for me while you’re sleeping now, too ;)

ME [12:35 AM]: You know I’m never gonna be able to get enough of you, Buck.

That was putting it lightly. Obviously, Bucky meant his text to be sweet, but Steve’s brain immediately goes to Bucky rawing him over his kitchen counter.

Fuck.

BUCKY [12:39 AM]: Aww. Stevie <3

BUCKY [12:41 AM]: Are we cooking tonight?

Steve lets out a slow, heavy breath of relief. He’s glad that Bucky changed the subject to something other than how much he dominates Steve’s thoughts, his dreams, his subconscious, his everything. As he replies, Steve types slowly, trying hard to get a hold of himself while it’s still early. While he still could.

ME [12:48 AM]: Sorry. I forgot to mention last night. I have a work meeting that will run late, so we’ll have to order in.
ME [12:50 AM]: How does Turkish food sound?

BUCKY [12:51 AM]: Of course. You know I’ll eat anything <3

It takes everything in Steve’s power not to respond to Bucky’s text with, *What about me, then?*, but he manages. Filled with sexual frustration and a healthy amount of shame, Steve manages.

ME [12:52 AM]: Great. Just wanted to make sure.

Bucky sends over a smiley face emoji, the one that grins only half as brightly as Bucky does. If that.

BUCKY [12:55 AM]: Hey, I’ve got a project that Dolores needs me to get done by end of day so I’ll be on and off

ME [12:56 AM]: Got it.

BUCKY [12:56 AM]: But I’ll see you tonight <3

ME [12:58 AM]: Understood. See you tonight, Buck.

Bucky sends over a single heart emoji. It could have been Steve’s actual heart, from how fondly Steve cradles his phone upon seeing it.

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The burning *need* in the pit of Steve’s stomach doesn’t go away, not even after that live-wire sensitivity, that ever-present *want* for Bucky shifts into something softer, something gentler. That fire cools down into embers, but it doesn’t go away. Not entirely. Not even as Steve finds himself in Avengers Tower. Not even as Steve finds himself struggling to sit through yet another intel meeting with little-to-nothing to show for all the Avengers’ work.

Even as he’s listening intently to Nat’s summary of all the data she’s stolen from Hydra, even as Clint calls in on a secure line from his deep cover mission, even as he’s outlining the next steps in their mission to raze Hydra to the ground, at the back of Steve’s skull, thrumming like his pulse, like his heartbeat, is the same refrain: Bucky, Bucky, Bucky.

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In between meetings with Avengers and S.H.I.E.L.D. teams, Steve finds himself, miraculously, with downtime. He’s sitting in the deceptively-cozy coffee shop on the ground floor of Avengers Tower, tablet balanced on his knee and an eight-dollar coffee at his side. He’s content, to the extent that he can be while skimming through documents stolen from a violent neo-fascist organization with plans to take over the world.

"Hey," a familiar voice says, and Steve doesn’t need to look up to know who’s there. Natasha—also enjoying her precious few moments of downtime, no doubt—approaches, carefully crossing in front of Steve. She plops down right next to him, settling deceptively loose and easy into the soft leather of the couch. "How’re you doing?"

"Not bad," Steve replies, smiling up at her from his tablet. That was a lie. He’s still hornier than it’s acceptable to be at work. He tries not to let it show. "You?"

She shrugs. Steve can *smell* all the syrups she’s added to her tea as she sips. "Could be a whole lot worse."
Steve hums. They leave it at that for a while, sitting in silence—Steve, at his tablet, pretending to be reading, Natasha, in her thoughts. Early on in their friendship, before Natasha could even admit she had the capacity for friends, they'd sit together, quietly, just taking in each other's presence. They both understood the need for silence, for solitude. It became a habit for them, a little solace for two very lonely people in the very lonely city they shared. Steve wouldn’t trade it for the world.

The bustle and buzz of the coffee shop around them settles into comfortable white noise, warm as Steve’s coffee. And when it comes time to unsettle that buzz, it’s Natasha who breaks the silence first. "Rogers."

"Yeah, Nat?" Steve asks, tilting his head towards her slightly, but not looking up from his work. Text is beginning to blur together, and even his supersoldier eyes feel like they’re starting to strain. He could use more coffee, he thinks. Or maybe a break from his break.

"You know when I said I was going to do a background check on your boy?" Natasha asks, her tone nonchalant. Steve looks up at her now, but she doesn't look at him in turn.

"I thought you were joking," Steve replies, furrowing his eyebrows. He frowns, knowing he looks fully kicked-puppy because of it. "Please tell me you were joking."

"You really need to get a better handle on my humor, Rogers," she replies, deadpan. Expression notwithstanding, Steve can tell she finds this funny.

"Nat!"

"Relax. That's why I came to you. I wanted to let you know," she says, rolling her eyes in the way that only someone who knows another person very well can do. "I have some information. It's not much. College transcripts, work history, military record—hey, did you know Bucky was military?"

"Yes, Natasha, because I am dating him," Steve replies, slow. "He used to be in the Army. Records, on special assignment in-field because of his dad’s relationship with the general. Hardly saw enemy fire, and besides, he’s been retired for years now."

Natasha hums. “Impressive. I bet Fury will send you undercover with that intel work.”

Steve isn’t sure if the feeling in his chest is just the caffeine kicking in, or if it’s because Natasha is literally trying to kill him with this stunt. Probably a little bit of both. “Why are you doing this? You don't need to be doing this."

"Is shits and giggles an acceptable answer?"

Steve sends her a look. She sighs.

"Look, I'm coming to you because I've started a background check. And I'm going to keep on doing it until I'm done. I'll send over the files I have for you later tonight, but I thought I'd tell you in person, too."

"But why, Natasha?"

She's quiet for a minute, studying his face. When she speaks again, it’s quiet, her tone serious, deadly-serious as a spider's bite. "Because, Rogers—someone needs to watch your back."

Which Steve immediately recognizes is the closest he'll ever get to Because I care about you.
Natasha doesn’t mean harm. It might not feel like it, but her actions—extreme and unusual as they may be—are rooted in the deepest, most honest sense of love than she can muster. Steve sighs. It’s all he can do. Sigh and shake his head and give Nat that usual chagrined expression.

“You’re too much sometimes, Romanov, you know that?” he asks, equal parts exhausted and endeared, just as she always makes him feel.

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Upon returning home, Steve is restless as he waits for Bucky. He makes a mental note to stay away from his inbox for the evening, which only leaves him with one less distraction from his own libido. He considers, ever-briefly, pushing Bucky, waiting for his boyfriend in nothing but a tiny black apron and a smile. He considers forgetting to order dinner and accidentally knocking his router over so they’re stuck having to pass the time that evening doing something else.

He doesn’t, of course. Steve knows Bucky has his boundaries for a reason. As slow as they’re taking it slow, Steve knows better than to break Bucky’s trust and pressure him into something he doesn’t want. He’s not that kind of guy. No matter how wound-up and needy he is. But a man can fantasize. Especially in the aftermath of realizing his boyfriend—his beautiful, soft, ever-gentle boyfriend—is, and somehow, has always been, built like a goddamn freight train.

Steve places an order for their dinner much earlier than he usually would, opting to spend the rest of the time until its delivery burning off his frenetic sexual energy in whatever ways he possibly can. It’s enough, for the time being, at least, and he lights a candle, hoping that the bitter, familiar sex-scent will dissipate before the delivery person arrives with their grilled lamb and falafel.

Eventually, the food arrives, and not five minutes later, so does Bucky. He’s wearing his multicolored sweater, even in the summer heat, and Steve tries not to imagine peeling it off him.

“Hey,” is what Bucky says, pecking Steve on the cheek as soon as he’s through the door.


“Thank God, I am starving,” Bucky says, slipping his backpack off and carefully hanging it on a hook by the door. Steve wastes no time in unpacking their dinners, even putting the food on real plates, instead of the little styrofoam boxes they were packed up in.

“How’d that project for Dot go? You manage to eat lunch?” Steve asks, as Bucky washes his hands next to him.

“Mm, yeah. It was a desk lunch, but, you know. Still lunch,” Bucky says, with a shrug. “The project went fine. She just wanted me to figure out a couple logistical things for the back-to-school reading festival we’re putting on in a couple months.”

“That sounds exciting,” Steve says, as the both of them settle on the couch. He hands Bucky his plate, stealing a kiss as he does. Bucky smiles, bashful and sweet, and it makes Steve’s heart feel so, so warm.

“Eh, it’s okay. Not as exciting as your day, I imagine.”

Steve shrugs. “Intel and meetings. Being a supersoldier is boring sometimes too, you know.”

Bucky hums noncommittally. “I bet.”

They eat dinner together, settling on Steve’s couch and further decompressing about the day. Steve
does not bring up his encounter with Natasha, not after how anxious Bucky was with her the night before. Bucky doesn’t ask about Steve’s dream, either, much to Steve’s relief. Instead, they spend their time together talking about the goings-on of their lives, events recounted and punctuated only by the clink of utensils on porcelain and comfortable, familiar silences. Steve takes it as a chance to adore Bucky, watching the way he talks, the way he moves his hands, the way he moves, the way he takes up space when he’s relaxed. At one point, he notices a glimpse, a hint, to the broad swell of Bucky’s shoulders underneath that oversized sweater, and, instead of wanting to sweep the table clean and let Bucky take him, Steve feels an incredible fondness, one that he can’t quite articulate; he would be at a loss if he were asked to describe it. But he cherishes it, regardless, just as he cherishes the way that Bucky adjusts his glasses, just as he cherishes the warm, content feeling he gets when he hears Bucky laugh.

After they finish up dinner, Bucky washes their dishes, and Steve puts on some mindless-but-warmhearted makeover show on Netflix. They don’t mean to watch it, not really, instead, leaving it on as background noise to their respective endeavors. Bucky has a book from the library he’s working on, and Steve, busy as usual, glances through more pages of intel on his tablet. It’s comfortable, especially given that they’re cuddling on Steve’s couch as they do it. So comfortable, in fact, that by the time that Steve remembers it’s a weeknight, hours have passed. It’s late—much too late for Bucky to reasonably go back to his own place, especially with work in the morning.

“Hey,” Steve starts, shifting from his ever-safe position as little spoon to look at Bucky, stopping, if only for a moment, to revel in how breathlessly beautiful his boyfriend is, hair loose and mussed and blue eyes framed so-perfectly by those long, dark lashes behind thick-rimmed glasses. “You’re staying, right?”

For some reason, like texting Bucky earlier that morning, there’s a weight to asking Bucky to stay the night, a weight that presses against, in tension, just how natural the words feel, once Steve speaks them into the space between them.

“Mm,” Bucky hums, the noise a low rumble that Steve feels reverberate in his own chest. Steve feels his heart flutter, like his heart is trying to escape, like his heart is trying to join Bucky’s own. “Yeah. Yeah, I think I am.”

Steve smiles at Bucky, feeling a level of elation that, even for the events of the day, feels unexpected.

“Great,” Steve says, knowing he needs to get ready for bed, though not wanting to move from that spot, even for a moment, pressed up close next to Bucky.

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They fall into their regular evening routines after that, though it does take longer than expected for the both of them to get off the couch. Steve showers, quickly, and he changes into his sleep-clothes as Bucky brushes his teeth.

“I washed your sweats, but your sweatshirt’s still in the wash. I’ll get you one of my shirts to change into,” Steve says, tossing said sweatpants over to Bucky, who catches them in his free hand. Bucky spits, rinsing his mouth clean of toothpaste before moving to peck Steve on the lips.

“Thanks, baby,” Bucky purrs in that half-asleep register that makes Steve’s stomach do flips. But this time, it’s different. It’s more than just the fact that Bucky is using the voice that Steve dreams about. It’s that pet name, that diminutive, that baby that makes Steve’s entire body and soul feel like they’ve been lit ablaze. Bucky, for his own part, seems horrified, eyes wide and broad shoulders tense, like he’s been caught doing something he wasn’t ever supposed to do.
“Sorry—” he starts, anxiously wearing at the bright purple sweats in his hands. “I didn’t—was that—”

Steve closes the gap between them, moving slowly, deliberately, placing one hand on Bucky’s hip, and the other at the nape of his neck. Steve swears he can feel Bucky’s heartbeat thrumming against his own when he brings him in close, pulling Bucky into a deep, tender kiss. Underneath the cloying minty sweetness of lingering toothpaste, Steve can taste that familiar, unnamable mix of barely-there smoke and metal and something familiar, something else—the same combination that Steve found in the folds of Bucky’s sweater. He wants nothing more than to drink in that taste, to let it linger on his tongue forever. And when Steve pulls away, soft as he’d started the kiss, he already misses that taste.

“I—uh—” Bucky starts, and God, is he gorgeous like that, pupils all blown and lips the most perfect shade of pink. “So—you’re—we’re okay with that.”

Steve hums. “Okay is an understatement.”

“Oh. Great.”

“Yeah. It is great,” Steve laughs, pecking Bucky on the lips, gently, before he turns, an energy in his step that makes him not want to go to sleep at all. “Now, lemme get you that shirt.”

He’s not proud, but Steve spends a little bit too much time picking out a sleep shirt for Bucky. Eventually, he settles on a soft, faded t-shirt he got as part of an Avengers event at the Children’s Center. He sets it on the counter as Bucky is washing his face, before pittering over to the kitchen to get a glass of water for the night. He returns to his bedroom to find Bucky already on the bed and the lights already dimmed. Bucky fills out that shirt in a similar way to how he’d filled out the Henley, stretching out the shoulders and chest in a way that Steve does not. Combined with Bucky’s purple NYU sweatpants, it makes Bucky a sight to behold, even in the late-evening darkness. Sleep seems secondary, then, when Steve wants nothing more than to drink in how fucking amazing Bucky looks wearing his clothes.

And he must have been doing just that, because Bucky sits there on the bed, his body language reading concern. “Stevie? You gonna come to bed, bud?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Steve starts, letting out a little laugh, a puff of a breath, at most. He settles into bed, sheepishly, tucking up against Bucky, closer now than most nights. “You just—you look good, Buck. Real good.”

Bucky lets out a laugh, then, just as soft. Just as breathless. “Yeah, well, let’s see if you’re singing the same tune tomorrow.”

“Sure I will be, Buck. You’re better to wake up to than fresh coffee,” Steve says, and his tone is joking, sure. But the words are sincere.

“You’re ridiculous,” Bucky murmurs, his tone ever-fond. “Go to bed, Rogers.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Steve laughs, low. “G’night, Buck.”

“Night, Rogers,” Bucky says, and before Steve knows it, Bucky is out, the rhythmic noise of his breath making Steve feel relaxed and safe.

Unlike Bucky, though, Steve doesn’t fall asleep right away. He has too much to think about. Because it isn’t until then that Steve notices—somewhere, over the course of the night, he stopped being so painfully, awfully needy. Instead of a burning knot in the pit of his stomach, Steve feels
warm all over, comfortable and content and settled in a way that he never thought he’d get to feel.

Tucked up against Bucky, feeling content and loved and safe, Steve has somewhat of a revelation. It’s less of a real revelation and more the pieces of Steve’s life falling into place. It’s stepping back and viewing a picture for its fullness. It’s a realization: that the apartment never feels too big or too empty or too not home with Bucky there. That when Bucky is there, it feels full. That Bucky belongs there just as much as Steve belongs in Brooklyn. Steve wonders, ever-so-briefly, as he watches the rise and fall of Bucky’s chest, sleeping peaceful and content next to him, if they could have a permanent, assured future like this. He wonders if their normal can become more than just normal; if maybe, one day, waking up next to Bucky would be a guaranteed part of Steve’s precious, delicate routine.

Maybe he’s ready to be with someone, really be with someone, Steve thinks, as he settles in close, settling against the warm expanse of Bucky’s chest. Maybe he’s ready to ask Bucky to move in, to live with him, to make a life with him. Maybe he’s ready to be with Bucky.

Maybe—Steve thinks, his heart beating heavy against his ribcage—maybe this is it.

Maybe this is what it’s like to really be in love.

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it's been a few months, i know, but hopefully this chapter makes up for it. between other fic obligations and life obligations, i was derailed from my meticulously-crafted schedule that i planned out for this fic at the beginning of the spring. oh well. that's just how it goes, i suppose.

anyway, when i was initially planning this fic, i viewed this scene as a little over the halfway point of the plot. i think that it's a little bit over the halfway point, now that i've worked out a couple plot things that were sticky, so maybe this is the 60-65% mark? i've never been great at math. as per the rating change, the next part of this fic shifts, if slightly, in tenor and content. i hope you will stick with me through it.

with that said, i have a couple thank yous before i get to notes:

first, thank you to jess for the amazing art for this chapter. i couldn't have asked for a better illustration for this chapter, and i’m so very, very excited for the next art for this fic. it's gonna be great, y'all have NO IDEA.

also a major thank you to my good good pal kat for suprise-commissioning the chapter-end good good good hot librarian au bucky art!!my heart honestly melts at the kindness of this gesture, and the beauty of this boy. gah. your friendship and support has meant so much, and know that it fills my heart with just so much warmth and joy, and i warms me, always so.

and a final thank you to em, as always, for being a fantastic beta reader. thank you for always pointing out that i don't know what a verb tense is. your patience is beyond words.

with all those lovely people given their due, a couple notes:
- bucky’s dual-masters is in media, culture, and communication/library science from NYU’s steinhardt school of culture, education, and human development and long island university’s palmer school of library and information science. he's one smart cookie.
- it’s a particularly good program fit for the martinelli, considering he’s both a hot librarian and doing hot curation work.
- and here is chris evans from the modern weekly china photoshoot, the closest thing to steve wearing bucky’s mustard-yellow turtleneck, that the world has to offer us. just imagine it a little boxier, a little less form-fitting, and you’ve got it.
- yes, of course, they're watching netflix's queer eye. i'm not sure who steve's favorite is. i think he likes tan, maybe? bucky, at least in this fic, likes jvn. he likes how earnest he is. i think.
- soundtrack for this chapter, of course, is david bowie's dreamy "as the world falls down". it gets across the dreaminess of this chapter, both in the literal sense of the plot, and in the sense of, you know. steve is finally realizing he's in love love.

as always, thanks for everything, everyone. i wouldn't have gotten this far without your support.

next up: an intermission.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

entr'acte.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Natalia Romanova is in Brooklyn. Across the river from Manhattan, the closest place she has to home, it’s practically across the world.

Today, Natasha is in Brooklyn because of one Clinton Francis Barton, currently on deep cover in a Hydra cell in Anaheim. Only in America could the happiest place on earth be in the center city of West Coast Nazism. Not that Natasha would turn down a ride on Space Mountain, if someone were to pay for her ticket into the park, but that’s neither here nor there.

Clint wants Natasha to check on the people in his building. Make sure everything is running smoothly. Make sure the Tracksuit Mafia isn’t trying anything while he’s gone. Make sure everyone is safe. Or Clint says that, anyway. Natasha’s half-sure that Clint just wants someone to check on his apartment and the dog.

Not that the dog in bad hands. The girl is staying there. Kate, is her name. Katie-Kate, according to Clint, and Practically an Avenger, according to her. Kate “Katie-Kate Hawkeye, Practically an Avenger” Bishop is far too smart for Clint and far too pugnacious for her own good. Which is why Natasha likes Kate. They get along like a house on fire.

As she leaves Clint’s apartment, purse heavy with an enormous container of homemade toffee-chip cookies—with purple M&Ms substituted for the chocolate chips, because Kate does nothing if she can't do it in a way that's, in Kate's words, the most—Natasha finds her way back on the MTA, finding relief from New York’s regular summer stink in an air-conditioned train car. Everything should follow her regular routine after that. Natasha will sit in that car until she gets back to Manhattan, then she’ll walk the couple blocks from the stop back to her apartment. At least, that’s how it should go.

But Natasha doesn’t do any of that. Instead, she gets off at a Brooklyn station far from Clint’s apartment and even further from her apartment across the East River. She exits the subway station, walks through a beautiful, tree-lined neighborhood of cozy-looking brownstones, and eventually makes it to an unfamiliar building: a library, clearly converted from a prewar Brooklyn mansion.

After months of hearing about it, Natasha has made it to the Angela Martinelli Public Library, the workplace of one James Buchanan Barnes. Bucky, if you’re nasty. Finally, Natasha has found her mark. Wasting no time, Natasha pushes her way into the library, marching in with the same squared shoulders and grim determination that she uses for war zones and battlefields.

Because for all she knows, she’s entering one.

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Once inside, it’s hard, even for Natasha, not to bask in the sweet relief of peace and quiet, the smell of old books, and air conditioning. It’s tempting to sink into one of those comfy-looking couches and sit for a moment. Maybe even pick up something to read. Maybe even enjoy one of Katie-Kate Hawkeye’s cookies. But Natasha isn’t at the Martinelli for her own sake. Natasha has a mission. And nothing—not air conditioning, not mercenaries, not getting shot through the stomach—has stopped Natasha from finishing a mission.

Instead of giving herself a moment of reprise after trekking through summer’s sticky heat, Natasha makes a beeline to the circulation desk. Much to her surprise, the staff manning the front counter are practically children.

The boy—chunky headphones, a tight fade, and a hoodie with the faintest splatters of spray paint—is on the phone with another patron as he works through what looks to be physics homework. It looks like college-level material. On his right, the girl is engrossed in a graphic novel, making little notes in a sticker-laden notebook as she does. It’s a cute scene. Not cute enough for Natasha to keep from interrupting, though.

“Excuse me,” Natasha says, and their heads snap up. There is a flash of recognition in the girl’s eyes, and she opens and closes her mouth, seemingly lost for words. She grabs the boy’s arm, less to get his attention, and more, seemingly, because she needs someone to grab onto. Natasha has seen that look before. People always get that look around Steve. It’s strange to have that look directed towards herself.

“Um—uh—hi,” says the girl, clearly starry-eyed. According to her name tag, her name is Kamala. The girl, Kamala, laughs nervously, closing both her graphic novel and notebook with trembling hands. “Sorry—I—gosh—um. how—how can we help you?”

Natasha smiles. She hopes it comes across as genuine. “I’m here to see a James Barnes. Is he in?”

It takes Kamala a beat to process what Natasha is saying. Still starstruck. “Oh, uh—yeah. Lemme get him, Miss—Miss Romanov.”

Natasha nods. Her words are calculated, but they leave her mouth quicker than expected.

“Call me Nat.”

---

In spite of the strangeness of being idolized, Natasha finds that she likes Kamala. She’s clever and funny and smart in ways that Natasha’s not sure that she recognizes yet, through the confusion and insecurity that comes with being a teenage girl.

And it turns out that, Kamala, like Steve, adores Barnes. She doesn’t say it, not outright, but from the way that he keeps coming up, unprompted, in their brief conversation, Natasha can tell that Kamala values Barnes’ mentorship.

All the stranger, then, for Natasha to find herself on the chilly end of Barnes’ disposition. Which becomes especially clear when he finally manages to make his way down to the front desk.

Natasha sees Barnes before he sees her. Weaving a path through the stacks, he looks soft, dressed up in a big, ugly gray-blue-white sweater, his hair pulled up in a messy bun. He’s not, as Natasha had hoped, in that tiny, tight Henley from the other night. From that night. Shame. The second Barnes sees Natasha, the second they lock eyes, Barnes stops, surprise suddenly registering across his features. For a moment—just a moment—the veneer of professionalism drops, and Natasha
sees his face shift to something much more than surprised. Barnes’ expression is unreadable, but Natasha isn’t fool enough to think that means it’s kind.

And just as quick as it comes, it’s gone, replaced by something calm. Something friendly. Something empty.

“Hi,” says Barnes. His voice is gentle, but professional. Forcibly so. She can hear the tinge of suspicion, of trepidation, at the edge of his voice. He’s holding out his right hand—his flesh hand—to shake. Natasha takes it, squeezing firmly, getting nothing but a limp-fish handshake in return. Just like last time. “You wanted to see me?”

“Come,” she says, not a request, but a demand. “Let’s take a walk.”

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The two of them walk, mostly in silence, to a coffee shop a block away. It’s a tiny place, seemingly well-established in the neighborhood, and surprisingly quiet for a sunny summer day. They tuck into the shop and grab coffee, distant enough from each other for the barista not to make the mistake of asking if they’re together.

Coffees in hand, they exit, claiming one of the quaint little tables directly outside the shop. Sipping at their coffees, Natasha and Barnes sit across each other in a scene that looks less like two acquaintances getting to know each other better, and more like a less structured, more comfortable version of an interrogation.

“The famous James Barnes,” Natasha says, stirring her cappuccino. The barista topped it with far too much foam. “Graduated Empire State with honors, US Army for a couple years, left on a medical discharge after an explosion took off your left arm. Came back to New York, finished a dual-Masters at NYU two years ago, promoted from hourly intern to salaried at the Martinelli immediately after.”

Bucky blinks. Natasha expects for him to shift in his seat, for him to squirm, for him to become unsettled. The moment never comes. “That’s right.”

“And now you’re dating Captain America.”

He shrugs, lazily lifting one shoulder. “I don’t think of my relationship with Steve that way, but I guess you could say that.”

She takes a sip of her coffee before speaking. Definitely too much foam. Over the plastic edge of her cup, Natasha watches Barnes carefully, looking for something. Anything. But he’s a brick wall, an iceberg, the permafrost layer hidden underneath meters and meters of arctic ice.

“You’ve got more going on than you let on, don’t you, Barnes,” she says, coolly. It’s not a question. Her tone lacks her usual bite, but lacks any sort of kindness, at the same time. Natasha isn’t provoking Barnes. Or, at least, that’s not all she’s trying to do. All she’s doing is testing the waters. Fishing. After all, there’s something about Steve’s boyfriend that keeps nagging at her, something she will chase down until it’s uncovered.

He raises his eyebrows, looking genuinely taken back. “I don’t see what you could mean.”

“Don’t you?” she asks, this time, a real provocation. It’s one without bite. But it’s a provocation, all the same.

“No,” Barnes says, slowly. His voice sounds just on the edge of impatient. Like he’s explaining
something to a child that he’s not very fond of. Like there’s a threat of something if Natasha keeps asking. “I don’t.”

Natasha levels Barnes a look. It’s a look that Natasha knows she wears well. Clint has withered before lesser glares. So has Steve. But Barnes. He looks hardly fazed. As Natasha watches him, sizing him up, uncertainty—that very feeling she dreads, that very thing she hates—begins to seize uncomfortably at her core.

Hot librarian, James Buchanan Barnes, Bucky-if-you’re-nasty, contrary to what his Instagram feed seems to imply, is not an open book. James Buchanan Barnes is a black box. And that, more than anything, is what concerns Natasha. Not simply because it presents potential existential danger for herself. Not even primarily because it presents danger to Natasha.

It concerns Natasha because James Buchanan Barnes, as an unknown, presents a fundamental danger for Steve.

“Look. I don’t know who you are. And I don’t know what you’re hiding,” Natasha says, leaning in close. Her voice is just barely above a whisper. “But I do know that Steve is in love with you. So. Let me make one thing clear. If you break his heart, I assure you, that will be nothing compared to what will come down on you. If you harm Steve in any way, it will be a fraction of what I will do to you. I will run you out of this city if I have to. If you hurt him, I will end your life as you know it.

Barnes does not flinch. He does not react. He does not so much as blink. As she pulls back, Natasha does not so much as blink, either.

“Do I make myself clear?”

There’s something there suddenly, something stormy in those blue eyes that flashes like ignition—like the spark of gunpowder—and is gone in a blink of a blink. An instinct less honed than hers might not have caught it. But Natasha is nothing if not the sharpest. She is nothing if not the best.

“Yes,” Barnes says, and he leans back, those broad, muscular shoulders suddenly evident underneath that hideous sweater. “Understood.”

They sit in a tense silence, one heavy with unknown potential. And if one thing about Natasha that’s held constant over her nine lives, it’s this: Natalia Romanova does not like unknowns.

“You should get back to work,” Natasha says, standing up. They’re done. There’s nothing more to share. Nothing more that Natasha wants to say. Nothing more that she could say.

“Yeah,” Barnes replies, following her lead. “I guess I should.”

They stand there, New York City’s summer even heavier than usual. Neither of them, as far as Natasha can tell, wants to leave first. Neither of them, as far as Natasha can tell, can trust the other enough to leave their backs exposed. But Natasha knows she’s at an advantage; she knows that she can wait Barnes out. She’s not the one, after all, who needs to get back to a desk job.

So eventually, as Natasha anticipated, Barnes is the one to blink first.

“Well. Good talk,” he says. He turns, but slowly, peeking over at her from over his shoulder. “See you around.”

Natasha gives him a nod, but that’s all she gives him. Not a wave, not a goodbye, not even a couple terse parting words. Just a nod and the full weight of her lifetime’s worth of suspicion. And with that, Barnes leaves, off to resume being the charming librarian with the big, ugly sweaters that
Kamala and Steve and just about everyone else seems to absolutely adore.

“Rogers, Rogers, Rogers,” Natasha says to herself, watching Barnes disappear, all broad shoulders and thick muscle and deeply-guarded secrets. His gait is not unlike the stalk of a big cat. Not unlike the ways of a *hunter*. “What have you gotten yourself into?”

Chapter End Notes

:) 

notes: 
- i helped make about two and a half dozen toffee and chocolate chip cookies last time i was in the city. [here is the recipe](#), if you wanna be real-life katie-kate hawkeye, just like me. 
- bucky is wearing a version of [this hideous sweater](#). 
- alternate subtitle: [you can't break that which isn't yours](#).
**Chapter 20**

**Chapter Summary**

answers unprompted; questions unaddressed (shaken, not stirred)

**Chapter Notes**

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Hey, you.”

It’s the first thing that Steve says to Bucky, the very moment that he walks into Bucky’s small, tucked-away library office, his voice nearly overwhelmed with fondness.

It’s a completely average late summer afternoon. Outside, New York City is sweltering, humid as it is hot, but Bucky, as always, is wearing a big, cozy-looking sweater, this one a bluish gray with white chevrons and stripes patterned across it. It’s hideous. It’s professional. It’s perfect. Standing from his desk and closing the short distance between them, Bucky pulls Steve into a kiss—fairly chaste, only as deep as a kiss could be, without being a precursor to something more, but with something underlying it, with something there. Maybe a hint of possessiveness, maybe a hint of heat. Maybe both.

Or maybe Steve is just projecting.

“Wow,” Steve breathes, grinning. He feels his heart fluttering wildly in his chest, despite his better instincts. Despite the fact that he knows that it won’t lead to anything. Boundaries, and all. “I, uh. That was—I mean, I’m not complaining, but—you wanna tell me what that was about?”

“Mm,” Bucky hums, against the crook of Steve’s neck. It sends the best feeling shivering up Steve’s spine, pooling in the pit of Steve’s stomach. He tries not to think about what Bucky’s teeth would feel like against the delicate skin underneath his collar, or what Bucky’s lips would feel like trailing down his collarbone, to his chest. Boundaries, Rogers. Boundaries. “Just—happy to see you.”

There’s a heaviness to Bucky’s tone, a tension in his words, something that someone other than Steve might not have picked up upon. But Steve’s nothing if he doesn’t know his guy. “Hey. Rough day?”

“You could say that. I had a meeting that could’ve gone better,” Bucky says, with a shrug. “I mean. I think it went as good as it could’ve ever gone, but—you know.”

“Pal, do I know,” Steve laughs, and he thinks back to all the meetings with Stark—one-on-one and team meetings both—that almost always seemed to careen straight to hell from jump. He doesn’t regale Bucky with stories of those meetings. Not then. Not yet. But he does kiss Bucky again, gently, tenderly, on those plush pink lips, that same spark of something lighting up when he notices Bucky’s shoulders relax, when Bucky rests those big, sturdy hands of his on Steve’s hips. When Steve looks at Bucky—those expressive blue eyes looking back at him like Steve is the first sign of daylight after a long, long night—he nearly melts, his words coming out soft, nearly a whisper. “But—you did your best. You played nice. You got through it. I’m sure you said your piece and
made your way out. That’s all that matters.”

“Thanks, Stevie,” Bucky murmurs, his voice carrying Steve’s name with the same fondness as the entirety of the phrase, *I love you*. Perhaps in Bucky’s mind, Steve realizes, *Stevie* and *I love you* mean the exact same thing.

In that moment, with Bucky looking up at him like he hung the moon, Steve could ask Bucky to move in with him. Hell, he could ask Bucky to **marry** him, for how *deeply* he feels for his guy. But Steve doesn’t ask Bucky either of those things. Not exactly. Not in those exact words. Instead, Steve just smiles at Bucky, and says, in the same register that Bucky says *Stevie*:

“I’ll see you at home.”

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A few days pass. Bucky stays at Steve’s apartment all but one of those days. The one day that Bucky returns back home—to his *actual* home, the apartment he still continues to pay rent on, the apartment where the Barnes family sends their family postcards and letters to their estranged son—Steve feels Bucky’s in the air. It’s not a mournful absence, but it’s a noticeable one, reminding Steve of just how *lonely* the world was, before he started going to therapy, before he started trying to meet new people, before he had *Bucky*.

He tries not to let it weigh too much on him. He tries not to dwell upon just how much Bucky has changed his life, just how much Bucky continues to change his life, just how much Bucky has given him, just how much *more* he longs for, as he lies there, yearning and alone, in his big, empty bed.

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Steve is distracted as he goes to bring lunch to Bucky that afternoon. He’s too busy, too distracted, thinking of anything and everything—of his ongoing mission, of his too-empty apartment, of *Bucky*. Before he recognizes it as a symptom of his anxieties, before he recognizes it as all the things that have been weighing on him coming to bear, all at once, at the most inopportune time, Steve loses himself in his ever-rushing thoughts, slipping, for a brief moment, into old habits. So much so that, when he shoulder-checks someone on the way into the Martinelli at full supersoldier force, it takes him a moment to whip around and help them back up.

“Oh, *shit*,” Steve says, before cringing a little bit at himself, as he helps the poor woman. First sending someone flying, and then cursing at a stranger, in full volume, in the library where his boyfriend works. Zero for two, Rogers. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” the woman says—familiar, or, just on the edge of it, though Steve cannot place from where, not exactly. He tries to place the face, but it seems to shift every time he focuses and re-focuses, like an optical illusion, like television static. Her red hair—distinct as Natasha’s, but very much *not* Natasha’s, at the same time—evokes a primal warning instinct in Steve’s brain. It’s the human equivalent to the colors on poison dart frogs, or something equally-toxic. “*Captain.*”

Combined with her uncanny familiarity, combined with the pointed way she maintains eye contact, Steve can tell there is something *off* about this woman, something wrong. The very energy of the library seemed to change when she and Steve made contact, and dangerously so. But before he can point to what that *wrongness* is, before Steve can place that familiarity, she’s gone, just as quickly as she’d bumped into Steve.

And just as quickly as she’d left, Bucky arrives by Steve’s side, the exact opposite of that
dangerous energy, and undeniably, undoubtedly, familiar.

“Hey,” Bucky says, his feather-light touch an anchor, re-settling Steve, easing the fight-or-flight reflex welling up in the pit of his stomach. “You alright?”

“Who was that?” Steve asks, swallowing down his anxieties, focusing on the calming blueness of Bucky’s eyes, the familiar warmth of his chestnut curls, the familiar sharpness of his cheekbones. Anything to get him moored again, anything to hide the fact that he’s been shaken.

Bucky shrugs, calm. Steady. Suddenly, Steve can feel himself breathe. “A new patron, probably.”

“Right,” Steve says, because, of course she is. Why would she be anyone else?

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Steve files that encounter away as something to focus on later, something to talk about in therapy, and nothing more. As the rest of the week flies by—in top secret S.H.I.E.L.D. meetings, in intel briefings tracking down Rumlow and Sin, in lunches at Bucky’s side and nights spent tucked tight against his sturdy chest—Steve all but forgets the fact that he shoulder-checked a civilian. Instead, Steve has other things on his mind. When he wakes up in Bucky’s too-small bed on a beautiful, sunny weekend morning, with Bucky’s left arm draped gently across his hipbone, all Steve can think about is being with his guy.

Bucky shifts, and Steve shifts to face him. “Mornin’, Buck.”

“Mm. Mornin’, baby,” Bucky says, his voice low and sleep-rough. A breath hitches in Steve’s chest, and he threads their fingers together, shifting to sit up fully. To see his guy, in all his breath-hitching, sleep-perfected glory, lit up prettier than the mid-morning sunbeams framing his face. “How’d you sleep?”

“Slept like a baby,” Steve says, biting back the urge to say something coy and playful and just on the outer edge of Bucky’s careful boundaries. Instead, Steve just leans in and kisses Bucky on the forehead, warming ever-more at the way that Bucky’s smile lights up his whole face, even as he’s still shaking off the last dregs of sleep.

“Good,” Bucky says, his long, dark eyelashes fluttering against those high, sharp cheekbones. “I’m glad.”

And Steve is, too. As he watches Bucky—eyes closed and hair a mess, chasing down just a few winks more of sleep before fully-greeting the day—Steve, once more, finds himself longing for this, longing for the moment that is right in front of him, for the moment already unfolding. He longs for Bucky to fill up his too-big apartment in the way that they both fill up Bucky’s own apartment, with its constant draftiness and its creaky floors and its intermittent mildew. He longs for Bucky, for the guarantee of waking up to Bucky’s sleep-rough good mornings. He longs, even as he knows that Bucky is in front of him—hopefully—longing for him, too.

But that’s neither here nor there. Steve was still working on the when yet, but for the time being, that morning isn’t it. Not yet. Instead, Steve has another pressing question to ask Bucky on that perfect summer morning.

“Hey,” Steve says, shifting so, just enough to run his fingers through Bucky’s soft, thick hair without Bucky having to get up. “It’s been a long week, so I was thinking—you wanna do Smorgasburg today? I was thinking we could do that for lunch, maybe stop by that bookstore we passed by last week, and then spend the rest of the day in? Sound like a plan?”
“Well,” Bucky says, looking up at Steve. Without his glasses, Bucky’s gaze holds an unfiltered intensity to it, one that Steve can hardly bear, sometimes. “We might have a problem.”

“What’s that?” Steve asks.

“Well, Steve, the thing is—” Bucky says, his voice deadpan. Grave, even. “I was, uh—I didn’t know how to tell you this, because I didn’t want you to think lesser of me. But I’m finally gonna come out and say it. Because you deserve to hear the truth.”

Steve frowns. “What is it, Buck?”

“Well—it’s just—” Bucky says with a sigh. He sits up, properly, facing Steve properly. There is a seriousness to his movements that make Steve feel a little uneasy, even as he knows, deep down, that Bucky is teasing him. “It’s my sweater. It just—it smells. It smells really, really bad.”

“I can’t fucking believe you,” Steve says, rolling his eyes. Completely expected, and yet here he was, even still. He can feel the familiar comfort of his tense shoulders relaxing.

“Hey!” Bucky laughs, “It’s the truth! I didn’t want you to feel bad about dating a guy who stinks.”

All Steve can do is slug Bucky on the shoulder, gently, but with more force than he’d use before. In the length of their relationship, Steve has learned that Bucky can take a lot more than he leads on, even as Steve’s first instinct is to hold back that supersoldier strength of his. “Jerk.”

Bucky grins, leaning into Steve’s punch as if it’s a lover’s touch. It is, after all. “I’m sorry, Stevie. Will you ever forgive me?”

“Buy me lobster sticky rice at Smorgasburg, and then maybe we can talk.”

“I’ll take it,” Bucky says, leaning over and kissing Steve on the nose. It makes Steve melt, earning a blush that starts right in his chest, right in his heart. “But for real. Can I borrow something from your closet?”

“All right, but only if I can pick it out.”

When Bucky speaks, he speaks with kindness, with love, with absolute, unrelenting trust. “Deal.”

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Steve’s wardrobe doesn’t have any ugly sweaters, thank God. And he ignores the familiar mustard-colored turtleneck tucked away in the very back of his closet, trying not to think of the fairy tales his mother told him about selkies and their seal-skins. Ultimately, Steve settles on a thin white sweater with the deepest v-neck he can find. It’s deep, even for his wardrobe. The material is soft, thin enough to be tolerable in the summer heat, but thick enough to be a sweater proper. Paired with a denim jacket just a few shades lighter than Bucky’s usual blue jeans, it’s perfect.

More than perfect, Steve quickly sees, the moment Bucky steps out of Steve’s bathroom, looking like a manifestation of all Steve’s fantasies. It’s more put together than the red Henley from their date with Sam and Natasha. It’s a deeper v-neck than Bucky would ever attempt on his own. It’s not just perfect, it’s something else entirely, a new register of attractiveness that Steve can’t even articulate into words, other than a simple: “Wow.”

“I look okay?” Bucky asks, turning around carefully. His biceps—prosthetic and flesh both—strain Steve’s thin denim jacket. For a moment, Steve’s brain goes completely fuzzy, any coherent thoughts fully-replaced by the familiar, primal buzz he feels pooling in the pit of his stomach, in
the back of his brain.

“You look—you look phenomenal, Buck,” Steve breathes out, drinking in the way that Bucky’s broad chest fills out his own sweater. “You blow okay way, way outta the water.”

“Well,” Bucky says, those perfect, pearly white teeth bared sharp against the plush pink of his lips. “I’ll take your word for it, then.”

And from the way that Bucky grins, from the way that he moves—shoulders set just the slightest bit straighter, gait just the slightest bit looser, swagger just that slightest, most marginal bit more dangerous—Steve’s convinced that Bucky, hot librarian and the only man that Steve has really desired in the twenty-first century, knows just exactly how hot he is.

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As he eats his way through half of Smorgasburg with Bucky, Steve feels at ease, the anxieties of that week—even the good-scary-exciting anxieties of finding the right words to ask Bucky to move in with him—ebbing to near-nothingness. Bucky, too, seems at ease, comfortable and loose in a way that seemed new, or, at least, to a different degree. There’s hardly a moment that Steve spends not finding himself adoring Bucky, especially as he fills out that deep, deep v-neck sweater, wearing it like a second skin.

Walking along, wholly focused on Bucky, Steve nearly misses a familiar face: this one much, much less-unsettling than the ever-shifting redhead at the Martinelli’s entrance, earlier that week.

“Wanda!” exclaims, briefly taking his free hand from Bucky’s to wave at her.

“Oh?” a soft, familiar voice says, scanning the crowd, quickly finding Steve. She waves back, a small canvas tote bag dangling delicately from her shoulder. “Oh, hello!”

“Good to see you,” Steve says, walking over. She shifts, raising her arms and inviting him into a feather-light, friendly hug. It surprises Steve, but he moves into it, still.

“Good to see you, too,” she says, as they both pull away. She’s smiling that little smile of hers, but her eyes are all lit up with genuine happiness, nonetheless. Bucky stands next to Steve, awkwardly, and she gives him a little nod, a little hello, and as awkward as it is, Bucky looks happy to be there, too.

“Oh, sorry,” Steve says, remembering his manners five minutes too late. Ma Rogers would be ashamed. “Wanda, this is Bucky. Bucky, Wanda.”

“Nice to meet you,” Bucky says, his voice warm and friendly and low and absolutely charming. Someone less secure in knowing his guy might get a little jealous.

“Nice to meet you,” she echoes in response, taking his hand and shaking it in that soft, delicate grip of hers. Wanda always holds herself so gently. Steve always wonders whether that came from a deep-rooted fear of being broken, or a deep-rooted fear of—however accidentally—doing the breaking.

“Hey, so. I’m sorry that I haven’t touched base with you in a while,” Steve says, his voice cheery, even in its guilt. “It’s like I said, getting used to this city is hard—”

“No, it’s okay, Steve,” Wanda says, with a kind, reassuring smile. “Really.”

“Just know that you’re not alone in the city,” Steve says, and she nods, almost knowingly. Before
Steve can open his mouth to say anything else, he stops, the knowing tell of recognition flashing across Wanda’s face, as a voice—soft, English, and familiar—cuts their conversation short.

“There you are,” says the voice, pinging recognition in Steve’s head as quick as he hears it. A man swoops in, steps quiet and soft enough that he might as well be floating, all tall and blond and pale as a ghost, even more so with the bouquet in his hand acting as a bright, colorful reference for comparison. “And for you.”

“Oh—” Wanda says, as she begins to blush. “These are—thank you.”

There is a moment of intimacy between them as they meet eyes, something that Steve knows he was not meant to ever be witness to. It only lasts a moment, as Wanda and her pale English friend suddenly realize that they are not, in fact, in a universe unto themselves. With a sly, sideways glance and a gentle nudge, he takes Bucky’s hand in his once more, neither of them speaking, but sharing the same sentiment as Wanda and her man, all the same.

“Hello, Captain,” says the man, looking wide-eyed, almost as if he’d been caught. Because, after all—he had.

“Hey,” Steve says, with a smile, coy. Knowing. In on it.

An awkward silence falls once more. It doesn’t look, most likely, as awkward as it feels, but as all of them—well, three of them—are testament to, appearances can be very, very deceiving.

“Sorry, where are—where are my manners,” says Wanda’s pale English friend says suddenly, the first to break that silence. He is polite and cheery, even in his clear discomfort. Unsurprising, given his upbringing—given his programming. Extending a hand to Bucky, he introduces himself, on his own terms, with his own name, to Bucky and Steve. “Viz.”

“Bucky,” Bucky replies, friendly, polite, and just the tiniest bit awkward. Viz nods too, equally polite and equally awkward. Another silence. As well-integrated, well-programmed, or well-adjusted the four of them may be, small talk, it seems, may be a bridge too far.

“Well, uh—” Viz says, again, being the one to break the silence. He trails off, before starting once more, floundering for an excuse: “We were just going—"

“We were just going to get tea,” Wanda says, cutting him off with a hand to the small of Viz’s back and a little nod. “It was nice seeing you, Steve. Bucky.”

“Bye, Wanda. Bye, Viz,” Steve says, sending over a sly smirk, one that, hopefully, shows them that their secret, intimate, human relationship is entirely safe with him. Don’t worry, Viz. I’m the last person to rat you out to your dad.

Viz nods a friendly goodbye, before turning his attention to Bucky. “And it was nice meeting you.”

And with that, Wanda and Viz step into the afternoon Smorgasburg crowd, vanishing almost immediately, almost like magic.


Bucky blinks. “What?”

“I was really worried that Wanda was lonely, after leaving home to live here,” Steve says, with a little huff of a laugh. He begins walking again, herding Bucky forward, anywhere but standing still. “Looks like she’s not nearly as alone as I thought.”
“Well,” Bucky says, not an ounce of sarcasm in his voice, “Good for her.

“Yeah,” Steve says, with a nod. “Yeah.”

And it is. Steve’s happy for Wanda. He’s happy for Viz. He is. Given all the things they’ve both lived through, given all the painful changes they’ve both had to endure—Wanda, most of all—they deserve a little bit of happiness, a little bit of calm, a little bit of normalcy. Steve doesn’t blame them. It’s the same thing that he wants, the same ever-important thing that Bucky gives him, after all.

But. But. There is that key difference.

“He’s a robot, you know,” Steve says, leaning in close, his voice a murmur against Bucky’s hair.

“Who? Viz?” Bucky asks, turning towards Steve. They’re so close that their noses nearly bump. It makes Bucky laugh, low and gentle and so, so warm.

“Yeah,” Steve says, his words trailing off, nearly finding himself lost in Bucky’s eyes, once more. “Viz. Short for Vision. You know, the red guy? The one that flies. Has a cape, most of the time.”

“Oh!” Bucky exclaims, lighting up with excitement. It’s the same expression that he makes when he solves the weekend puzzle on NPR, when he manages to fish his ID out from under the library printers without asking for help, when he sees Steve on a busy afternoon. “Oh. Huh.”

“Yeah,” Steve says, fondness slipping into his voice—and not entirely for Wanda and Viz, either. “I’m happy for them.”

“Yeah,” Bucky says, quiet. As if he is putting pieces of something together in his mind. Some other puzzle, something leaving him much less excited and much more pensive. “Yeah.”

“I’ll have to catch you up. In the meantime—you want horchata?” Steve asks, nodding to a simple booth, a couple feet down the way. Bucky smiles, and while he does not light up like he had earlier, his energy glows bright enough to drown out the summer sun, nonetheless.

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The two of them get their horchata, and two trays of deep-fried cookie dough balls at the booth a couple feet down the way, on top of it. Bucky’s energy does not flag, even as his appetite nearly matches Steve’s, although he does seem to have something on his mind as they walk to the new bookstore down the way. When they arrive back at Steve’s apartment, new books in tow, the both of them seem ready for bed, even if the night is still early. After Bucky takes a quick shower and Steve washes his face, they lie in bed at a time suitable to Steve’s true age, for once—nine in the evening. And not a minute later.

For a while, they lie there in silence, the noise of the world outside through cracked-open windows and the familiar, comfortable weight of Bucky’s arm draped across Steve’s waist enough, more than enough, to send him to an early night’s rest. But just as Steve is about to settle, just as he’s about to close his eyes, Bucky shifts, ever-slightly, but enough to get Steve up and alert once more.

“Steve?” Bucky asks. There is something in his voice, something that sounds like the corollary to that quiet, pensive gaze from earlier that day.

“Yeah?”
“Would you date someone like Viz?” Bucky asks, and they both know—Steve’s history notwithstanding—that he doesn’t mean someone English.

“Like, a robot?” Steve asks, a little playfully. It’s a sly little move, like explaining the punchline, but it gets something out of Bucky, at least. And that’s all Steve ever wants, all he ever hopes for.

“Well, I mean, I guess,” Bucky says, with a little laugh, a laugh that Steve would move mountains for. “Maybe. Although, I dunno. Not necessarily. But more like—I dunno. Someone—who can’t—who has to hide in plain sight.”

What sparked the question, why Bucky brings it up now, and what it could mean, Steve isn’t sure. But he answers honestly, shifting, if only slightly, to look back at Bucky as he answers. “I mean—if I really, really cared about the person, I would. Yeah. I would.”

Bucky looks like he has something to say—like there’s a flood he’s just barely holding back. But if there is, he does not speak it. Bucky, as he had the tendency to be, is silent, deathly silent, even as the city outside continues to bustle.

“Why?” Steve asks, although it’s not a question. Not really. It’s a nudge, a go on, a way to give Bucky the space he needs, if he wants to take it.

But Bucky just shrugs, halfheartedly, one-shouldered, as he looks at Steve, those blue, blue eyes cool and unforthcoming. “Just, you know. Wondering.”

Steve looks at Bucky for what feels like a long, long time, searching for something—anything—that Bucky might be hiding, that might be on his mind. But Bucky is a blank slate, revealing nothing, positive or negative alike. For a moment, Steve wants to push Bucky, to, like Natasha did with Cheburashka all those months ago, force him to have the tough conversation he might be holding back. Just as he opens his mouth, though, Bucky’s own words echo in Steve’s head: Give me credit, Steve.

And so, Steve doesn’t push Bucky. Instead, he kisses Bucky on the nose, earning that warm, familiar peal of laughter that warms Steve up, that melts his anxieties and fears and stressors and soldier’s instincts, like he’d personally saved Steve from his icy grave underneath the Arctic ocean. Bucky warms Steve up so much that he can hardly contain it, and he pulls Bucky in close, kissing him, filling him, hopefully, with the same sort of overwhelming warmth that he makes Steve feel with every kiss, with every good morning, with every laugh.

“Hey,” Steve says, soft, because he can’t help himself, that warm feeling still pouring out of him, spilling out in the form of words he hadn’t planned to share, not yet, anyway.

“What’s up?” Bucky asks, those long, dark eyelashes brushing against the peaks of his cheeks.

“Do you know,” Steve murmurs, slow and playful, but his heart going straight into his words, “What I love most about you?”

Bucky smiles at Steve, his feelings clearer now than ever. “Is it my sparkling personality?”

“Stop dicking around, jerk,” Steve laughs, bopping Bucky on the nose, ever so lightly. “I’m being serious.”

“Who’s to say I’m not?” Bucky asks, already half-devolving into another one of those infectious laugh. “But okay. Okay. What do you love most about me?”

And that’s when all pretense of levity fades, when Steve’s heart seemingly bursts and spills and all
he can speak is truth. It’s as if Bucky prompting him forced him to spill anything—everything—to
Bucky, and Bucky alone.

“When I’m with you,” he says, suddenly quiet and serious, “Away from all the gods and monsters
and secret missions, I feel—I feel normal. It’s the only time I really ever feel normal.”

“Oh?” Bucky asks, barely audible. There’s something to his voice—something fragile and
vulnerable and earnest and maybe, even, a little bit sad. His lips—soft and pink and inviting—are
parted, ever-so-slightly, lost in something. Steve wants to kiss him again, to lose himself, once
more, in that familiar taste, but he doesn’t, he can’t, not when he still has so much left to say.

“Mmm. Yep. When I’m with you, it’s no shapeshifting robots, no reality-bending powers, no
supersoldier bullshit. Just you and me, and this big, wild, fuckin’ nonsense city,” Steve says,
fondly. He tucks a strand behind Bucky’s ear, an echo of Bucky’s ever-familiar nervous tic. “You
make me feel like I’m a regular young thirtysomething. Even though, you know, I’m not. Not
exactly.”

Bucky lets out a little breath, a ghost of a gasp, if even that. Steve does not move his hand away
from Bucky’s face, cradling it, gently, as he asks the question that’s been on his mind for who
knows how long. He did not plan on asking this question to Bucky, not today. But the words come
quicker than he can think to stop them. Posing Bucky the question now feels, more than it ever has
before, right. “And so, I, uh. I wanted to ask you something. I—you don’t have to give
me an answer now. It doesn’t even have to be soon, But I just—I love waking up to you, Buck. I
love you being here. It feels so damn empty around here without you. So—if you’d—if you’d want
to—will you, you know. Would you wanna move in with me?”

“I—” Bucky starts, his voice soft. Damn-near a whisper. He looks at Steve with open adoration,
even as his voice comes out conflicted. “I—Steve, I just—I can’t tell you enough just—just what
this means to me. Really. But I think—I’m sorry, Stevie, but I think I’ll have to think about it.”

“Yeah,” Steve says, the words slipping out of his mouth, easily. The anxiety that he knew
would flame out and consume him upon rejection does not consume him, perhaps because Bucky is not so
much rejecting him, as he’s giving him a for now. “Of course, Buck. Of course.”

“Thank you, Stevie,” Bucky murmurs, low, and he kisses Steve, soft and sweet as he’s always
been, as he only could ever be. That, too, makes it feel like his decision isn’t a rejection. Far from
it.

Steve hums, very much not lost in his own, roiling anxiety. It’s nice, to have a moment of
vulnerability and not get thrown into crisis after it. They settle into a quiet, familiar moment again,
in those quiet, familiar positions—Bucky as big spoon, Steve as little spoon—with nothing but the
sound of Bucky breathing and the city outside between them. Even with that question lingering
between them, even as they’ve hit an impasse, they’re okay. And if Steve has remaining questions
about Bucky, if Steve starts to realize that, sometimes, he can’t read Bucky as well as he thought
he could, well. That is a question for another time.

“Steve?” Bucky asks, eventually.

“Yeah?” Steve asks. He can feel Bucky’s heartbeat, workhorse-strong and steady, against his skin.
Bucky swallows, and when he speaks again, Steve wishes, more than anything, that he were facing
him.

“You make me feel normal, too.”
The very next week, bright and early on a cool Monday morning, in the little café on the ground floor of Avengers Tower, Natasha approaches Steve once again, settling on the couch across from him, coffee in hand and comfortable as a housecat.

“You doing alright, Rogers?” is the first thing she asks him, and isn’t that a question.

“Yeah,” Steve says, with a little smile, thinking about Bucky, about their weekend together, about the promise of let me think about it. All Bucky’s unknowns and ambivalences and the funny way those have made Steve feel are all miles away, tucked tight between the sheets of Steve’s California King.

All that gets from Natasha is a little hum. And if she has anything to say about Bucky, if she has any new pieces of intel, they never come up. If Natasha Romanova, ever-inquisitive, almost to a fault, has any lingering concerns or comments or questions about Bucky, she never asks.

Chapter End Notes

as we approach the common era 2020, i wanted to get chapter twenty in before the turn of the new year. so, here we are. chapter twenty, eleven days before 2020. it's a little bit of a nonsense deadline, but i wanted to hit it, so here we are. thank you again, everyone, for sticking with this sporadic, sprawling, sometimes-space story of mine. that love and support--in comments, in shares, in messages i've gotten, in continued reading--has meant so, so much more than i could ever say. seriously. i know i say thank you a lot, but: thank you.

a couple notes:
- for the sake of getting this chapter out when intended, it has not been beta read. i will be editing for clarity and flow in the upcoming weeks. please let me know if there's anything overly glaring, and i'll be sure to get those right away!!
- first sweater is the same as last chapter's sweater, of course.
- bucky's smorgasburg outfit is based off this incredible sebastian stan outfit, thank you to starlessfuture_ for bringing it to my attention. it truly was a blessing to behold.
- speaking of smorgasburg, it's a real thing with real food, including lobster sticky rice (at least, for this year's smorgasburg). i myself have never gone but it's a time for steve rogers to have an excuse to try out all the different foods from all the different places, as we all know he would. and it gives him an excuse to eat as much as supersoldiers do, which is always a plus.
- that scene was added much, much before sebastian stan decided to eat a Hell Meal for men's health but this feels like incredible kismet.
- also in incredible kismet: i had them getting horchata long before i wrote a fic where steve sucks dick for horchata. i'm just a horchata stan, i guess.
- i love paul bettany in human dude form as the vision. i love him. i absolutely love him and i am not sorry. i think i might have a soft spot for the vision, but i also refuse to apologize for that.

i think that's all for now, loved ones. thank you for being here with me and sharing in this project, in this space. may the end of 2019, the end of this wild decade of change, lead you to joy, community, and radical empowerment, rather than despair. my heart is
with you as we travel into the decade of the 2020s. catch you in the future. <3

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