

Is It Pretending If I Already Want You?

Story: Is It Pretending If I Already Want You?

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Relationship, pretend boyfriends au, Pining, Mutual Pining, Big!Steve, Post-Winter Soldier-looking Bucky, Family Getaway, Romantic Stay the the Cottage, Sexual Tension, Resolved Sexual Tension, (eventually) - Freeform, Fluff, Fluff and Smut, Feels, Bucky's a little high-strung in this universe, Whereas Steve's a laidback goofball with a heart of gold, Eventual Smut, Anal, Anal Sex, Anal Fingering, Blow Jobs, Hand Jobs, Making Love, Bottom Steve, Bottom Bucky, Switching, Bucky's got a secret about his left arm, Masturbation, Masturbation in Shower, Bottom Bucky Barnes, Top Steve Rogers, Magical Healing Cock, Comfort Sex, Bucky Barnes Needs a Hug, Hurt Bucky Barnes, Bisexual Bucky Barnes, Gay Steve Rogers, Cheesy Romantic Gestures, So much fucking fluff, gay slurs, Homophobic Language, Only Briefly - Freeform, And the Guy's a Dick and Gets What's Coming to Him so YAY, Multiple Orgasms, Forced Orgasm, Prostate Fucking, Crygasms, Overstimulation, Happy Ending, New Beginnings

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*Summary: Based on prompt: Pretend Boyfriends AU where one of their families is always wondering why they're never in a relationship, so the other offers to pretend to be their boyfriend for some family event" Basic Steps to Getting Yourself In a Pickle With Both Your Family and The Guy You've Secretly Crushed On For Five Years (A Guide): STEP 1: After being perpetually single and constantly making up excuses to your family, give in and lie about having a boyfriend. STEP 2: Agree to bring said boyfriend to the family cottage for a week so he can be your date to your parents' wedding anniversary party. STEP 3: Panic. STEP 4: Say 'yes' when your best friend and closet crush - who you're convinced isn't interested in you that way in the least - offers to be your pretend boyfriend. STEP 5: Try your best not to fall in love with them during the trip. STEP 6: Fail miserably. *Chapter 1*: Chapter 1*

Like most stories that turn out this way, it all begins with a lie.

A *harmless* lie, in Bucky's defense. Not one that could've ever hurt anybody – a *white lie*, let's call it that. And it hadn't been premeditated or anything; it just sort of... comes out. Because his parents' twenty-fifth wedding anniversary is coming up, and that means a week with the family – his family that he hasn't seen in a while and then also the *entire* family that he hasn't seen in *years* that would be at the actual celebration. You know, the ones who pinch your cheeks - even though Bucky's *twenty-four* now and doesn't even have the baby fat to scrounge up anymore to justify that sort of thing *anyways*. The relatives who, if they remember, send you Christmas cards or a Facebook message on your birthday but other than that, you don't *really* ever talk to them.

Bucky's close with his family; has been ever since they'd adopted him and Rebecca when they were kids. He *loves* them and sure, there's a part of him that's looking forward to seeing them again, don't get him wrong. After all, it's August now and the last time he made a trip to Shelbyville was back in May for Mother's Day (and Annie Proctor was never above the good old mother's guilt trip to have her entire family under one roof every year for that special day).

It was just... he'd known what was coming, because it was *always* the same thing.

"Why don't you have a girlfriend yet?"

"When are you going to find a nice boy to settle down with?"

"Are we ever going to have grandchildren?"

"Well yes, we know we have three other kids; we can count. Still.

Grandchildren?"

"Well, you could always adopt."

"You're such a catch, James – I just don't understand why you won't let yourself get involved in anything serious."

"Maybe if you cut your hair and people could see your handsome face..."

"Are you going to bring someone special this time?"

"Why not?"

It mostly came from his mother – who Bucky knows means well – but his sister is responsible for a fair portion of the blame, too. She's a little shit, no matter how much Bucky loves her, and she likes to instigate because she *knows* how much Bucky just *loves* those conversations. Even his father brings it up now and again; those throwaway inquiries as to why Bucky never seems to be tied down. Sometimes they suspect that he *is* and he's just hiding the person from the family.

That's not the case, and that's exactly what Bucky always tells them. *Always*. *Every single time they talk*, in fact. (Because that is literally how often they ask, even if it's the quick and subtle, "So, anyone new if your life lately?" during phone calls.)

If he *was* seeing someone, he wouldn't hide it. Sure, his family is a little... what's a delicate way of putting it...? *Unique*; out there – very open and welcoming but they're all loud and they can talk your ear off if you let them. Bucky accepts it because, hell, he's just as bad – but he knows not everyone can handle them in large doses. The last time he tried bringing a *friend* with him for a visit, yeah, they fell in love with his family, but they *also* needed to find gaps to run off and hide for a breather.

Bucky's family has a bit of a way with making you feel a little *too* loved, bless them; their hearts are all in the right places, at least.

He's just *never* in a relationship, and he doesn't see the big deal with that. Honestly, he's not even halfway thirty yet – why does he need to settle down, get married, and have kids? He's always been more of the independent type, which is why he'd moved out heading into his first year of college. He hadn't picked New York because he deliberately wanted to get away, not at all. He'd just always dreamed of living there. Unfortunately it made visiting home a little harder, yeah, but it also gave him the opportunity to begin the brand new chapter of his life on his own terms.

He doesn't have *time* for relationships – not with how busy things are for him. He has his own place and he pays his own bills and if he's not working, he's spending time with friends. Bucky thinks he has a pretty good handle on his life and has his affairs all in order. He reminds himself that they don't *mean* to come across overbearing *every*. *Time*. *They ask*. But can't they just be proud of him for what he *has* accomplished and stop putting so much importance on the fact that he's doing it all solo?

So when his mom calls, Bucky's distracted in the kitchen, trying to make himself dinner with his cell phone pressed between his shoulder and his cheek after a long day at the office (the lawyer he's the assistant for is a complete, demanding *dick*). He's already only half-listening. Annie's going over the details of the trip again: they'll be meeting that upcoming weekend up in Nashville where the family cottage is... Bucky'll use his vacation time to stay the week... Their anniversary is on the 18th, which is a Thursday, and the dinner and reception will be held at so-and-so place at such-and-such time (which Bucky doesn't *really* think he needs to be reminded of, since he'll just be heading there *with* his family anyways), etc. Bucky makes the mistake of reminding her that he'd pre-ordered the chicken...

Which is apparently the perfect gateway into asking, "*Will you be bringing a date? You said you'd get back to us the last time we spoke, in case we needed to order something for them, but then you never called us back with the info.*"

Bucky's trying to juggle the conversation with not adding too much spice to his stir fry sauce, so he just replies distractedly that, no, he isn't bringing anybody. They should be used to this, but of course they never are. It only leads into another discussion where she's drilling him with question after question; the ones that Bucky can't get *that* frustrated with because she asks them so damn *lovingly* – because she's just worried about her son *dying alone*, he guesses. So he doesn't get impatient with her; he just rolls his eyes a lot, in the privacy of his own space where she can't see.

"Mom, it's really *not* a big deal," he repeats for what feels like the billionth time. He grabs some of the chili flakes and sprinkles them into his personal concoction on the stove. Switching his phone to the other ear, he continues, "I told you before, I don't need to bring a date. I'll be fine on my own."

"*You always come by yourself, sweetie. We just thought that if you had someone special in your life right now or something, you'd have more fun with the extra company.*"

“Mom, I’m not seeing anyone, same as before,” he insists, and *Jesus*, he’s trying so hard to not be huffing like a child at this conversation. “You asked me last time *and* the time before that, and you’ll ask me again in a few days, and my answer is *still* going to be the same.”

All that leads to is a repeat of every ‘motherly’ talk he’s ever gotten from her regarding this issue. Bucky just stands his ground, stays calm, remembers that *she’s coming from a good place, she’s coming from a good place, woosa, woosa...* and repeats over and over that he’s ‘just too busy right now and it’s really *not* a big deal.’ Eventually, he has to go when the phone call distracts him and he accidentally fucks up his recipe by adding *far* too much spice. He mutters a curse under his breath and hastily says goodbye, *love you too, I’ll call you in a couple days.*

It’s later that evening when it happens – the lie that sets the whole thing into motion. Bucky’s watching TV on the couch, *finally* unwinding with a cold beer in his hand, when Rebecca calls. They usually just text, so Bucky figures it must be some sort of emergency. But nah, apparently she’s just calling to greet him with, “*Do you have any friends?*”

“What?”

“*I’m starting to think you don’t have any friends,*” Becca goads casually; *annoyingly*, in that way reserved specifically for little sisters. Bucky pictures her looking at her nails with an amused little smile on her face. “*Do you need me to make a few calls and set you up on some Man Dates?*”

“I have friends, Becks,” Bucky replies flatly.

“*Aww, that’s cute,*” she says. “*Hang up, I’m gonna FaceTime you.*”

“But--”

She hangs up. He sighs, picking up the remote and muting the show he’d been watching. So much for getting to have a relaxing night before bed. Seconds later, sure enough, she calls him back using FaceTime, so Bucky accepts it. Rebecca is sitting in her room, staring at the screen with a grin on her face. Holding up his phone in front of him, Bucky asks, “Okay, *what.*”

“*Turn your phone from side to side,*” she instructs.

“What?”

“*Just do it – side to side.*”

Bucky does, confused. When the camera’s back on him, Rebecca fakes a serious look and asks, “*Is that them? They look nice – can you put it back on the one to your left? I didn’t get to say hi!*”

Unimpressed, Bucky rolls his eyes and then snaps back, “My friends ain’t *imaginary*, smartass.”

“*Ooh, ‘ain’t’ – lookit you, all hoity-toity New Yorker.*”

“I’m hanging up now,” Bucky says, reaching back for the remote and already looking back to the TV.

“*Oh, quit being so uptight,*” his sister huffs, dropping the act. She readjusts on her bed so her knees are tucked up beneath her chin and says, “*Mom’s really hoping you’ll change your mind and bring someone when you come visit.*”

“Well, hate to disappoint, but *once again* that will not be happening,” Bucky mutters, still staring at the screen while he browses the guide. He shoots Rebecca a side glance. “Not that my dating life is any of your business – you’re not even old enough for boys yet.”

“*I’m seventeen.*”

“Exactly.”

“*I’m going into my graduating year of high school.*”

“Not old enough for boys,” Bucky repeats, drawing out each word and interrupting her.

She rolls her eyes. “*Just throw on a white collar and join the priesthood, why don’t ya? Seriously, at this point that’d probably come as less of a shock than you actually dating someone. Least then, mom would stop getting her hopes up.*”

Bucky throws his free hand into the air. “Why does everyone care so much about who I date?”

His sister throws up her index finger in front of the screen. “*Ah – but that would actually have to mean you do date, which you don’t. It’s more like, why does everyone care that you’re repressing your newfound relationship to the ‘Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ’ and just don’t feel you can tell us. Do you need a copy of the Bible? We might have one sitting around in the attic somewhere.*”

“I’m *not* joining the priesthood, Rebecca. We’re not even religious.”

“*Did you join a cult?*” she asks with mock sympathy. “*Are you a scientologist now or something?*”

“Scientologists can still date,” he points out.

Rebecca’s face falls flat. “*Okay, seriously, not helping your cause right now.*”

Bucky presses his lips in a tight line and shakes his head. All he can think of to reply is, “Yeah, well, even if I *was* dating someone, it’s not like it’d be anyone’s business.”

“*But you’re not, so it’s okay,*” she pushes.

Bucky stares directly at her, frowning. She’s always been the master of reverse-psychology. Either that, or Bucky’s just always been a sucker the second she uses it. “How would you know?” he asks, feeling suddenly weirdly defensive. It’s one thing when *he’s* the one having to insist that he’s single and it’s purely *by choice*, but it’s another thing entirely when someone starts making it sound like maybe it’s for a different reason – commitment issues, a phobia, Bucky having something wrong with him... He’s running through every single thing she could mean by her comment in his mind.

Rebecca shrugs. “*Because I know you by now? Because you’re my brother? Because you never seem to be dating somebody? Take your pick,*” she sing-songs. “*And you’re sure you’re not just saving yourself for Jesus?*”

Bucky isn’t sure why he does it; why this conversation is suddenly *the* conversation to break the hump on the camel’s back. But without preamble he’s saying, “Well for your information, *genius*, I *do* happen to be dating somebody,” before he even realizes what just happened.

The face on his screen pauses, like she didn't hear him correctly, and then Rebecca scoffs out a laugh. "*Yeah, okay,*" she replies skeptically. "*You're gonna have to do better than that. April Fools was months ago.*"

"Well, believe it," Bucky retorts, and he knows he should stop talking but now that the words are coming out they don't seem to know how to stop. "'Cause it's true – I just didn't say anythin' because we haven't been seeing each other all that long, so I wasn't planning on bringing him to something where he'd be meeting my whole entire family."

"Him?" Okay, sure, apparently Bucky has a boyfriend now. He'll run with it if it'll get them off his back.

Now his little sister is staring hard at the screen. She keeps narrowing her eyes and raising her eyebrows, like she's trying to translate her brother's tone and figure out whether he's full of it or not. "*So you've got a boyfriend,*" she says after a few seconds of silence. She sounds halfway between calling bullshit and sounding unsure.

"Yes," Bucky sighs. He needs this conversation to *end*.

"*Uh-huh. Okay, what's his name?*"

Bucky stammers for a second and then covers with, "None of your business, Booger."

She scowls at him, always having hated that childhood nicknamed he'd saddled her with. "*I knew it, you're so full of shit,*" she replies, and now a tiny, satisfied smirk tugs up one corner of her mouth. She and Bucky look so much alike when they both smile like that.

"Hey, don't give me that look – I taught you that look."

"*Just admit that you lied and I promise I won't hang it over your head when I see you,*" she says, her voice rising into that deceptively *sweet* pitch. He should just throw in the towel and accept defeat, but the Barnes-Proctor family is nothing if not a *little* proud. So he *should* just admit to the lie but of course he doesn't.

"Too bad for you, I wasn't lying," he insists.

"*Really,*" Rebecca challenges, narrowing her brown eyes again. "*Fine, prove it.*"

"I don't have to 'prove' anything."

"*Oh, okay. Hey, do you smell that?*"

"Smell what?"

Rebecca starts sniffing with genuine concern, her brows furrowing. "*No, seriously, Buck, I think I actually smell something.*"

Bucky's previous annoyance immediately vanishes. He frowns and asks, "What's it smell like? Gas or something? Maybe you should go tell dad about it."

She sniffs loudly a few more times. "*No... No, it's not gas,*" she muses. "*I think it's the smell of--*" She looks *directly* into the camera and finishes smugly, "*your pants on fire.*"

Bucky's mouth drops open and he rolls his eyes with a groan, as Rebecca starts cackling with laughter. "*Bucky, just admit that you're full of shit,*" she encourages him, but it's far less judgemental now. He knows she's caught him, which only makes him desperate to fight *harder* to prove that she's wrong. He also realizes he isn't really fond of this idea that they might think he's *incapable* of dating. He could very well date if he wanted to; it's not like there *is* something actually wrong with him.

His brain has evidently decided that right now, Bucky's going to be the King of bad ideas, because he speaks once again without giving it proper thought, and blurts out, "Okay, fine; you want proof? I'll give you proof."

That makes Rebecca stop laughing. She regards him for a solid minute or so – just *staring* at him while she once again tries to put her finger on whether or not she should call another round of bullshit. Then she says, "*Fine. Prove it. In person.*"

"Fine," Bucky snaps.

"*Bring him to the cottage and for the anniversary party.*"

"Fine!"

"*Fine!*"

"I'm hanging up now," Bucky repeats.

"*I'm going to tell mom,*" Rebecca grins. "*Since you have nothing to hide and all. She's going to pee her pants. I'm not responsible for cleaning up the mess.*"

"Fine!" Bucky says loudly, three-hundred percent *done* with the conversation, because she's going to tell their mom? He's starting to realize how deep he's just dug himself, and he doesn't know what else he's supposed to say now. All he can do is wonder where he put the shovel.

Rebecca laughs and does a horrible mimic of Bucky's tone when she replies, "*Fine*" again, too.

"*Goodnight, Rebecca.*"

"*Sweet dreams. Bye Bucky's friends!*" she pretends to call out, bringing her face closer to the screen. She starts making kissing noises when Bucky ends the video call. His hand thunks down next to his leg and he stares ahead, trying to make sense of what just happened.

He'd been gimmicked. He'd been gimmicked by his teenage sister, *that's* what happened. And now apparently he had some made-up boyfriend who would be joining him in just a *few days* for a week at his *family's cottage*... As his date to a *big family event*...

Less than a minute later, his phone vibrates. Bucky looks down to it but doesn't unlock the screen. Becca really *does* work fast. The message preview shows that it's a text from his mom. All it says is: **!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! <3 <3 <3'**

Well, fuck.

Bucky knows that Natasha already has plans (a *date*, to be specific, and given how few of those she goes out on, Bucky knows better than to interfere), so the next night, it's Steve who comes to the rescue. Steve's one of those guys who, by association, can make anyone within a ten mile radius smile – he's just got that easy-going, laid back nature to him that's addictive. Bucky met him during his second year of college. Steve was in his first year, and whereas Bucky was taking Business, Steve was studying a Double Major in Art History. *Ironic*, Bucky always thought – how perfectly their post-secondary paths defined their contrasting personalities more simply than a long-winded introduction ever could.

One of the best things about Steve is that when someone talks, he always listens. In fact, he's one of the few people who never seems to get bored or tired of hearing a person – *like Bucky, for instance* – go on and on about the same sorts of things. He doesn't plaster on a fake smile and do mental math until it's over. So long as your lips are moving and something's bothering you, he's all ears and it's nothing but one hundred percent genuine interest.

Steve Rogers is a good fit for Bucky in terms of a yin and yang friendship because he's the calm to Bucky's storm – and Bucky's storm always seems to be ten seconds away from brewing. He hadn't always been like this. He can remember a time when he'd been just as carefree and lighthearted. But then *school* happened and *responsibilities* happened, and Bucky's always been the type to place so much more expectation on his shoulders than was ever necessary. He knows his family never expected him to graduate a year shy with Honours – nor did they ever make him feel like they'd love him less if he *didn't* have a career and a place of his own by the age he's at now.

Bucky hardly ever wears anything shy of a long-sleeved shirt in public. But every morning before he showers, he catches a glimpse of that left arm of his in the mirror – and every gnarl of scar tissue, twisted and lining around the limb and shoulder, is a constant reminder to him of the mistakes he'd made in his youth. Bucky hates seeing therapists, but the last one he'd ever taken the time to sit down with wasn't far off when they'd concluded that the accident in question... when Bucky was seventeen and had drunk and drove, totalling his parents' car with Rebecca with him inside of it... resulting in his left arm needing two surgeries, skin grafts, and left with nothing less than a fuck-ton of nerve damage (whereas, thank god, Becca had only walked away with a broken wrist)... *That* is the one point in Bucky's life that he can't seem to get over. That doctor had taken a guess that Bucky's Type A behaviour *now* has everything to do with his inability to forgive himself for how he'd behaved back *then*. Bucky knew she was right. He stopped going to see her anyways.

Steve, though... Steve's never gotten impatient with Bucky or tired of him. Sure, sometimes he gives him this amused sort of smile and chuckles that the brunet needs to lighten up or calm down, but comments like those are only ever said with love. In the five years they've known each other, they've become just as much each other's confidant and *rock* as they've become the other's best friend. It's just that, he's never met a single member of Bucky's family. But that's just the result of constant poor timing, as well as the fact that almost every odd time his family would make the trip to New York, it would

be over holidays that had Steve visiting his own distant relatives on the Brooklyn side. His family knows *of* Steve – they just don't *know* Steve.

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This, funny enough, turns out to be the greatest thing to have ever fallen into Bucky's favour.

Steve's sprawled out on his back across Bucky's bed, a box of chicken fried rice from the Chinese they'd ordered still in his hand. He feeds himself expertly with a pair of chopsticks and munches away as he listens to Bucky rant about his current predicament, pacing the bedroom as he's been doing for the last hour and a half. Bucky explains everything and gives himself the chance to rant a little bit, and all the while, Steve just watches with that tiny, amused grin. He's always known better than to cut in and start giving his two cents *before* he knows for sure that Bucky's done. So this entire time, he's done nothing but stay silent and use his mouth only to chow down on dinner.

"I don't understand why they always seem to care so much about my love life!" Bucky exclaims, probably for about the thirtieth time. Shaking his head and pacing faster, he throws his hands in the air and repeats for about the thirty-*seventh* time, "I mean, there's nothing wrong with me. I *date* – I *do* date." Pausing, he takes a few quick breaths and then looks to Steve in confusion. "Right?"

Steve shrugs. "I dunno," he answers nonchalantly, peering back into the carton and digging around with the chopsticks, trying to find more chicken. "I think I only ever remember seeing you go out with, like... one person, since I've known you? *Maybe* two?"

"Really? Who was the second?" Bucky asks with genuine curiosity.

Steve grins at him and gives him a knowing look. "See?"

Bucky's shoulders sag as he visibly deflates. "I just don't understand what the big fuckin' deal is – so I don't date, who cares? It ain't like I've been actively avoiding it or some shit, I'm just busy is all."

He holds out his hand mid-stride, making a grabby motion. Steve hands over the fried rice and then props his head up in his hand to continue watching. Now speaking with his mouth full, Bucky goes back to pacing and letting off his *copious* amounts of steam. When he's finished, he plops down onto the side of his bed with a huff, handing the rice back over to the blond. Steve takes it and looks at him expectantly, waiting for Bucky to meet his eyes and give him the go-ahead to speak.

"Oh, yeah, I'm done," Bucky says quickly, waving halfheartedly with his hand.

"Okay," Steve says, sitting up and crossing his legs. It's always funny seeing someone of his large stature positioning himself like an excited child because, well, he *is* large. He'd been the Captain of the college's football team, after all, and that hadn't come from a shortage of intense daily workouts. Somehow though, the guy always seems to be able to eat whatever he wants without it ever damaging his perfect figure. Bucky's always been a tiny bit envious.

"First of all, I get why the whole thing's frustrating for you, but I think you're makin' this *so* much more complicated than it needs to be," Steve starts.

Bucky raises an eyebrow his way, which earns him an exasperated little chuckle when he apparently hasn't caught the memo that Steve feels is *completely* obvious. Pointing the chopsticks at him, he says, "You just gotta get a friend to go with you and pretend to be your beau for the week, and then make some excuse up afterwards of why you two had to break up. Bing, bang, boom – problem solved."

Bucky scrunches his nose up, taking that suggestion in. He supposes it's not the *worst* idea he's ever heard. In fact... it's sort of *brilliant*, actually.

"Only one problem," he says, his hope immediately vanishing. He sighs. "I'm heading up there in *two* days – sort of short notice, dontcha think? Asking someone to take a whole week off just to come play 'pretend boyfriends' with me seems like sort of a long shot."

Steve hums in thought, flopping back down on the bed. He taps his feet rhythmically off of the mattress and makes little noises through his mouth, before popping his lips and asking, "How about Tony?"

Bucky barks out a curt laugh. "With *his* sense of humour? He'd either go offending my parents or get so humiliated after Becca handed his ass to him that he'd spoil the whole thing in the name of vengeance."

Steve chuckles; he knows Tony well enough, too, to know that Bucky's got a good point. "Okay, umm... Sam?"

"Mm-mm," Bucky says, shaking his head. "He's got a midterm next week. He's like one semester away from getting his Masters, huh?"

"No fuckin' kidding," Steve replies with surprise.

"Yeah. Great for him – not so great for *me* right now."

Steve's brows furrow in concentration while he appears to wrack his brain. Then they nearly shoot up to his hairline when he casually asks, as if he's solved the entire puzzle, "How about Natasha?"

Bucky just stares at him; waits for the punchline. But no, *uh, okay*, apparently Steve's being serious.

"Yeah, no, you're right, she's the perfect solution," Bucky says slowly, speaking to Steve as if he was an idiot. "Natasha's the most *obvious* choice to introduce to my family as my new *boyfriend*. Fuck, how the hell didn't *I* think of that?"

Snorting, Steve rolls his eyes. Picking at the rice again, he gives another one of those lazy, jaunty shrugs and replies, "I dunno, man; dress her up and she'd *still* probably make the best-looking dude out of all of your options."

"Not exactly givin' me all that much confidence right now, Rogers."

"She'd *definitely* still make the best impression," the blond adds. He mutters to himself something about *how she'll get a kick out of that*, before pulling out his phone and, from the looks of it, shooting her a text. The entire time his thumbs tap away, he's got a dopey little half-smile on his face. Steve finds *anything* hilarious – particularly himself.

"She's on a date," Bucky reminds him.

“So? She can text me when she’s done.” Steve drops his phone beside him when he’s finished and then lets out a small breath; baby blues roaming back over to Bucky’s profile. Bucky’s chewing his lip in thought and doesn’t realize his friend’s staring. Steve gets a small smile and brings one hand behind his head, using it as a cushion. Nudging Bucky with his toe, that’s when he says, “Well... what about me?”

“Hmm?” Bucky snaps from his thoughts, turning to look at him.

Steve laughs. “I said, what about *me*? M’starting to get a bit offended that I wasn’t even a *consideration* – do I smell or something?”

Bucky rolls his eyes and shoves his leg before stealing back the carton of rice. After swallowing a few small mouthfuls, he shrugs himself; dark brows slightly creased. “I dunno; just didn’t think you’d be interested or I thought you’d have offered by now.”

“Oh, so I’m supposed to be a mind reader – that it?” Steve teases.

“Fuck off,” Bucky says, smiling. He hands back the rice so he can wander into the living room and return with the slightly larger carton of chicken balls. Placing it between them on the bed, Bucky sits back down and pops one of them into his mouth. He notices Steve’s still staring with that boyish grin, so Bucky swallows and then asks, “You’re serious? You’d be cool with that?”

“Yeah,” Steve says casually, pushing himself up so he can get himself in on the chicken ball action. “We just hired on a trainee over at the pub, so we’re overstaffed at the moment as it is. Boss-Man owes me a favour anyways, so, yeah, it’s cool, I can help.”

When Steve flashes him that million-dollar smile again before picking up the carton to sift through with his fingers and dig out the perfect chicken ball, Bucky can’t help but swallow again. This time, it feels much more like a nervous *gulp*.

Because it *hadn’t* necessarily been that Bucky had simply *not thought* to ask Steve for his help. More accurately, it had been a *very* deliberate choice – stemming from the secret that Bucky’s been so damn good at hiding for the past five years...

Just how bad of a *crush* he’s always had on Steve Rogers.

****Chapter 2*: Chapter 2***

It’s almost a fourteen-hour drive from Brooklyn to Nashville. When Bucky drops by Steve’s place in the morning to pick him up, the blond waltzes out the front door of his house with a large duffle bag hanging on his back – and a gigantic box in his arms. He’s wearing a pair of shorts with a black t-shirt; short hair a little messy and that usual (adorable) smile on his face. Bucky feels like his heart’s about to fall out of his ass, he’s so nervous for the upcoming week. Seeing Steve isn’t exactly helping to calm him down, either.

He gets out of the car to grab the duffel bag and load it into the trunk. Glancing at the box, Bucky raises an eyebrow and asks, “What’s that? We’re only goin’ for a *week* – you look like you’re moving out.”

Steve just peers into the box and then tips it forward so Bucky can see. “Can’t do a road trip without the necessities, now can we?” he asks cheerily. It’s absolutely *packed* inside with what can only be described as a college student’s *dream*: cans of pop, junk food up to wazoo, magazines, and – from the looks of it – mixed CDs.

“Who even uses CDs anymore?” Bucky jokes, taking the box and finding a spot for it in the back seat. He has a jack to plug in Apple products, and (though he won’t admit it out loud) had stocked up his iPhone with a bunch of new music just for the occasion.

Steve just shrugs. “C’mon, it’s music for the open road!” he insists. “People didn’t use *iPods* or *iPhones* back in the day – they had mixed tapes or CDs. I spent, like, four hours putting these together.”

Bucky glances back at him from over his shoulder, and can’t help the exasperated smile he gets when he sees the over-exaggerated puppy dog face his friend is giving him. “I even put a bunch of music from the 90s on there?” Steve says playfully. He *knows* that Bucky’s a closet nostalgia buff; classic rock is his jam, but he has a *very* passionate love for the boy and girl bands of the 90s. Aside from his family, Bucky thinks Steve might be the only person who actually knows that.

So he pretends to be unconvinced and thinks about it. Humming loudly, he taps his fingers off the roof of his car, before pulling out a couple of the CDs marked ‘90s SLAM JAM’. Looking through them, he looks to Steve and asks, “Any of these have *Space Jam* on it?”

Steve grins. “The second one.”

Bucky drops the other CDs back in the box, the second case in hand. Raising it in the air, he says nonchalantly, “You twisted my arm. Alright, Rogers, get in. But you start deafening me with your singin’ and we’re turning this off.”

“Aw, c’mon, Buck – you *hafta* sing along to this kind of music!” Steve argues as he opens the passenger door and gets into the car. He’s so tall and large that he needs to adjust the seat to give his long legs more room. Bucky gets back into his seat and starts up the engine. He can see Steve watching him excitedly from the corner of his eye as he sticks the CD into the slot. A few seconds later, and *Ghostbusters* by Ray Parker Jr. starts playing.

Bucky laughs. “Seriously, Rogers?”

But Steve’s pointing at him, already singing along with the track. “*If there’s somethin’ strange in your neighbourhood... Who ya gonna call?*” He looks at Bucky expectantly, as Bucky starts pulling out of the driving; looking over his shoulder to make sure there aren’t any cars coming by.

“M’not singin’,” Bucky says distractedly.

Steve makes a loud buzzing sound. “Wrong answer! C’mon, Buck - *If there’s somethin’ weird and it don’t look good... Who ya gonna call?*” And then he points both index fingers to Bucky and waits.

Bucky rolls his eyes and tries to hide his smile. Under his breaths, he mutters, “Ghostbusters.”

Steve grins and then starts *really* singing along to the song; gesturing with his hands and turning to sing overdramatically Bucky’s way, to get his friend laughing. Bucky keeps rolling his eyes and calling Steve an idiot, but his lips are pursed and he is most *definitely* fighting a monster grin. By the end of the song, every time the word “Ghostbusters” plays, Steve’s cheering it – and even Bucky is practically shouting it along with him.

They chuckle as the instrumentals eventually fade out, only for it to go right into *Backstreet's Back* by the Backstreet Boys. Bucky groans loudly, even though *Steve* knows that *he* knows the lyrics by heart. "This is gonna be a *long* drive, ain't it?" he asks over the music.

Steve just laughs and starts singing along again. Bucky's heart flutters, but he doesn't let it show.

By the time they've passed through Harrisburg, they've gone through two and a half of the CDs and have started in on the snacks. Bucky had given up pretending that he wasn't totally *loving* Steve's dorky music when the *Space Jam* theme song came on. Steve laughed his head off like a giddy child when Bucky got right into it – acting about as overdramatic and goofy as Steve was being. They sang so loudly that Bucky eventually had to give it a rest because his voice was going hoarse.

After Harrisburg, they turn down the music and let it play idly in the background while they chat. They fill each other in on their lives so frequently that there's hardly anything to say that they don't already know, so Steve eventually changes the topic and asks if Bucky's still nervous about seeing his family. Bucky just tightens his grip on the steering wheel and says, "I'm fine." Steve knows better than to push. So instead, he asks to hear about Bucky's family.

"If I'm gonna be spending a week with them, I should probably know at least a *little*," he points out.

He has a good point. Bucky agrees that the more prepared they are, the less likely things will go wrong. It's weird, though, because he's never actually *told* any of his friends in New York about his family or home life all that much. Steve knows that Bucky and his sister are adopted, and that they also have two other siblings. He also knows that Bucky grew up in Indiana, and what his mom and dad's names are. Steve knows that *something* happened to Bucky before he moved to New York that messed up his left arm, but he doesn't know *what* – only that it can be a million degrees outside (sort of like it is now), and Bucky will *still* wear a long-sleeved shirt.

So there's a lot for Bucky to explain. He tries not to let the details get *too* intimate; sticks to the objective facts as much as he can and doesn't really add any of his own commentary. He tells Steve about his parents' jobs, how old his brother and sisters are, what sort of place Shelbyville was like growing up; he talks about when they bought the cottage that they're heading to and describes some of the memories he has from his childhood of playing in the lake and having campfires. Steve tries to casually steer the conversation towards finding out what Bucky was like during high school and stuff – but Bucky just expertly deflects a lot of his questions and evades revealing anything too personal.

It's not about Steve. In fact, Bucky *wishes* he could tell Steve everything there is to know about himself; if he trusted anyone with the personal details of his old life, it's this guy. But it's just not something he talks about... Truthfully, it hurts him sometimes – because he knows he isn't the same guy now that he was back then. Perhaps deep down, he worries that if Steve ever found out the sort of person he *used* to be, he'd no longer be happy with who Bucky is *now*. Maybe he'd wish he knew *that* guy, instead of this one.

Steve's always – for *whatever* reason – liked Bucky exactly for who he is. Personal shame and embarrassment aside, Bucky doesn't want that to change.

Eventually, by about the six hour mark, they fall into a comfortable silence. Bucky pays attention to the road and hums occasionally to the tunes still blaring from the speakers. Steve alternates between staring out his window lazily and reading through the magazines he brought along. Whenever they drive through a slightly busier town, he'll initiate a game of Eye Spy. In Wytheville, they have their third pit stop to use a washroom and stretch their legs. Bucky has a quick cigarette while Steve offers to fill the gas tank and cover the cost, since Bucky paid for the first one.

Steve falls asleep during the next stretch. Bucky's thankful for it, because he can think better when he feels like he's technically alone – but it also makes him even more nervous, because when he's alone with his thoughts is when they best start running away from him. He tries his best, but now he can't stop worrying about all the ways in which this can go horribly wrong. Seven days is a *long* time to pretend to be in a relationship, much less with your best friend. Much less than *that* when it's someone you genuinely *do* like.

Bucky should've thought about this whole thing a little harder. What if he isn't a good enough actor and his family sees right through it? He figures that since he *does* actually really like Steve, pretending like that shouldn't be a problem – in theory. But now he has to actually confront all the things he's felt for Steve over the last five years... Smile at him adoringly and offer up the odd PDA so nothing looks suspicious. Can they go the entire week finding excuses not to kiss each other? Would that be crossing a line and making it too weird for them? And what if Bucky *does* have to kiss him? He isn't sure how he's supposed to handle that.

The hardest part is that he's *seen* all the rom-coms; he knows *exactly* how a trope like this goes: they'll go to the cottage and fake it for Bucky's family. But then being able to actually *act* like that with Steve will have Bucky falling head over feet, until before he knows it, he's gone and fallen in love with the guy. Then someone will somehow play Matchmaker, and Steve will turn around and profess his own feelings – and *hey*, it'll turn out Steve likes Bucky, too.

Then they all live happily-ever-after, the end.

Except that *isn't* how this week's going to go, and Bucky knows it. He's known Steve for five years. He'd been secretly thrilled when he discovered Steve's sexuality - because with the way girls always turn their heads and glue their eyes to him the second he walks into *any* room, Bucky hadn't even considered that Steve was gay. Bucky *hates* stereotypes, or judging a person before you actually get to know them, yet he'd been just as guilty of assuming Steve was straight due to the vibe he gave off. But nah – it just turned out that he was an *artist*, and has a very deep love and appreciation for the human body (women's, in particular; finds them so incredibly beautiful and inspiring).

If Steve ever thought of Bucky in that way, Bucky would've known by now. Yet the fact is, Steve's never made a move; never even hinted that he liked Bucky as more than a friend. Well, in Steve's defense, it's not like *Bucky's* ever done that, either, but... Still. Bucky's pretty confident that he would've been able to tell.

So, what will more than likely happen is: they'll get through the week, and Steve will play his part perfectly. Bucky will dig his hole even deeper and actually let himself believe that *maybe* Steve's not completely faking it. Then when they head back home, he'll be smacked in the face with reality again and life will suck for a while until he gets over it.

Steve shifts in his sleep, his breathing catching and then evening out again. It pulls Bucky from his thoughts as he glances over. It's actually unfair how good-looking Steve is; Bucky couldn't put it into words if he tried. You just tend to take one look at him and think, *Wow...* Their friends have jokingly suggested before that Steve should take up modelling, but Steve just laughs and says he could never keep a straight face for so long.

"*I'm good,*" he always replies whenever someone brings it up. "*I'd rather just make art of other people.*"

Bucky knows the truth, though – about how Steve doesn't actually think he's nearly as attractive as everyone else seems to think. He'd confided that in Bucky one night, after pizza and beer and bad movies; revealed how he used to be underweight and sickly growing up, and that it wasn't until high school and a whole lot of time, devotion, and *puberty* finally kicking in that Steve got the body he has now. Everyone drools over him these days, but no one had paid any attention to him back then.

Bucky had asked to see a picture, and in his tipsy state, Steve searched through the old photo albums he had packed away in his closet until he found one from when he was fifteen. Steve rarely ever frowns, but he'd outright *grimaced* the entire time Bucky looked at that photo. He'd looked so different back then... Tiny and frail-looking and sort of awkward.

Bucky hadn't understood why no one wanted him – he thought Steve looked adorable. He kept those thoughts to himself, of course.

He's crashed at Bucky's enough times that Bucky's seen him sleep before, but it never makes his heart clench any less powerfully. The guy has unnaturally long eyelashes, and when he's passed out like this, they kiss the tops of his cheekbones and cast the prettiest shadow. Steve isn't a snorer, but his lips are always parted just the slightest bit, and he looks so innocent.

Bucky wishes Steve didn't have this kind of effect on him. Frowning, he looks back to the stretch of highway in front of him and tries to distract himself from his (*loud*) thoughts.

This is going to be a very, very long week...

By the time Steve wakes up, they've only got about an hour left until they hit Nashville. Sleepily, he yawns and tries his best to stretch out while he asks for the dozenth time if Bucky wants him to take over and do some of the driving. As always, Bucky assures him that he doesn't mind. Steve's excited all over again once he discovers how close they finally are. Bucky's formulated a game plan in the time Steve's been snoozing. His family is *going* to ask questions and want details of their relationship, so it'd be best if they're on the same page. He's thought up a bunch of little facts about them – *how they met, how long they've been dating, what their first date was*, etc. – and explains them all very carefully to Steve.

Unfortunately, his friend has the attention span of a toddler when he's excited. Bucky has to keep repeating himself and asking Steve to repeat the facts back to him. When he's in the middle of relaying the fake story of their first date, Steve's bouncing his knee up and down and interrupts, "I wanna have a cool name – can I be, like, *Drax* or something?"

Bucky looks from the road to Steve, back to the road again, thrown off by the question. "Are you even listenin' to me anymore?"

"Yeah, yeah, I am, Buck; you've already told me this story. It's cool, I got it – I just thought that we could have a little more fun with it, y'know?" Steve replies.

"You're not havin' a *fake name*, Steve," Bucky says, sighing. "My parents already know what your name is – just like they *do* know we were friends before we 'started dating', remember? They've heard about you before."

"Damn," Steve mutters, "that could've been hilarious." Then he perks up and gives Bucky a weird little smile as he asks, "Wait, you've told your parents about me before?"

"Well--"

"What'd you tell 'em about me?"

"Nothin' like that," Bucky insists, keeping his cool. "I mean, we've been friends since I moved to New York, Steve. We hang out all the time. You were bound to come up in conversation eventually." Trying to save face, he adds, "They know about Tasha and the rest of the gang, too. Tasha actually came with me one weekend a few years back."

"Oh, okay," Steve replies – *and is it all in Bucky's head that he sounds a bit disappointed?* It has to be.

It's close to nine p.m. when they finally pull up to the cabin. Bucky hasn't been there since the summer before he left for New York, and he has to admit that he's missed it. Steve stares out the window and says, "Wow, Buck... This place is gorgeous." Bucky knows it is – made entirely out of wood, it has that old feel to it while still looking very modern. It's two floors high, with an open-windowed concept. Buried deep in the countryside, about twenty minutes out of town, it has a fire pit right in front of the wrap-around deck, surrounded by wooden chairs. Trees blanket the perimeter, sealing them in, and even from where they park, the lake is clearly visible. There's a sense of peace that always washes over Bucky whenever he comes here. It reminds him of simpler times.

Grabbing their stuff, they leave the car unlocked (the cottages are so far and few between that there's never any fear of anyone breaking in) and head inside. Because he'd told them he and Steve would be arriving late, Bucky assumes his youngest sister, Amy, is already asleep. "Hello!" he calls out (trying not to be *too* loud), dropping his own bag to the floor and kicking off his shoes. He hears his mom squealing excitedly from what sounds like the living room, and then talking.

Bucky heads down the hallway, beckoning for Steve to follow. "I'll give you the grand tour once we say hi," he explains. He stops in the doorway to the large kitchen when he sees Rebecca in the middle of pouring herself a late night cup of coffee. With her headphones wedged snugly in her ears, she clearly hadn't heard him come in.

It's habit that gets Bucky leaning against the frame, crossing his arms with a smirk. "I must have the wrong house," he starts reciting.

Rebecca looks to him quickly, jumping a little as she tugs the buds out of her ears. Getting a grin, Bucky repeats himself and so she recites back, "Sister!" Steve's in the background, watching in confusion as Rebecca giggles and Bucky strides forward, wrapping her up in a bear hug. "Oh, I missed you so much!" she says. "They waited up all night for you, you know."

"It's a long way from West Africa," Bucky replies, letting her go and stealing her coffee mug to over-dramatically take a big whiff, sighing with content. Steve looks at them like they have four heads between them. "Ohh, coffee," Bucky groans, inhaling again. Then he smirks at his sister and adds, "I brought you something from far away."

Rebecca pretends to giggle. "Really?"

Bucky mimes pulling something out of his back pocket and hands the invisible present to her. She pretends to mull it over, faking a touched little smile and pressing one hand over her heart. Reaching out, she gives Bucky's shoulder a light shove, and Bucky asks, "What're you doin'?"

"*You're* my present this year," Rebecca answers.

Steve's thoroughly weirded-out look intensifies when suddenly they make loud kissing sounds – scrunching their faces up – before singing at the exact same time, "*The best part of waking up, is Folger's in your cuuuup!*" Then they burst out laughing for real, as Bucky yanks her in and gives her a proper hug.

"Uh..." Bucky hears Steve say from behind him.

Shit. Bucky had momentarily forgot about him. Mortified, he turns to look at him as his face goes beet red. Scratching the back of his head, he mumbles, "Uh... Right, that. That was this old commercial... Folger's – y'know, like the coffee? Uh, it was really weird and, uh--"

"Hilariously inappropriate, so it's always been sort of an inside joke," Rebecca cuts in, saving the day. Looking Steve from head to toe, she walks up to him and holds out her hand. "Becca - Bucky's incredibly awesome little sister. You are?"

Steve smiles normally again, chuckling, and shakes her hand. "Steve," he says, "nice to meet you."

"Wow, Bucky, he's actually hot," she muses thoughtfully, already poking a finger against Steve's arms and chest. They haven't even been there for five minutes and Bucky already feels like dying. He quickly tells Rebecca to stop, but Steve just laughs and assures Bucky that it's alright. Rebecca, all the while, keeps poking Steve.

"You feel like you're made out of bricks," she says. "Got a brother?"

"Only child, sorry," Steve replies playfully.

"Damn," she says, lowering her hand. Shrugging, she turns back to Bucky and steals her coffee cup back. "Get your own," she says, before whispering to him, "*Nice, Buck.*"

"Will you shut up?" Bucky whispers back. Steve's clearly heard them; smirking at Bucky and exhaling a small chuckle.

Bucky opens his mouth to probably embarrass himself further, when the rest of his family piles into the kitchen. Annie lets out another excited squeal and then rushes towards Bucky, pulling him into a hug. Bucky smiles and squeezes her back, saying, “Hi, mom.” His dad, meanwhile, holds out a big hand for Steve to shake and introduces himself. Bucky can faintly hear his friend saying, “Hi, I’m Steve. Your place is beautiful, thanks for inviting me.”

Bucky introduces Steve properly to everyone. Ben’s fourteen, and instead of shaking Steve’s hand, he gives him a sort of high five – immediately bonding when Steve asks Ben if he likes video games. Of *course* he does, so when Ben asks if he’s ever played Call of Duty and Steve replies with a smile, “Duh, obviously, dude,” Ben challenges him to a round sometime during his stay. Steve gives him a cool smile and accepts. *Well, that was easy.*

His mother looks like she’s about to swoon herself off her feet and into the clouds when she gets a good look at Steve – and Bucky imagines she’s just *loving* this. Bucky hasn’t brought anyone home to meet them since the twelfth grade. She glances between Steve and her son as if her eyes were made out of hearts. Bucky’s mindful to keep a *little* distance between him and Steve, while trying to appear as casual as possible.

The make-it-or-break-it family member is Amy. At only six-years-old, she isn’t afraid to speak her mind or say when she doesn’t like something – or *someone*. She also happens to be incredibly close to her oldest brother, and doesn’t like other people getting his attention when he visits. Bucky assumed she was already in bed, but apparently she’d thrown a tantrum when they tried to get her to lie down, so they let her stay up until Bucky got there. Over her clothes, she’s wearing a little crown on her head of long, blonde hair, matching her puffy tutu and the wand held tightly in her hand. The moment she sees Bucky, she runs over to him and he scoops her up. During the introductions, she’s latched to him and staring at Steve with a feisty little glare.

“Who’s this little one?” Steve asks once he’s properly met everyone but her. Giving her a smile, he laughs, “M’guessin’ she already doesn’t like me very much.”

“Aww, she’s just protective,” Bucky answers. Giving her a little bounce in his arms, he looks to Amy and says, “You wanna meet Steve? He’s real nice, I promise.” She stares at the blond hair for a few seconds before jutting out her bottom lip and shaking her head, glare intensifying. Everyone laughs. Bucky just shrugs one shoulder and assures his friend, “She just needs some time to get used to you. She’ll come around.”

“It’s okay. I’m sure I’m a lot scarier than I look,” Steve says before flashing Amy another harmless smile. Bucky’s never seen Steve interact with children before, and the way he suddenly comes across like nothing but a big teddy bear makes his stomach feel like it’s dropping. Clearing his throat, he catches his dad asking them how the drive went. This gets them chatting for a few minutes.

Steve smiles politely and seems to have no trouble being a part of the conversation, as if he’s already completely comfortable with Bucky’s family and has known them far longer than just a few minutes. He doesn’t even seem to care whenever Rebecca makes jokes about how weirdly good-looking he is; clearly surprised that Bucky actually *hadn’t* been lying about having a boyfriend. Bucky’s an adult, but not above sneaking her a quick glance when the others aren’t looking so he can give her a

triumphant smirk and mouth, '*Told you.*' She flips him the finger, and Bucky chuckles. He's missed her.

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In the middle of the conversation, Bucky feels Amy start wriggling around in his grip, so he distractedly lowers her to the ground and then straightens, continuing to talk to his parents. When he notices her marching up to Steve, he forgets what he's saying and looks over to them. Curiously, his parents glance over, too.

She's sizing him up – looks so *tiny* standing in front of Steve's huge build. Face defiant and voice guarded, she puts her hands on her little hips for almost a minute before huffing out, "I'm a Princess."

Steve's voice is light and playful, smile expanding and he faking surprise as he says, "You are? Well my, my – I was *wonderin'* why you were wearin' that tiara. Is this your castle?"

She narrows her eyes at him and then gives one affirmative nod. "Yes," she says. "You have to do what I say."

"Amy," their mother cuts in. "Manners, honey – that isn't how we treat guests."

"Oh no, Mrs. Proctor, it's fine," Steve says. Lowering down to one knee so they're now at eye level, Steve narrows his own eyes with that adorable smile and then asks, "Do I have to call you Princess Amy?"

Amy thinks about it and then nods again.

"Okay."

She surprises everyone by suddenly raising her wand and bopping Steve on the head with it. Bucky straightens, ready to scold her for her behaviour, when Steve lets out a peel of amused laughter and exclaims, "What was *that* for, your Highness?"

"Now *you're* a Princess, too," she says definitively.

"Oh, *I'm* a Princess now?"

"Mhm."

"Do I get a tiara?" Amy thinks about it, then shakes her head, crossing her arms. Steve pretends to think about it and then nods, narrowing one eye and whispering, "Okay, but we can't tell anyone, okay? There should only be *one* Princess in this castle, and if they find out you have the magic to make *other* people Princesses, they're all gonna want to be Princesses, too." He looks so scandalized by the idea that even *Amy* can't help from getting a smile at that.

"Okay," she whispers back.

"Okay," Steve agrees, giving her a little wink. He straightens back up and looks to Bucky to say something, when Amy grabs his hand and starts tugging him away.

"Excuse me, little missy," Bucky calls after her. "Just where do you think you're goin'?"

"Showing him around the castle!" the little voice calls back.

"After that, it's bedtime for you, sweetie," Annie adds.

"Kay!"

Bucky looks to the rest of them and then throws on his best, most convincing smile. It comes out a lot more awkward than he means it to. Gesturing after them, he says, "I should go... Make sure she doesn't get him lost in her toys or somethin'..."

“Okay, honey; after that we can sit down and have some dinner,” his mom says. Bucky hadn’t even realized there was something cooking away in the oven. He should’ve assumed that his mom had *insisted* they wait up for him before having a bite to eat, so Bucky goes to catch up with Steve and Amy to make sure his little sister doesn’t dawdle.

It’s absolutely *adorable* watching the way Steve interacts with Amy. She only lets go of his hand when she suddenly tells Steve that she wants him to be her ‘horsey’. Then she climbs onto his back and directs him throughout the cottage, and Steve just listens to every word she says with the utmost patience. He keeps shooting Bucky warm smiles and commenting on how beautiful the place is as they make their way to the top floor. Amy shows him her bedroom and asks Steve if he wants to play.

“Tomorrow,” Steve promises her, sitting down on her bed so she can hop off his back. She looks disappointed, so Steve picks up one of her stuffed animals and holds it in front of his face; eyes peering at her from over top of its head. “*When Steve Rogers makes a promise, he always keeps it,*” he says in a high-pitched voice. Bucky snorts behind him. “*If you go to bed like a good little Princess, tomorrow we can do aaaaaanything you want for a whole hour.*”

She narrows her eyes at him. “Anything?” she repeats.

“*Anything!*”

She gives it her careful consideration. “I wanna play dollhouse,” she tells him. “And we can draw, and you can even use my special crayons. And I don’t let anyone use those,” she tells him with all the vehemence a six-year-old can muster. She tells him that information as if revealing the secret of life, making Bucky grin as Steve shoots him a quick smile.

“*Really?*” he asks, still speaking through the teddy bear. “*You’d let me use your most specialist crayons?*” Amy nods, now smiling again, too, so Steve says, “*Thank you, Princess! I’ll make sure to draw you somethin’ extra special.*”

“*After we play dollhouse,*” she clarifies.

Steve chuckles and lowers the teddy bear. “*After we play dollhouse,*” he says, tossing it over by her pillow.

Bucky heads over to her and picks her back up. “Alright, Peanut, you heard mom, it’s time for bed. You brush your teeth?”

“Mhm,” she says, nodding. “Before you got here.”

“Hmm...” Bucky pretends he isn’t convinced. Trying to look into her mouth, he says, “I dunno. Let me see.”

She giggles and then bares her teeth. Bucky looks at them, humming loudly – not noticing the way Steve’s looking over at them with an adoring smile. “You *sure* you brushed your teeth?” Bucky teases, frowning. “Even the back ones?” Amy just giggles again and nods, before exhaling a tuft of air in Bucky’s face. He squeezes his eyes shut and throws his head back, playing along. “Yuuuuck! You didn’t brush your teeth at *all*, little missy! What’re ya tryin’ to do, *kill* me? Huh? Huh?” Tossing her onto the mattress, he starts tickling her sides long enough to get her screaming with laughter, before nodding and pulling the blankets down.

“Alright, alright, I believe ya,” he says. Amy crawls under the covers and reaches up for her big brother, so Bucky bends down and gives her a hug. After kissing her forehead, he tells her that he’ll go grab their mom and she’ll be up in a second. Amy likes having a story read to her every night before she goes to sleep. They say their goodnights and are about to head for the door when Amy says, “I want a hug from Steve, too.”

They exchange a small look of surprise. Bucky’s heart just about melts at how *happy* that makes his friend look; how he’s won over the toughest member of the family so quickly. Winking at Bucky, he heads back over to the bed and leans down, giving Amy a hug before saying, “G’night, Princess.” Then they head downstairs, switching places with Annie so she can go read Amy her story, while Bucky takes over setting up the dining room table.

About twenty minutes later and they’re all sitting down to enjoy some homemade lasagna. Rebecca sits opposite Bucky, kicking at his shin lightly every few minutes, and Bucky kicking back. They become legitimate children around each other, and sometimes he’ll give Steve an apologetic look when he remembers that he has company. Steve just keeps chuckling and smiling over at him, as if to say, *It’s okay*. Steve’s never seen Bucky act like this before... Bucky hopes he isn’t put off by it.

It’s nice to be back with his family again, but Bucky still feels on edge - because this is the first real conversation they’re having, and he knows what’s about to come. They all engage in casual chatter; fill Bucky in on what’s been going on with their lives, and Bucky fills them in on his – about what he’s doing at work, how his apartment is, *yes, he’s doing well, yes, he’s happy*, etc. Then they start asking Steve questions to learn more about him, and Steve answers them effortlessly. He’s a much better storyteller than Bucky, that’s for sure. It’s both a relief and fucking *nerve-wracking*, how quickly his parents seem to like Steve.

Although, Bucky’s pretty convinced that his mom’s just so damn thrilled that Bucky brought anyone at *all*, that she probably would’ve been enamoured with *anyone* Bucky introduced them to. The fact that Steve’s just about the greatest guy ever is merely a bonus.

But then of course, the *real* questions start...

And Bucky can’t believe that all it takes it *one* for them to get it wrong.

It’s a simple one: *So how long have you two been dating?*

They’d discussed this in the car; they’ve got this. He’d only repeated himself on that one about seven times, and Steve had said he’d been listening. All the same, when he opens his mouth and answers, “*Six months*,” Steve says at the exact same time, “*A year*.”

It takes everyone a second, but then his mom’s blinking in confusion, his dad’s looking between them, and Rebecca... Rebecca’s narrowing her eyes right at Bucky. Bucky just stares down at the middle of the table, eyes glazing over and face blank. How the *hell* did they just manage to shit the bed on that one *that* quickly? He looks to Steve at the exact moment that Steve looks to him, and Steve – for a fraction of a second – looks just as unsure of what just happened. Bucky’s internally panicking too much at the moment to even think of getting pissed with Steve for forgetting something so simple. All he can think is, *Help!* and hope to god that Steve’s somehow learned how to read minds in the last ten seconds.

“Uh,” Steve starts quickly, still looking to Bucky. Then he glances back to the others and throws on a smile. “Well, *officially* it’s been six months – but we’ve been seeing each other for about a year,” he improvises.

“Right,” Bucky adds lamely.

“Wow!” Annie says, genuinely surprised. “That’s a lot longer than I’d expected. Why didn’t you tell us about him sooner, sweetie?”

“Yeah, explain why you never told us about him,” Rebecca adds casually, still narrowing her eyes at her big brother.

Bucky’s thrown off, already panicking. He’d had such a set plan that starting it off on *this* footing has him forgetting everything else he’d planned for them to say. Trying to gather his thoughts and appear as natural at this as Steve, he answers, “Well, we were friends first, and... we didn’t really know for a while if it was anything serious, so...”

“So we kept it private until recently,” Steve finishes, coming to his rescue. Giving Bucky a reassuring smile, he adds, “It was a big decision for us to take the next step, so we didn’t want any added pressure from our friends and stuff. We just wanted to see where it went first.” To be extra convincing, he reaches out and threads his fingers with Bucky’s right hand that’d been resting on the table. Bucky’s never held his hand before... It’s warm, and if it were a *real* gesture, Bucky would think it grips his almost possessively.

That seems to ease the awkwardness in the air. Annie looks to their hands and gets a lovesick smile. “That’s so precious!” she says excitedly. “So how did this happen? When did you two know?”

Bucky wants to slink into the floor. This conversation is *so* much more uncomfortable for him than he’d anticipated – namely because now he’s drawing blindly at straws. He should’ve written everything down on cue cards or something. He’s *completely* forgotten *that* made-up story, too. Everyone’s looking to Bucky for the answer, even Steve. So much for him having been listening in the car. There’s a second of silence, as Bucky keeps staring at the table nervously and trying desperately to remember the right words.

“Well, I knew from the moment I met him,” Steve offers quickly. Bucky glances over at him in confusion, as Steve gives him a smile and squeezes his hand. Then he looks back at Bucky’s parents and explains: “I was in my first year of University, and I’d always go to the library between classes to do some studyin’. I always had this one table I liked to sit at, but one day I went in and I saw this guy had already taken it. They were the kind of tables that have a divider in the middle, with one facin’ the other, y’know? So I took the seat across from him and decided to do my homework there.”

Bucky’s brows knit in confusion. Everyone, even Rebecca, is looking at Steve now as he relays the story. What stands out to Bucky is the fact that... this isn’t made up. This is actually what happened when they’d first met all those years ago. He watches Steve laugh, saying, “...And he kept grumblin’ to himself about *whatever* he was reading, so I started making funny faces at him from over the divider. At first, he just kept lookin’ at me like I was the biggest weirdo he ever meet, but eventually I was able to get a smile out of him. Didn’t say a word to me that day; not until about a week later, when

we took the same table for about the tenth time. We've basically been friends ever since – but I knew from the moment I got that first smile outta him that he was special.”

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Annie looks about ready to fall over, she's so giddy. She tries to keep it in check as she comments about how *cute* that is. Ben makes a face to himself – still too young and immature to think a story like that about his big brother is anything other than *weird* – and Rebecca turns to him and starts teasing him for it. Bucky, meanwhile, hasn't looked away from Steve's face yet.

“You remembered that?” he asks quietly, so no one can hear him.

Steve gives him that warm smile again; brushes his thumb over Bucky's knuckles, and Bucky can feel his heart hammering away in his chest. “Of course I do,” Steve murmurs. And Bucky thinks, *Fuck*. He really *is* good at this. Bucky was completely right about how he'd imagine this whole week would go. Only this is going to be much, much worse.

He says little for the rest of dinner; only offers up little bits of conversation, but mostly just picks at his food and keeps looking back to Steve. His mom asks more questions and Steve improvises more stories – tells them about their ‘first date’, agrees with her whenever she lovingly looks to her son and comments about how wonderful he is... Basically covers for Bucky's ass. Bucky can't believe how smoothly Steve is acting with his family. He doesn't seem to mind one bit when they start to talk his ear off, or when Rebecca harmlessly pokes fun, drilling him with questions of her own. Bucky suspects that she'd still been a little suspicious of the whole thing, but by the time they're cleaning up and bringing the dishes into the kitchen, she seems a whole lot more convinced.

She even confesses to Bucky, “I really thought you'd been lying. I guess you can say ‘I told you so’ again if you want.”

Bucky gets a tiny smile - feeling a *little* more relieved that their plan is so far working - and quietly says back, “I'd much rather keep it as an I.O.U. for a later date.”

“You *would*, moron,” she answers, but she's smiling, too. Steve's in the living room, Ben showing him his video game collection while Bucky and Rebecca take care of the dishes. “I like him, though,” she then says.

“That's good,” Bucky replies. He isn't really sure what to say to that. He certainly isn't going to say what's *really* on his mind and reply, *Me too*.

She hands him the last plate for him to dry. “And I mean, he's obviously nuts about you.”

Bucky pauses, staring down at the plate. What he *wants* to insist is, *No he isn't*, but instead he can only ask, “You think?”

“You blind or something? He was practically fawning all over you the entire conversation; it was almost puke-worthy,” she says, giving him a strange look. Rolling her eyes, she empties the sink and then flicks some water at him. “Don't act *too* surprised – he *is* dating you for a reason, y'know. People usually tend to like the other person if they're dating them.”

Bucky meets her eyes and then does his best to nod casually, going back to drying the plate before stacking it away in the cupboard. Rebecca says goodnight with a small hug and leaves to go hole up in her room. Bucky stays in the kitchen and stares off with a frown. Steve hadn't let go of his hand *once* during dinner. Bucky knows, because he can hardly remember breathing that entire time. And he kept smiling his way, like one *would* smile at someone they care about... like *that*.

Shit, Bucky hasn't even been there for a *day* and he's already reading into things that aren't there. Mentally berating himself for being so stupid, he shakes his head and goes into the living room to say goodnight to everyone. After the day of driving they've had, he just wants to get some sleep. Steve follows him upstairs after saying goodnight as well (and not even looking weird when Annie gives him a hug, like *Steve's already part of the family when they've only known him for a few hours*). That's just Bucky's family in a nutshell; always so welcoming of everyone. It can sometimes be a little much, though, for people who aren't used to it. Steve seems to find it the most normal thing in the world.

Bucky's room is unchanged from the last time he'd been there, if only tidied up a bit. He'll unpack in the morning, so he just grabs his toiletries and uses the bathroom to brush his teeth and change into his pajama pants. When he goes back into his room, he's surprised to see Steve stretched out on his double-bed, grinning at him like a dope.

Yeah, Bucky *wishes* they could share the bed – but once his door is closed and it's just them, the game is put on hold. There's absolutely no justification for keeping up the act when there's no one else around to see it, as much as Bucky wouldn't mind. (And that's an understatement.) Reacting on autopilot, he says, "So you're taking the bed, then?"

Steve glances to the rolled-up air mattress they'd snuck in with them and then says casually, "If the house was on fire and someone came runnin' in, wouldn't it look weird to see one of us sleeping on the floor?"

"Nice try, Casanova, but you're gonna need better pick-up moves than that," Bucky replies. He pulls the deflated mattress out of its package and rolls it out on the floor next to the bed. He turns on the little device to inflate it, before going into his closet and grabbing the extra pillow and blanket. Steve gets off the bed, chuckling.

"Nah, it's your bed, *you* sleep on it," he offers.

"You're the guest; I'll be fine on the floor."

"Now *what* sort of boyfriend would I be if I let you do that?" Steve jokes. He gauges the firmness of the mattress before deeming it ready. He seals it closed and then approaches Bucky to grab the stuff from his arms. Bucky watches him set up the air mattress with a frown.

"Steve, I'm more than willing to sleep on--"

"Bucky, relax," Steve says gently, casting him a smile. "I like air mattresses; reminds me of camping. Both of us couldn't fit on your bed anyways."

Bucky's ears burn as he once again nitpicks what Steve could mean by that. *Nothing*, he tries to remind himself. *The answer is nothing*. Steve doesn't mean *anything* by that because he's just doing what his job here is to do: play his part. And he's *always* joked like this with Bucky, so Bucky can't go misreading it now. Nodding to himself, he waits until Steve's lying down and comfortable before he turns off the light and pads over to the bed. He climbs in and stares up at the ceiling, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the darkness.

After a few minutes, he hears Steve say quietly, "I really like your family, Buck."

"They seem to like you, too."

"Does your ma always get this excited when you bring someone home?"

Bucky chews his lip. *No*, not always. But that's because it's been years since Bucky *has*. "She used to," he chooses to say. "It's been a while; she's just happy for me."

"Mm," he hears Steve hum in agreement. "It was cute." Bucky says nothing.

After another couple minutes pass, Bucky hears Steve shuffle on the mattress, and when he speaks, it sounds like he's facing Bucky's direction. "You okay, after tonight?" he asks.

"Yeah... I don't really know whether to punch you for forgettin' everything I told you, or thank you for saving my ass."

"Your stories weren't convincing anyways," Steve teases.

"Punching it *is*, then," Bucky says flatly.

Steve laughs. "I thought I did okay... They seemed to believe it. That good enough for you to forgive me?"

"I guess," Bucky says, playing along with a loud sigh. "Don't think I can think of a time when I was ever able to stay mad at you before, so..."

"Guess it's a good thing I didn't break that streak then. Thanks for inviting me here, Buck."

"You're welcome," Bucky replies slowly. Frowning again, he glances in Steve's direction before tucking up his covers and turning onto the side away from him. After a few seconds, he thinks he can hear Steve turning over, too. Bucky's blind-sighted by the overwhelming urge to ask Steve a million questions; questions he shouldn't be asking because Bucky really *should* know better than to get his hopes up... Questions he's certain he doesn't really want the answers to.

"Steve?" he whispers.

There's a small delay, but then Steve whispers back, "Yeah?"

Bucky stares ahead at the wall. Nope. He can't do it. He *doesn't* want the answers. "...Goodnight."

"...Goodnight, Buck."

(It takes Bucky *hours* to finally fall asleep.)

***Chapter 3*: Chapter 3**

Bucky doesn't fall asleep comfortably until almost six in the morning. So to say he feels like he got hit by a *truck* when his internal clock wakes him up by ten-thirty is a colossal understatement. He opens up one eye enough to peer at his alarm clock, register the time, and then close it again as he buries his face into his pillow with a loud groan. Try as he might, his stupid body won't let him fall back asleep.

Bucky's alone in the bedroom. He isn't sure what time Steve himself got up at, but the guy must've tiptoed as if he was made of air, just to make sure he didn't wake his sleeping 'boyfriend'. But he doesn't know this at first, so when he rolls over and opens his mouth to hoarsely call out Steve's name and wake him, too, he's surprised to see the air mattress all rolled up and back in its bag. The blanket and pillow are nowhere in sight, so he must've folded those and stuffed them back into the closet, too.

Something about that makes Bucky feel strangely *lonely*, because... well, how nice would it be to roll over and wake up to the image of Steve's face right in front of his? The peaceful stillness his features relax into whenever he's dreaming... or perhaps, seeing Steve already smiling his way before whispering, "Mornin', Buck"? That's exactly the sort of thing his family *assumes* happens between them every morning, after all – what with how 'in love' with each other they're pretending to be. Bucky rolls onto his back, zoning out as he stares up at the ceiling.

He pictures what they would look like together, lying in one bed... Knows his best friend's scent off by heart and has little difficulty imagining how it'd feel to wake up to that smell; be wrapped up in it, better and more comforting than any blanket... If this were fucking *real*, Bucky wouldn't have to guess. It could just be his life, and then his life could be *awesome* for a change; not feel so fucking hectic and scattered all the time (even though three-quarters of the blame for that falls on Bucky's own shoulders).

But no. Instead, he gets to wake up *alone* in bed and *alone* in his room. Alone with his thoughts, as usual, and they're already getting on his nerves. They'd been what kept him up until fucking *sunrise*. Jesus, it's only Saturday today. He and Steve don't head back to New York for a whole seven days. Bucky needs to get this shit under control and on *lockdown*, because he's not going to survive it if he lets himself feel all the things he felt all night.

That he's feeling again now.

Moving sluggishly, he forces himself out of bed, scratching at his messy bedhead and yawning as he takes the stairs two at a time. He doesn't hear the boisterous sounds of people talking over each other – only Amy and his mom. When he walks past the living room, his dad is reading a book and enjoying what's probably his third cup of coffee already. Mark looks over to him with a little smile and says, "Morning, kiddo."

"Mornin'," Bucky replies, still sounding a little on the *zombie* side. Never breaking his stride, he continues into the dining room that's connected to the kitchen. Annie is starting a new pot of coffee while Bucky's little sister munches on some Cheerios at the table.

“Bucket!” she calls over to him excitedly, face breaking out into an adorable grin. Despite how sleepy and in need of properly waking up he is, Amy never fails to put a smile on Bucky’s face - especially when she uses that little name she’d started calling him since she’d been old enough to talk. Aside from Steve, Amy’s just about the one thing guaranteed to melt Bucky’s heart and turn him into a sap. He heads over to her and bends down, giving the top of her head a kiss.

“Mornin’, Peanut,” he replies. Glancing to his mother, he greets to her, too. “Where is everyone?” he asks, looking back to the mostly vacant living room.

“Down in the lake. Steve said he felt in the mood for an early morning swim, so Ben and Rebecca decided to join him.” Annie gets a little, playful smirk. “Ben seems to really like him. You might’ve been replaced, you know.”

“That’s ‘cause Steve’s new and shiny,” Bucky says, walking over to her to give the side of his mom’s head a little peck. He rummages through the cupboards, retrieving a mug as he reaches for the coffee pot with the other hand. “I’m old and boring. But the joke’s on him, ‘cause *Steve’s* old and boring, too.” Smiling to himself, he adds, “At least in the meantime, I won’t hafta be the one forced to play *Halo* with him every night.”

Annie breathes out a small chuckle, turning so she can lean back against the counter. She regards her son for a few seconds before smiling warmly. “We’re all happy to have you home, honey. And that you brought Steve – he seems like a very pleasant young man.”

“M’glad you like him,” Bucky answers, making sure not to maintain any eye contact when he says it. Inside, he feels like his mom’s words punch him in the gut. He has to bite his tongue to stop himself from bursting out into an uncontrollable rant of just *how amazing* Steve really is, because she really has no idea. All he can do is smile tightly at her when he finally does meet her gaze again.

“Are you happy?” she then asks after a brief pause. Bucky can see how light and casual she’s trying to seem, but he knows that tone. She really *has* been concerned for his well-being, from the sounds of it. “I see you’re still wearing those long-sleeved shirts. Sweetie, it’s practically ninety degrees outside, you’re going to get sun stroke--”

Sighing, Bucky looks away again and replies quietly, “Yes, mom, I’m happy. Okay?” Trying to change the topic as swiftly as possible, he does his best to keep his tone even as he continues, “You always ask me that whenever you call, and it’s always usually whenever I’d tell you that I wasn’t seein’ anyone. You know, tons of people are single by choice, mom. Even if I wasn’t in a relationship, being unattached wouldn’t mean there was somethin’ wrong with me, or that I’d automatically be sad or somethin’.”

“James, you know that’s not at all what I mean whenever I ask,” she says. “You know just as well as I do that that had *nothing* to do with your sexuality. Your father and I – *all* of us, we’ve always been one-hundred percent supportive about who you are; whether you’re *gay* or *straight*, or *bisexual* or *not sexual at all*. So don’t for one second try and make it sound like we of all people would be ignorant towards that sort of thing.”

Her tone is sharper and just a tad hurt. Instantly, Bucky feels like an asshole. Whatever front he puts on to the world *aside*, he really doesn't like upsetting his mom. Shoulders sagging, he frowns and replies, "You're right... I'm sorry. It's just... that's how it *felt* sometimes, when all of you wouldn't stop askin' me about it every time we talked. I just wish you'd take my word for it more."

"And *I* wish you'd feel you could open up to me like you used to," Annie replies gently. "I mean, you and Steve... a whole *year*? And you never felt you could tell us? *Why*, sweetheart?"

Fuck, is this ever a difficult conversation. Now Bucky feels like shit for something that's not even *true*, but what else can he do but go along with it? Trying to remember the reasoning Steve gave the night before, he repeats that he just didn't want any pressure being put on his relationship until they were completely certain that it was a long-term thing.

"I *am* sorry though," he says, using the *real* guilt he's feeling to make the lie sound truthful. "It's nothin' personal to do with you guys. You know I love you, mom. You know that, right?"

She holds his stare and then nods, sighing as she puts down her coffee cup in order to give Bucky a hug. "Of course I know that, honey, and I love you, too. You always have a home here with us, don't forget that. Sometimes, you're just so far away. We miss you..." He thinks he can hear her voice start to crack with emotion, but then she quickly covers it up by pulling away and giving him a wobbly smile. "And *what* sort of mother would I be if I didn't worry about my baby when he's all the way in a city like New York?"

The hint of a smile Bucky gives her in return is genuine this time. "Still the best mom ever," he promises her. "That'd never change. Anyways, uh... how about we kids make you guys breakfast today? It's not too late that it falls over into the 'brunch' category yet, is it?"

They glance to the clock, and Annie shakes her head. "Not brunch until noon," she answers – the family rule, for as long as Bucky can remember.

"Alright. I'll go grab Steve and them; I'll be back in a minute. Hey, Peanut," he says with a bit more enthusiasm, looking to his sister. Amy perks up and looks back, so Bucky asks, "You wanna be my special little helper while makin' breakfast?"

"Yeah!"

"Perfect! I'm just gonna head outside for *one* second, and then we can start cookin' – how's that sound?"

"Good," she answers.

"Awesome. Up top," Bucky says, holding out his hand. She giggles and gives him her hardest high-five. Bucky overdramatically pretends that she nearly slapped his hand off, before chuckling and ruffling her blonde hair, heading through the living room and out the patio door. It's all grass down to the dock, so Bucky pads down to the edge of the lake in his bare feet – able to hear and see the three bodies in the sparkling water from the moment he gets outside. They're all shouting and laughing amongst each other, and the closer Bucky gets, the clearer his view of Steve is, *and the tighter the knot in his stomach clenches*.

It feels even worse the second Steve notices Bucky from the corner of his eye. His face breaks out into an elated grin – as if Bucky’s exactly the person Steve wanted to see – and he immediately shouts, “Mornin’, sleepyhead! Come into the water, it’s beautiful!”

Bucky doubts that, but *Steve* sure is. Jesus Christ, he looks incredible enough as it is when he’s *not* soaking wet; hair clinging to his forehead and temples, droplets of water beading on his skin that isn’t submerged. “Pass,” Bucky replies, now at the edge of the dock and looking down at them. “I told mom that we’d all be cooking breakfast today, so...” He juts his thumb over his shoulder, towards the cottage. “You guys can keep swimmin’ after we eat.”

“Aw, c’mon, Bucky – stop being such a lame-ass!” Becca hollers, circling her arms to keep afloat. “Get in the water!”

“Yeah, Buck!” Ben chimes in. “You’ve gotta be sweating your balls off, wearing that thing - c’mon, come swim with us!”

His siblings keep shouting at him and trying to goad him into the lake, while Steve grins at Bucky and curls his index finger in a *come hither* gesture. *For fuck’s sake, he needs to not do that...* Bucky frowns uncomfortably and only shakes his head harder. Clearing his throat, he says over them, “If you guys won’t come out, that’s fine. Just means you’re all solely on dishes duty since I’d be the one who cooked. Your choice.”

He turns to leave when he hears Steve call back, “Wait! Wait, wait – I’ll come help. Just give me two seconds; you don’t gotta be in such a hurry, y’know.”

Steve glides through the water smoothly, and does this guy always need to make everything look so goddamn effortless? Then he climbs up the little ladder and emerges onto the dock, and Bucky feels like he almost swallows his tongue for a second there. Sometimes, he forgets just how insanely *hot* he and his body is. Then there are times like this when he’s rudely reminded. Fuck this punk for looking so good; Bucky could almost punch him for it.

He realizes that his eyes have trailed down Steve’s naked torso – carved in the most *epic* of Dorito-esque proportions. He only realizes because Steve *catches* him doing it, so he quickly lifts his stare and forces it off of him entirely; going for subtle and unphased and hopefully not failing miserably. All the same, Steve just flashes him a charming smile, while Becca and Ben boo loudly from the water and continue to hurl childish names Bucky’s way for being such a buzzkill.

“Hey now, easy there,” Steve says lightheartedly, looking over his shoulder at them and holding out a hand. “Give your brother a break, he just woke up. I’m sure he’ll come swimmin’ with us later – no name callin’, we’re not kids here.”

But then something seems to catch his eye in the water, off to the right of where Ben is currently swimming. Smile fading, he gets a deep frown as he pauses and then brings one hand over his brows. Squinting, he asks, “What is that?”

Ben and Becca instantly turn their heads in that direction, shutting right up as fear hits them. It’s a *lake*, so it’s not like it could be anything dangerous like a shark or something – but someone says ‘what is that’ with *that* look of concern and you’re in the water? Your imagination is *going* to run, and fast. Bucky’s immediately craning his neck to see what’s caught his attention.

“What? What is it?”

“There,” Steve says, pointing. Bucky tries, but he can’t see anything. “Right there; don’t you see it?”

“Steve, I can’t see anything – what is it?”

The blond puts a hand on Bucky’s shoulder as Bucky steps in closer to try and get a better view. Faintly, he can hear his brother and sister panicking a little; probably trying to figure out whether they should make for the ladder and get the hell out or not.

“*There*,” Steve insists again. “It sort of looks like... my *boyfriend*!”

Lowering his hand down Bucky’s back quickly, he only needs to give Bucky a light shove to get him falling into the water. It’s chilly – *actually feels quite nice, but like hell if he’ll admit that at the moment* – and jars Bucky fully awake. When his head rips from the water, he shouts in shock, as the three around him start *howling* with laughter.

“You fucker!” Bucky snaps at Steve, who’s practically bent over; sounding like he’s crying from laughing so hard.

“I’m sorry!” Steve manages to reply through loud chortles. His voice wobbles in pitch, and *yep*, he’s practically crying. “Aww, Buck – m’sorry, I *had* to. You were...” He falls into another fit of laughter. “You were right there, I *had* to!”

Bucky knows it’s not the end of the world, same as he knows that none of them mean any harm by their laughter. Still, he swims over to the ladder and gets out quickly; clothes stuck to his skin and long hair in his eyes. Shoving his hands to his forehead, he swipes it all back and away from his face, glaring at Steve as he stomps past him to head back inside.

“Buck...” Steve starts, still chuckling. But then his smile tapers off and Bucky can hear his tone grow sincere as he continues to say after him, “Buck – hey, c’mon, I’m *sorry*, I was just-- *shit*. C’mon guys, let’s head in,” he faintly hears him saying to his siblings.

Bucky knows he’s being a sourpuss. He wishes he could laugh it off as easily as they just did, but he’s sort of grumpy in the mornings until he properly wakes up and has a coffee or two. So, leaving had actually been the *smart* option, because he certainly didn’t want to blow up at Steve over something that small. It’s not like Steve would ever do anything to hurt him – and knowing Steve, he’s probably already feeling like a bag of shit now as it is.

“Decided to go for a quick swim?” his dad asks in surprise when Bucky gets inside and walks past him.

“Don’t ask,” Bucky sighs, heading straight upstairs.

He’s in a dry pair of shorts and in the middle of searching his bag for a clean shirt when Steve walks into the room. His towel is slung over his shoulders, and he seems to hesitate in the doorway before coming over to Bucky and squatting down beside him.

“Hey,” he says gently, putting a hand on Bucky’s bare right shoulder. Bucky almost jumps a little, because it unexpectedly makes his body feel alight with butterflies, fluttering around all over – even his arms and legs, fingers and toes. “I’m sorry, Buck. That was a dick thing to do – I was just horsin’ around, bein’ stupid. You know how stupid I get sometimes. We weren’t laughing *at* you, I swear.”

Bucky chews the inside of his cheek and then sighs, putting his mission to pick a shirt to a halt. He drops his head forward a bit before giving Steve a tired little half-smile. “Don’t apologize. I suppose I sort of had that one coming. There’s no wheedlin’ your way out of the ‘fun activities’ in my family.”

“So I guess that just means I fit right in then, huh?”

Bucky snorts quietly. Shaking his head, he goes back to shoving his clothes around until he comes across one of his favourite shirts – navy blue, a light material, and long-sleeved (as usual). “Don’t get too used to it, Rogers. I have absolutely *zero* problem sayin’ no to *you*.”

(Lies. All lies.)

Made only worse when Steve retorts teasingly, “I’ve noticed. You’re immune to all my best tricks! I swear, Buck, I’m *gonna* break you down one day. You won’t be able to say no to this face.” And then he gives Bucky his best puppy dog face, pointing both index fingers to his over-exaggeratedly jutted out bottom lip, his wide eyes, the way his brows tug up in the middle. Bucky’s stomach flops and he finds himself laughing. As is always the case (for some reason), getting Bucky to laugh always puts the happiest grin on Steve’s face.

“You’re a fuckin’ *loser*, Rogers,” Bucky mutters lovingly, unable to stop the adoring tone from creeping into his voice as he rolls his eyes and straightens back up. Steve rises with him, but then reaches out a hand and stops Bucky as he goes to put his shirt on. Bucky has no idea what Steve’s suddenly looking at, but the blond’s smile simmers down a bit as a sad sort of curiosity washes over his face.

“You ever gonna tell me what happened?” he asks quietly.

Confused, Bucky looks down – only to realize that Steve’s fingertips are touching the scarred flesh on his left arm. It’s no wonder he hadn’t fucking felt it; he’s lucky he’s able to feel enough to still have any proper mobility with that arm. The surface layer of the epidermis itself, though, is pretty wrecked. For most of it, he can only *barely* feel a numb sort of sensation when it’s touched. Some spots lack any feeling at all.

Averting his eyes about as quickly as his face falls, he pulls away from Steve’s touch and yanks his shirt over his head, making sure he gets his arms into those sleeves first and foremost. Steve’s staring at his face now, patiently - and with something unreadable. He almost looks as if he wants to close the distance between them and offer Bucky some sort of *physical* comfort.

Bucky *wishes* he could talk to him about it, but he just can’t. He just... Fuck, he just can’t talk about it, to *anyone*.

“I’m sorry,” Steve says again slowly. “Not today?”

Bucky shakes his head and starts to leave the bedroom. “Not today,” he mutters back hollowly.

Steve, as always, follows right behind him - knowing like he always does that it’s better to drop the subject.

The first time Steve catches Bucky checking his work emails off of his phone is when they’re all cleaning up dishes and tidying up the kitchen. Bucky tries to be as sneaky as possible – twisting just a little to the side and keeping his phone pressed to his hip while he quickly peeks down – but he notices Steve staring at him anyways.

Narrowing his eyes, Steve gets a little disbelieving smirk and asks, “Are you on your phone?”

Bucky shoves it into his pocket and goes back to wiping the countertop. “No.”

The cottage may be big and worth a fair amount of money, but it still only has one full bathroom. After breakfast is finished, Bucky goes to grab a shower – which of course means that Becca suddenly wants to take hers first, and then Ben calls dibs right afterwards. Bucky just rolls his eyes and waits for his turn, lying in bed and zoning out again with his headphones wedged in his ears. His dad is showing Steve where they keep all of their firewood, in the event that Steve ever wants to start a bonfire in the pit.

Bucky wastes a bit more time than he probably should in the hot water. He lets it pelt down over his head as he stares off and remembers every painstaking detail of his best friend’s body when he’d gotten out of the lake. Then his imagination starts to kick in again, but this time he doesn’t imagine things like *Steve sleeping soundly beside him* or *Steve’s smile when Bucky would wake up*... He pictures what it’d be like to have Steve standing right behind him, right now; his hard chest pressed to Bucky’s back.

He closes his eyes and tries to conjure up the sensations – of how it’d feel if Steve rested his chin on Bucky’s shoulder while he lathered his hands and then slid them across Bucky’s skin... Washed his body for him... Slid his hand between his legs and tilted his face down to start caressing his lips over Bucky’s neck and shoulder, as naturally as breathing. Bucky’s own hand is on himself, and he uses the left one to reach out and steady himself against the wall. His strokes are full and quick, but not hasty. He continues to imagine...

Would Steve want to top? *Is* Steve a top? Bucky can’t tell just by looking at him; he could see Steve giving it about as easily as he could see Steve sprawled on his back, smiling breathlessly and moaning for more. Christ, it’s been so long since Bucky bottomed for someone... The last time must’ve been – what, when he was sixteen or seventeen? Was it with Brock, or with Wade? He doesn’t really care about the specifics, really; he just tries to remember how it’d felt.

Full... in the best way possible.

Vulnerable.

Maybe *that’s* why he hasn’t done it in so long.

He frowns, eyes still closed, and slows his strokes; tightening his grip but paying more attention to the tip with every tug. That’s one of the things he likes best. He clears away the thoughts of bottoming and instead imagines having Steve pressed against the shower wall so *Bucky* could fuck him. How does Steve like it, Bucky wonders – hard and fast, or slow and sensual? Maybe a bit of both? Would he want to have his cheek pressed against the wall so Bucky could take him from behind like that, or would he want them to face each other so he could look into Bucky’s eyes?

Bucky bites his lip to stifle a soft groan; brows furrowing, hand going back to pumping just a tiny bit faster. He wants to draw this out and make it last forever (and also, hiding away from his current predicament isn’t exactly a negative bonus, either). Sadly, though, he can’t use up all the hot water. So he tries to create as much of the details as possible.

Would Steve be a screamer, or one of those silent people who only grunts softly when they finally come? How tight would he be around Bucky's dick? Bucky imagines the answer to that is *very*... Tight and hot and perfect. Bucky would want to make it so good for him – want to get him panting and feeling so sweet that he couldn't even kiss back anymore; just let his mouth hang open against Bucky's while he cried out *over* and *over* and...

Bucky gasps raggedly when his climax ruptures over him. It's a sharp sound to his own ears, but he doubts anyone would've heard that over the sound of the shower running. He shudders as he spills all over his fist and arcs onto the floor of the tub. The evidence drains away and is gone before Bucky's even finished feeling the pleasure from it. Normally, coming makes Bucky feel blissed-out and relaxed enough to stop over thinking everything for at least a *few* minutes.

Right now, it leaves him feeling a little empty. And also a little guilty – Steve's *here* with him, after all. Is that rude... to jack it to thoughts of your best friend when he's under the same roof? Bucky supposes he could do worse; given what he's being forced to endure (and will only *continue* to endure for the next seven fucking days), it's better to do *that* than do something stupid, like blurting out how he feels *to* Steve or something. Or having Steve accidentally walking in on him with his hand around his dick.

Oh.

Best not to picture *that* in too much detail.

Bucky's cheeks go hot, and with stiff movements, he turns off the shower. After throwing on his clean clothes from earlier, he heads down the hallway towards the stairs, towel-drying his hair. Amy's giggling and talking from inside her bedroom, presumably to her stuffed animal collection. Bucky casts a lazy glance her way when he walks past her doorway—

Only to stop and duck his head back in.

“Steve?”

Amy's sitting at her little round, pink table; small, stumpy chairs pulled up with some of her dolls occupying thee seats. Her tea set is out and she's pretending to pour the non-existent liquid into a few of the little cups. His best friend sits in one of the chairs – too large for it; his knees practically tucked under his chin – with a fuzzy pink crown shoved on top of his head. He looks to Bucky with a big, *genuine* grin on his face and replies, “Hey, Buck! Come join us!”

“We're having a tea party,” Amy explains factually, as if it wasn't already obvious.

“Yeah, Bucky, we're havin' a *tea* party.”

Bucky looks between them, still a little surprised at the sight he just walked in on. Steve looks absolutely ridiculous trying to balance his weight on that tiny chair without breaking it completely – about as ridiculous as the crown on his head looks, or the way he holds his pinky out when his sister hands him his cup of fake tea.

“Here you go, Princess,” she says politely.

Steve bows his head, smiling goofily. “Thank you, Princess.”

“What happened to playing with the doll house?” Bucky asks, a small smirk turning up one corner of his mouth as he slings the damp towel over his shoulder and leans against the doorframe, crossing his arms.

“I didn’t want to play that anymore,” Amy answers, handing another empty cup to one of the stuffed animals (this time, her purple bunny). “And Steve said he likes tea anyways.”

“Since when do you drink tea?” Bucky pokes. Steve’s a *coffee* drinker and all of his friends know it. Steve raises an eyebrow and gives him a look, playing stupid.

“I’ll have you know that your sister makes the best tea in the whole castle,” he replies coolly.

“*Princess Amy*,” the little blonde corrects almost immediately.

“Ah – right, sorry. *Princess Amy* make the best tea in the whole castle. If you’d come sit your butt down and *try* some, you’d know that,” Steve says.

Bucky draws out a few seconds pretending to think about it, humming loudly. Both Steve and Amy watch him, Amy laughing when Bucky narrows his eyes at her, still humming. But when he starts to walk towards the table, Amy laughs and holds her hands out in a *stop* gesture. “Princesses only!” she tells him.

“Oh, really?” Bucky says. “Since *when*, little missy?”

“Since now!”

“C’mon, Princess, it’s not nice to not let people play with you just ‘cause they’re different,” Steve tells her with a smile.

Oh, for god’s sake... Why does Steve have to keep doing and saying things that make Bucky’s knees feel weak? Does he *have* to be this good with children, *seriously*? Bucky’s gaze goes to him and lingers there for a second, before Bucky swallows and he forces it back to his sister. “It’s okay, Steve. She just wants to hog you all to herself because she loves you better than me now, that’s all.” Sticking out his bottom lip, he snuffles loudly and then heaves a sigh, turning to head out of the room. Steve watches with a grin, while Amy giggles at his silliness and leaps out of her chair.

“*No one* loves me, I understand,” Bucky jokes, looking like he’s about to head out of the room. He keeps his steps slow because he *knows* that Amy’s going to come grab his hand – and she does. Laughing, she catches it with both of hers and tugs.

“No, wait!” she giggles loudly. “Bucket! Come play with us!”

“No! No, you’re too late!” Bucky wails, looking away melodramatically. “I’m not a Princess, and you love Steve better than me.”

“No I don’t!” Amy shouts, now bouncing on the balls of her feet with gleeful laughter as she tries to pull Bucky to the table. She’s so small that there’s no way she could even begin to be strong enough, but after a moment, Bucky pretends that she is and lets her drag him over. She pulls her teddy bear out of one of the seats before offering it to her brother.

“Are you sure?” he asks, lowering himself down. It’s uncomfortable as shit, trying to sit like that. His knees feel like they’re going to wedge into his armpits. Steve shoots him a sympathetic, understanding smile, and Bucky sneaks him a “*Jesus Christ, this is small as fuck*” look - before they both glance back over to Amy. She tells Bucky that he can have tea with them, even though he isn’t a Princess.

“See?” Steve whispers, leaning towards him a bit while Amy pours Bucky his own cup. “She *does* love you, mopey.”

“At least that makes one,” Bucky jokes.

“Or two,” Steve says with a shrug, just as Bucky twists away from him to take his tea cup. It takes a moment for Bucky to actually register what Steve said, but by the time Bucky looks back to him with a confused expression, Steve’s pretending to slurp from his cup and is already conversing with Amy again.

Bucky spends the next couple hours playing with dolls, drawing with crayons – and wondering what the fuck Steve could’ve meant by that.

The rest of Saturday luckily goes just fine. Bucky does his best to keep his mind distracted enough that he only wallows a *little*, when he knows no one’s around to see it. The afternoon is mostly spent playing with Amy, and then enjoying the beautiful weather outside. They have a badminton net set up around back, and Steve and Bucky successfully kick Ben and Rebecca’s asses, before doing the same to his parents. More than one comment is made about how great of a team they make. Steve’s modest but they both have a bit of a competitive streak to them, so it’s one of the few blessed times where Bucky doesn’t let acknowledgements like that dig too deep beneath the surface.

Later on, Bucky’s coerced into swimming. Once his siblings stop making comments about Bucky’s incessant need to keep his shirt on, they let it go and actually have a fun time. The only close calls are the moments when Steve starts to swim too close; smirking mischievously at Bucky, like he keeps planning to pick him up and toss him right back into the water. Sometimes, he almost gets away with it. Thankfully, Bucky always notices at the very last second and swims away – always acting like something caught his eye, or he has a reason to put distance between them again. He thinks at one point he sees Steve shake his head and roll his eyes, but it’s too quick to know for sure.

Very deliberately, Bucky doesn’t ask about the comment Steve had made in Amy’s room. He dwells on it for a few hours, but by dinner time, forces himself to remember that he’s doing nothing more than setting himself up in a trap, destined to be disappointed. So he makes himself ignore it; try to forget about it. (Not like he really *can*, but he can have hope.) Over the course of the day, though, Steve only *continues* to give Bucky more and more reasons to have to ignore other stuff, too – playing his role so convincingly that it’s actually starting to frustrate Bucky a little.

Things like... Smiles that last too long, or holding his hand every once in a while. At one point, Steve even puts his arm around him. When Bucky asks under his breath what he’s doing, Steve just whispers back, “It’ll look weird if we’re never touchin’ each other – just play along.”

The *right* answer would’ve been something like, ‘Cause I just wanna hold ya, Buck’ or ‘Cause I’m crazy about you – run away in the sunset with me.’ Okay, well, maybe that’s actually the *wrong* answer, technically. What Steve had actually said was, by their agreement, correct. It still made Bucky feel rotten, while also (confusingly) excited. It’s not like he was going to argue having Steve’s arm around him like that, no matter what the reasoning may be.

It really doesn’t help that his family hit it off with him so quickly, either. By no later than Saturday night, he might as well be part of the family already. It actually has Bucky sweating it out a bit, not putting it past his mom or sister to make some sort of

joking inquiry as to when the two of them plan to elope or something one day. Bucky would probably die on the spot if anything like that was asked.

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For the second night in a row, Steve sleeps on the floor. Bucky almost wants to invite him to join him in bed, but he can't think of an excuse strong enough to justify asking. So he stays quiet, and waits until he knows for sure that Steve's sleeping before letting the noise in his brain get louder; the images he'd fantasized about earlier flooding back. He grinds his palm over the erection in his pajama pants but he doesn't actually masturbate, nor does he get himself off. He *thinks* about it – almost goes for it carefully – until Steve shifts in his sleep and rolls over on his side facing the bed. That's enough to scare the crap out of Bucky and will himself to stop touching.

Despite the aggressive case of blue balls, his hard-on eventually goes away and Bucky's able to fall asleep a *little* sooner than the night before.

Sunday's another gorgeous day, weather-wise. They all go for a walk around the area, and it'll never cease to blow Bucky's mind, the way Steve listens to everyone so intently. Bucky zones out about four times while his mom explains the history of the area to Steve (but then again, Bucky already knows that story). Yet Steve never does the same. He maintains his interest and even asks questions, as if it's the coolest tale he's heard in a while.

(It really isn't.)

That evening, Annie and Mark take Amy out to go see the little kids' carnival they have going on in town for the weekend. With Rebecca over at one of the neighbouring cottages where her friend is staying, it's just Bucky, Steve, and Ben. They decide to pull out a few bags of chips and bust out some Mario Kart. Bucky's played video games with Steve a million times before, but never this game – which seems funny, since it should be some sort of written rule that friends *do*, at least once.

After all, what better way to test the strength of a friendship than by playing Mario Kart?

"Uh, I get to pick first," Ben says when Steve goes to select his player.

"I'm the guest," Steve replies.

"I always get to go first," Ben argues.

"It's true, he does always get to pick first," Bucky agrees.

"Age before beauty, my friend," Steve counters. He's flicking through the roster without actually picking anything yet. Bucky knows Steve well enough to know that he most likely isn't actually going to do it – he's just being a pain in the ass. "I'm older than you and I'm the guest, so it's proper courtesy to let *me* pick first."

"Age before beauty, *my ass!*" Ben exclaims, even though he's hardly all that upset about it. "Youngest picks first – right, Buck?"

"It's a family rule, unfortunately," Bucky tells Steve.

"Aren't you supposed to be on *my* side?" Steve asks flatly, glaring at him. "Ain't that the whole point of being my boyfriend?"

Bucky can't help but smirk. "To always side with you? In your dreams, Rogers."

"Ah, what else are ya good for then?" Steve jokes, looking back to the TV.

"Ben, just let Steve go first. He'll bitch all night about it if you don't."

Ben rolls his eyes. But then he suddenly grins with an idea. Turning towards Steve, he proposes, “Alright, *fine*, I’ll tell you what: if you can guess my first name right, I’ll let you pick first.”

“Uh... *Ben*,” Steve says, narrowing his eyes and giving him a weird look.

“No, I mean, my *full* first name.”

Steve gives Bucky that same weird look and then answers, like it’s the most obvious thing in the world, “Um, *Benjamin*.”

Ben grins and looks quickly to the TV. “Wrong! Bentley, hah!” His thumbs move as he glides his cursor over each character in the roster, deciding who to pick. Bucky laughs – laughs even *harder* at how surprised Steve looks when he realizes how easily duped he just was – before Steve holds up a hand and says, “Now wait, wait, wait, hold on! Okay, *okay*... Counter bet; you willin’ to take it?”

Ben hesitates before suspiciously asking, “What is it?”

“You guess *my* full first name and I’ll *let you* pick first – no more complaints from me.”

“Uh, Steven, *obviously*,” Ben says.

Steve makes a loud buzzing sound and is now the one trying to race to pick his character. “Wrong, it’s Stefano!”

“What--”

“Your name is *not* Stefano, Steve,” Bucky groans. “Let the kid pick first; you’re actin’ like you’re five.”

“Hah!” Ben adds teasingly, doing exactly that and actually picking his avatar while Steve gives Bucky a hilariously indignant look.

“Seriously, Buck – *my* side, just once!”

“Earn it, lover boy,” Bucky retaliates, adding insult to injury by swooping in and selecting *his* character while Steve’s distracted.

Steve gives him what he probably hopes is his most threatening glare, but it’s hardly terrifying when there’s a little smile on his lips. “Oh, you’re on now,” Steve warns him. “Just you wait.”

It turns out that Steve gets *really* into Mario Kart. Like, a lot. About as much as Ben. They all play pretty aggressively, shouting and cursing each other during every round. Steve sometimes plays dirty, too – will snatch his hand out and knock Bucky’s controller out of his grip, or mash random buttons with his palm. Bucky just keeps trying to yank it back, yelling, “FUCK YOU, STEVE, STOP!”

Steve just keeps laughing and shouting back, “THERE ARE NO FRIENDSHIPS WHEN PLAYING MARIO KART! TAKE THAT, ASSHOLE!” before knocking one of them off the track. Steve’s actually really good at the game, and winds up winning more levels than either of the other two. Even though it’s sort of annoying here and there – *Mario Kart really does bring out the worst in people, both in making you a poor winner as well as a sore loser* – Ben’s having a great time, and Bucky is, too. He’s also never seen Steve act like this, which says a lot, since Steve’s the goofiest guy he knows. It makes Bucky want to kiss him as much as it makes him want to punch him in the back of the head.

“You’re a horrible boyfriend,” Bucky jokes distractedly, focused on their current race.

“Hey, all’s fair in love, war, and video games, baby,” Steve replies before cutting himself off, jerking his controller out to the side as his thumbs make quick work over the buttons. Steve calling him *baby* almost throws Bucky off – nearly crashing on his own accord.

“Gross – guys, I’m still sitting right here,” Ben reminds them. “Either get a room or knock off the cutesy stuff.”

“You know what’s *not* gonna be cutesy?” Bucky says. “When I do this!” He tries to let Steve’s avatar get nice and close behind him before dropping a banana peel in his path. But Steve’s reflexes are almost inhumanly fast; he just beelines around it and then shouts, “HAH!”

“You’re not even givin’ me a chance,” Bucky mumbles.

“Yes I am,” Steve insists. He glances over to him and gives Bucky one of those warm, precious smiles... The one that especially makes Bucky have to stop himself from gulping; from questioning how much of this is an act... “You’re just really bad at this game,” Steve then says sweetly.

He promptly hurls a spiked turtle shell at Bucky’s cart, making him spin right off the track again.

In the aftermath, Bucky can’t remember what exactly it is he dreams about that night – all he knows is that it gets him moaning with distress and Steve by his side. He just about jumps out of his skin when the soft repetition of “*Bucky*” is eventually enough to rip him from his nightmare. Steve’s sitting on the edge of his bed... Face concerned, but Bucky doesn’t register that in his half-awake state. Big hands are on his shoulders, but Bucky doesn’t feel those either. Gasping, the first thing he does when his eyes open is bolt up into a sitting position – and, in doing so, straight into Steve’s arms.

They immediately wrap around him. Bucky realizes that he’s shaking and still trying to catch his breath (*when had he run out of it?*), and he’s clutching onto Steve, too. He didn’t even acknowledge that he’s instinctually done that until he feels the hard muscles across the expanse of Steve’s bare back beneath his fingertips.

“Shh... Shh, its okay...” Steve’s whispering next to his ear. The blond’s face, Bucky also realizes, is pressed into the hair on the side of his head. He’s hugging Bucky to him and soothingly stroking light lines back and forth along Bucky’s back with one hand. Bucky’s glad he was already shivering from the dream, because it completely masks the little *pleasurable* tremors that pass through him when his body’s actually able to register how fucking good it feels with Steve doing that.

“Shh, you’re okay, Buck... Just havin’ a nightmare; we all have ‘em,” Steve’s still whispering protectively. “You’re alright... M’right here... It’s okay, baby, I’ve got you...”

Bucky’s heart slams against his ribcage, he’s sure of it. Does Steve even realize he just called Bucky *baby* again? Except there’s no one around this time; no one to prove nothing to. Probably just getting a little too used to the game they’re having to play all day – Steve’s probably half-asleep himself – that the lines are a little blurred for him right now. That’s what Bucky tells himself.

Still, he can't bring himself to let go or move away. He has his forehead pressed against the spot where Steve's neck meets his shoulder, and the skin feels so warm against his. Steve smells wonderful... He always smells so wonderful. When he opens his eyes, he can glance down and see the canvas that is his chest, his collar bone... Bucky would only have to tilt his chin up the *tiniest* bit to brush his lips against the skin and taste it on his tongue. He exhales loudly through his nose and forces his eyes to shut, driving away the urge.

"M'sorry," he mumbles, voice a bit strained. "M'sorry..."

"Shh, no, Buck, it's okay." Steve cards his fingers through the hair at the back of Bucky's head and holds him there, hugging him even closer. His voice sounds slightly muffled, like he's turned his lips even more against the side of Bucky's head.

"Did I wake you up?" Bucky asks, even though he already knows the answer. Of course he did – it has to be around three in the fucking morning.

"Yeah, you kept shiftin' a lot and then your breathin' got too quick," Steve murmurs back. "Second I heard you start makin' these little pained noises, I was tryin' to wake you up. Didn't take long after that." He pulls back. Reluctantly, Bucky does, too. He glances up at Steve, feeling tired and miserable in that way you sometimes get after a night terror, when you're still feeling the effects of it.

"You remember what it was about?" Steve asks. Bucky realizes his friend's got one hand resting over top of his. Bucky takes a slow, deep breath through his nose and looks away while he tries to remember. He can only remember colours, sounds, and this horrible, *anxious* feeling, but nothing too specific.

He shakes his head slightly. "I can't remember," he admits. "I think... I think someone was tryin' to catch me. They wanted to do somethin' to me, but I can't remember what it was. Just... real bad. I know it would've been real bad." Getting a weak look, he shakes his head again with a pitiful sound. "I can't remember anything else, m'sorry... M'sorry I woke you up--"

Steve makes a soft, sad sound. Reaching up his other hand, he cups the side of Bucky's face. "Aw, Buck... It's okay. You got nothin' to be sorry for," he promises. Then he leans in.

Bucky stops breathing, eyes widening, because *what is Steve doing?* Is he going to kiss him? For a second, he thinks that's what's going to happen... But then Steve just pulls him into another hug. It's still a comforting, relaxing gesture – and it's still Steve's arms wrapped around him, and Steve holding him close, and Steve's smell enveloping him. So Bucky tries not to feel *too* disappointed by the outcome.

"What used to help you get back to sleep after a bad dream when you were a kid?" Steve asks.

Bucky snorts against his shoulder. "Getting my mom to check under my bed for monsters?" he jokes dryly.

There's a pause, and then Bucky can hear the smile in Steve's voice when he asks, "... You want me to do that for y--?"

"No, Steve, I definitely don't," Bucky cuts in, but it gets a tiny chuckle from him, all the same.

Steve exhales a small chuckle in kind, and then they go silent. Steve turns out to have been thinking, because then he pulls back again and says, "Alright, I got an idea. Lie back down, with your back to me."

"Huh?"

"Just trust me," Steve says, smiling. "M'not gonna shove you off the bed or anything – m'serious, just lie down and face away from me. Try to get a little closer to one side so I have at least a *little* room."

"This your way of tryin' to manipulate your way into sharin' the bed with me?" Bucky mutters jokingly, but he does as he's told. Inside, his heart is now racing a mile a minute. Resting his head back down on the pillow, he gets comfortable again; feeling the dip in the mattress as Steve squeezes himself onto the small bed and lies down on top of the covers.

Bucky's about to ask what exactly he's up to, when he feels Steve pressing just the tips of his four fingers to Bucky's nape and lightly dragging them down his spine. Bucky jolts just the tiniest bit as his eyes flutter shut and a soft, surprised little moan spills out of him. Steve chuckles from behind him.

"Some people, this tickles too much for them to stand it," Steve explains gently as he starts to run the tips of his fingers aimlessly along Bucky's back... Up and down his sleeved arm... Over his shoulder and along the side and back of his neck... Bucky's skin is covered in goosebumps – every few seconds, Steve's fingers trail over a spot that makes him shiver – and it's so relaxing that it has him going boneless against the mattress and feeling half out of it in no time.

"Back when I was little, my ma used to do this to me if I was sick or had trouble sleepin'," Steve says.

Bucky's eyes open. Staring ahead, heart still going crazy, he whispers, "...This one of those times when you really miss her?"

"Yeah," Steve replies – softly, lightly... he always gets a little sad when remembering Sarah, but he lost her so long ago that he's able to talk about her without sounding weighed down by it. Mostly, his tone is just filled with incomprehensible love. Bucky wishes he could've met her. She died before he and Steve became friends.

Bucky stares ahead, suddenly thinking about lots of things. He has Steve lying so close to him and touching him like this – trying so hard to soothe him and lull him back to sleep. He feels overwhelmed, chest tight. He also remembers the first time Steve had ever opened up about his mother; regaled Bucky with stories, *memories*, from when he was a boy, all the way up to the day of her funeral. It was the first time Bucky had ever seen Steve cry. Steve is strong, and brave, and generous, and kind, and *perfect* – and everything Bucky is not.

"Steve..." he whispers. The fingers against his back still for a moment, but then they pick back up again as the blond whispers back, "Yeah?"

"I'm... I'm sorry," Bucky forces out. There are tears in his eyes but he's not about to let himself cry, nor will he let Steve *know* his eyes are wet. He just... he needs to get this out. "I'm sorry that you've always been so open with me and I... haven't been. You told me all about your life growing up; you... You've talked to me about your mom a bunch of times. You've trusted me with so much and yet I've hardly done the same..."

Opened up to you about much of anything... Do you hate me sometimes for being the way I am?"

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Steve's fingers are halfway trailing up Bucky's right arm now, and this time they *do* come to a full stop. "Bucky, I could never hate you," Steve says, completely honest. "I could never be upset with you for not wanting to talk about things in your past that have hurt you. I mean, yeah, I want to help, or be there to listen if you ever need someone, but... Buck, you're one of the most amazing people I've ever met. You're so much stronger than you give yourself credit for. No. No, I don't ever hate you, and you don't need to say sorry... Okay?"

Bucky closes his eyes, frowning deeply. He wishes that were true. Steve's just too good-hearted to see the truth of things. Lying, he simply answers, "Okay."

"Go to sleep, alright?" Steve says then, going back to lightly caressing Bucky's shoulder and neck with his fingers. Bucky can't help but sigh softly and go a bit more lax. A few minutes later, somewhere between consciousness and sleep, he feels Steve slip his hand up Bucky's shirt so he can continue tracing random lines along his back, skin on skin. His lips part and he moans again softly, unable to remember a time when he felt this peaceful... A thing in the world that didn't feel more perfect than Steve touching him so preciously... Even if for reasons that are nothing like Bucky's own.

Less than an hour later, they're both fast asleep – Bucky, still curled up on that same side, and Steve, legs too long and feet hanging off the edge of the bed... But with one arm slung over Bucky's side.

Bucky's brain feels a little fuzzy when he wakes up Monday morning, so it takes him a few prolonged seconds to realize that he's not alone in his bed. The details of the middle of the night return to him in fragments. At first, all he feels is the steady exhale of hot breath against his neck, which gets his eyes flying open and his brows creasing immediately. He freezes as he slowly lifts his head to look down his body. There's an arm hanging over his side.

Holy fuck. *Steve*? Why is Steve in bed with him? Then everything returns to him all at once, and rather than feeling thrilled, it makes Bucky panic. He sits up so quickly that Steve's jostled awake. He hears a sharp inhale and then little sleepy sounds as his best friend opens his eyes enough to look up at him and slurs, "Buck? You okay?"

"Yep! Fine – I'm totally fine," Bucky answers *far* too loudly, swinging his legs off the bed and practically leaping out of it. He can hear movement from behind him – guesses that Steve's pushed himself up onto his elbow and is staring up at him, probably confused and disoriented. He doesn't really know *where* to go now that he's out of bed – which is *awkward*, considering that he's moving as if driven by some sort of directionless purpose at the moment.

Turning back to Steve, it's hard to get the words out, but he forces himself to ask, "Last night... We didn't – I mean, we didn't... *do* anything... right?" He's ninety-nine percent sure they didn't, but he can't be completely certain that there aren't details he still missing.

Steve definitely does look confused now. “Uh...” Then he realizes he’d fallen asleep in bed with him and his eyes widen. “Oh, *no* – no, no, no, don’t worry. You just had a nightmare was all. I was trying to get you back to sleep, and... I guess I fell asleep, too.” Frowning apologetically, he gets off of the bed and stands. He’s frowning, staring off, and Bucky finds it unnerving. He *also* feels a little shitty for making the whole thing sound as awful as he must be making it seem – especially if Steve feels the need to say sorry for it.

Perfect, Buck. Make it seem like the possibility of you two actually doing something like that together freaks you out. That definitely sends a terrific message. Atta boy, genius, keep it up.

“I mean... y’know, not that I would’ve been mad or nothin’ if we had,” Bucky says, trying to save face. That doesn’t sound right coming out either, though. Feeling flustered, he shakes his head, closing his eyes, before quickly trying again: “Fuck, not like that – I mean... It’s not like I would’ve freaked out if you said yes. I just... Wow, ‘kay, none of this is how I mean it to sound--”

“Relax, Buck, it’s fine,” Steve interrupts him. He gives Bucky a tiny, almost *tired*-looking smile. Yet, it doesn’t strike Bucky as the kind of tired you feel when you’ve just woken up. It seems to be something deeper than that. But Steve’s voice is without judgement when he continues, “I know what you mean, don’t worry. Sorry again for crashing with you last night. It won’t happen again.”

He turns and kneels to the floor to deflate the air mattress and get it put away before any of Bucky’s family can come walking in. Bucky just keeps staring at him, frowning so hard it’s actually growing uncomfortable. Things never really feel awkward between him and Steve, but it certainly feels that way now. All because Bucky couldn’t handle things with just a *bit* more calmness. Not wanting to dig the hole he’s in any deeper, he excuses himself quietly and leaves the room to go brush his teeth.

He spends an hour or so of the morning sitting out on the deck, taking advantage of the sunshine and giving himself a bit of quiet time while he burns through a few cigarettes. He doesn’t know how to feel about what happened in the middle of the night. There’d been so many moments where he felt really certain that Steve was going to kiss him – or at the very least, that if *Bucky* took that plunge, Steve wouldn’t fight him on it. *Fuck*, he remembers Steve calling him *baby* again...

If he just asked Steve about it and put it out in the open, things could be a whole lot easier. Except that that’s only truthful on *paper* – in reality, opening the door to that conversation would just as likely – if not *more* likely – make things between them super awkward. Steve would most likely have to find a gentle way of letting him down; tell him that he loves Buck, just not in that way... Establish the very deep line set between them, and that line’s name would most likely be ‘Friendship’ and nothing more. Then how could Bucky ever expect things to be the same between them? He couldn’t; it wouldn’t be possible.

Bucky can’t risk throwing away five years of friendship – such a strong, solidified friendship at that – over confusion he’s felt in the last *three days*. He’d told himself that he needed to remember what’s fact and what’s fiction, and their ‘relationship’? Steve having ‘feelings’ for him? That’s all fiction. Bucky’s been acting like an idiot.

With that in mind, he gathers enough courage to put out his smoke and head inside with an apology ready to give to Steve. However, when he gets inside, Steve's sitting on the couch with Annie on his right, Rebecca on his left, Amy in his lap... and a *photo album* in his hands. Steve looks over to Bucky and breaks out into that usual grin, and Bucky's just gone and forgotten everything he'd just been thinking about.

"I hope you don't mind me whipping out some of the oldies, honey," Annie says. Amy giggles and points to whatever picture is on the page, and they all chuckle. Annie's smile is nostalgic. Bucky doesn't know which photo they're staring at, but he knows they're all of him. That album is nothing but *his* pictures, as far back as when he was eight-years-old (the age he'd been when the Proctors adopted him and Becca).

"You look adorable in these, Buck," Steve says, beaming fondly. He flips to the next page and gets a toothy grin at whatever his eyes fall to. Bucky shifts uncomfortably. He's perfectly fine *not* looking through all of those.

"Yeah, you *were* a cute kid – when exactly did that go wrong?" Rebecca teases.

"Yeah, *okay there*, Booger," Bucky snaps back. "At least there're no baby photos of *me* in any of those albums. You want me to show Steve all of the amazing photos of you with a mullet?"

Rebecca's smile vanishes.

"How about the bowl cut?" he asks next. "Hey, Steve, you wanna see my sister with a mullet, or a bowl cut?"

"Shut up, you jerk!" Rebecca hisses, getting off the couch. She gives him a light shove as she stomps into the kitchen to get a drink (and probably try and drown herself in it). Steve just tips his head back and calls after her, "I had a bowl cut, too, Becks – it's okay! Embrace your inner loser!"

"She was beautiful," Annie insists, cutting in. Giving Bucky a stern motherly look, she scolds him, "Be nice to your sister, James."

"She started it!"

"And *you're* seven years older than her," she reminds him.

"Yeah, *James*," Rebecca pipes back in smugly, her head popping into sight from around the corner. "Be nice to me!"

"Rebecca Marie," Annie sighs with exasperation.

"Hah, you got *two-named*," Bucky sneers back. Rebecca smiles sweetly and gives him the finger; Bucky just mimes catching the gesture and sticking it in his pocket, looking touched.

"I like this one," Steve says out of nowhere, reminding them all that he and Amy are still there. Flipping the book around, he holds it up so Bucky can see what he's referring to. It's from when Bucky was about nine – taken here, at the cottage, actually. He's sitting in the tire swing they've long since gotten rid of, in his bathing suit. His brown hair had been much shorter then. In the photo, it's damp with lake water. Bucky can't remember what had got him laughing as hard as he was when the camera went off, but his kid-self looks ecstatic.

"I can almost hear you laughing when I look at it," Steve tells him, turning the book back over so he can see it again. "See? That's your big brother when he was just a few years older than you," he tells Amy, who giggles and tries turning the page. "You

look so happy in it, Buck,” he murmurs, turning his baby blues back up to him and smiling softly. Bucky blushes, hard as he tries not to.

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Annie looks between them and then suggests, “Well, I actually have a second copy of that picture framed in our room back home, if you wanted this one?”

“Really?” Steve asks.

“Oh no, mom, it’s okay, I’m sure Steve doesn’t want--”

“Thank you, ma’am, I’d love it,” Steve says enthusiastically. Then he catches himself and says to Bucky, “I mean, if you’re alright with that.”

“I... guess so?” Bucky replies, unsure of what else to say. Sure... he *supposes* he doesn’t mind, really. The fact that Steve would even want a picture of him like that is a sweet sentiment, it’s just... *why*? It’s not like he’ll actually keep it once the week’s over and they head back to New York, back to reality – right? And if he *does*, what exactly is Bucky supposed to make of that?

Steve seems to look genuinely pleased that Bucky’s given him permission to keep that picture. As is the *story of his life* since they’ve been there, it only leaves Bucky even more confused.

In the early evening, Steve catches Bucky checking his work emails from his phone *again*. This time, he isn’t as willing to overlook it.

“*Tell me* you haven’t been doin’ work while we’ve been here,” he says from over Bucky’s shoulder, startling the brunet. He hadn’t even heard Steve come into his room.

Bucky trips over his words, but *damn*, the shorts he’s wearing now don’t have pockets, so he has nowhere in which to make his iPhone miraculously disappear. “Yes, okay? *Yes*, I have,” Bucky huffs. Steve shakes his head with an incredulous chuckle, so Bucky exclaims, “You don’t know my boss! The place is called ‘*Pierce, Lukin, & Schmidt*’, okay? His name is *right* there in the fuckin’ company’s branding – he’s a big deal. Which means he always needs *me* to handle the shitty little details.”

“You’re on your *vacation*, Bucky. That’s what vacation time is for: to get *away* from work *and work-related stuff*.”

“Thanks, Tips – you wanna write that one down for me?” Sighing, Bucky looks back to his phone. “He won’t stop forwarding me all these emails from his clients. What am I s’pposed to do – just *not* answer them?”

“Yes.”

“What if he fires me?”

Steve considers that. “Okay, fine – is he *payin’* you for all this work he’s sendin’ you to do during your week off?”

“Well... I mean, no, but...”

“Yeah, I didn’t think so,” Steve says quickly. “You’re not a doormat, Bucky, so stop lettin’ him treat you like one.” Before Bucky can react fast enough, Steve’s grabbing his phone from his hands and getting off the bed. Alarmed, Bucky jumps to his own feet.

“Give that back,” he says warningly, holding his hand out.

“No,” Steve answers simply. “If I give it back, you’re just gonna tell me that you won’t be doin’ any work when you totally *will* be. If you won’t let yourself enjoy your time here and just focus on relaxin’ and spending time with your family, then I’ll make you have no choice. You need a *break*, Buck.”

“Steve, c’mon, this ain’t funny,” Bucky says over him. He tries to snatch his phone back, but Steve just steps away and holds it out behind him. The worst part is, he *knows* that Steve’s completely right - he *does* need a break, because Pierce is driving him crazy. And he *is* being taken advantage off; Bucky knows he is... But he doesn’t know how to turn that switch *off* – how to let himself lift some of those responsibilities from his shoulders and put them aside for just a short while. So he tries to lunge for it again.

“Steve, I’m *serious*, fuckin’ give it back!”

“Nope, sorry! You’re grounded – no phone privileges!”

“Steve, I – *Steve!* Give me my goddamn phone!”

“No!”

“Jesus Christ – *Steve!*”

His chest is pushed up to Steve’s now, their faces dangerously close as Bucky keeps trying to reach around him and grab his phone. Steve keeps putting up a struggle while they bicker back and forth over each other. His fingers only *just* graze it, and Bucky thinks he’s almost got it...

When Steve quickly manoeuvres his hand between them in the blink of an eye and shoves Bucky’s phone into his own shorts.

They freeze. Steve looks as if he’d acted before he even thought about it properly. They both look down to the front of Steve’s shorts, Bucky’s eyes wide. It’s only *now* that it sinks in just how close they both are. Slowly, they both look back up at the same time, and... *fuck*... Steve’s lips are only inches from his. Steve’s baby blues jump back and forth between his eyes, his expression impossible to decipher. Bucky’s mouth suddenly feels bone dry.

“You want it,” Steve says slowly, “...go get it.”

There feels like there’s no air left in Bucky’s lungs. His chest is suddenly really hot beneath his shirt, as his gaze drops down to Steve’s mouth. Steve’s own eyes seem to lower to his as well, and then it feels like Steve’s starting to lean in just an inch--

So of course, that’s when Becca walks into the opened door frame, clearing her throat.

Bucky’s five feet away in the blink of an eye. Even Steve looks frazzled, straightening quickly – *what the fuck, he had actually been leaning in??* – and looking at the floor for a moment, brows slightly creased. Bucky blinks, his heart ready to pound right out of his fucking chest as he tries to push down the adrenaline that’d just been coursing through him, and it’s like that look on Steve’s face is gone in a split-second *flat*. Now he’s smiling politely at Rebecca and asking, “What’s up?”

“First of all, gross,” she jokes, looking between them. Bucky can’t help but notice that she seems to narrow her eyes a bit when she regards Bucky. But then she points her thumb over her shoulder and says, “Amy’s absolutely *insisting* that you two read her her bedtime story tonight, so... You two should probably go do that. Y’know, before she throws a tantrum or something.”

“Okay,” Bucky says quickly, already striding past her and towards his little sister’s room.

“Then mom says it’s dinner time,” she adds to his back.

“Okay,” he repeats. Amy’s brushing her teeth, so Bucky distracts himself from *whatever the hell that just was* by crouching in front of her little bookshelf and perusing the options.

“Buck...” he hears Steve say slowly from the doorway. He sounds tentative.

“I think we’ll go with *Princess Rose and The Golden Bird*,” Bucky replies, sounding way too cavalier. He pulls out the book and stands back up, shooting Steve a big, forced smile as he goes over to the bed.

Steve just watches him with a little frown. “*Buck*,” he tries again. Bucky doesn’t want to hear what he has to say – ‘*Look, buddy, what you thought was gonna happen back there? It wasn’t like that...*’ – so it’s nothing short of a miracle that Amy picks that moment to come skipping into the room. Steve looks down at her and then gives a small sigh, doing what he’s so used to doing and *letting it go*.

Bucky makes sure to keep all of his focus on his sister. “You alright with this one tonight?” he asks her, holding up the book he’d picked.

“Mhm!” she replies, hopping into bed and going straight for the middle. Bucky helps her get under the covers, before lying next to her on her left, propping himself up on his elbow and resting his head against the headboard. She looks over to Steve curiously and then beckons him, “Come on!”

“Okay,” Steve chuckles with a small smile. His gaze jumps to Bucky as he approaches the bed, too, but only for a second. Then he does like Bucky did and gets comfortable on her right, also resting his head against the headboard.

“Alright, Peanut, who do you want to read to you – me or Steve?” Bucky asks.

“Hmm... Both of you!”

“Both of us, huh?” Bucky looks over to him.

Steve shrugs one shoulder and then reaches across Amy to take the book from Bucky’s hands. Looking over the cover, he suggests, “Why don’t we take turns each reading a page?”

“That sound good, Peanut?”

“Mhm!” she nods eagerly.

“Okay, uh... Alright, I’ll start,” Steve says. Opening up the book, he holds it out in front of Amy and turns to the first page. Clearing his throat, he puts on his ‘story-telling’ voice and begins: “*Many, many years ago, in a Kingdom far, far away... there lived a beautiful Princess! She had long, red hair and loved roses so much that everyone called her Princess Rose. Every evening after dusk, Princess Rose went out on the balcony and clapped her hands--*” He glances down at Amy. “Clap your hands,” he encourages her. She giggles and does, loudly.

Smiling warmly, Steve looks back to the book. “*A golden bird came flying out of nowhere and alighted on her shoulder. Instantly, the Princess’s hair began to shine, ablaze with brilliant red light!*”

He turns the page and then tilts the book so Bucky can get a better look at the text. Bucky reaches out and holds onto the other side of the book, Steve’s hand still holding up the right side. Clearing his own throat, he continues just as theatrically: “*When the bird started to warble an enchanting tune, Princess Rose joined it in a song, and everyone in the Kingdom fell asleep and had sweet dreams ‘till the break of dawn.*”

Taking turns, they go back and forth reading Amy her story. Their commitment gets her giggling, and both men smiling – both at her, at each other, and to themselves. Bucky can't help but focus on Steve rather than the story whenever his friend takes back over. It's only been a few days, sure, but Bucky's pretty positive that the way Steve is with children will never be any less precious; have such an effect on him to see.

Steve gets the last page. When he finishes with 'the end', he shuts the book and they both look down at Amy – only to realize that she's fast asleep. Neither of them noticed her clock out. Bucky watches Steve get a gentle, lopsided smile at the sight of her. Bucky chews on his bottom lip, trying so hard not to voice what he's wondering.

"You ever want kids one day?" he blurts out anyways, keeping his volume quiet so he doesn't wake his sister.

Steve meets his eyes and then looks off in thought. He maintains his smile as he gives a single nod. "Yeah... Yeah, one day," he admits. "I've always wanted kids, I think – a boy and a girl. I know that sounds really cliché, and maybe it *is*, but... Yeah, that's just what I always pictured while growin' up. Doesn't matter how old they are; I think I'd like to adopt a baby one day, just so I could have that experience of, y'know, raisin' 'em that young... Changing diapers, seein' their first steps, hearin' their first word... Stuff like that. But I think the other, I could see myself adoptin' a kid that's slightly older. Give a kid a loving home who *really* needs one, y'know?"

Bucky's absolutely *enthralled* with Steve right now. In fact, he doesn't think he's ever loved someone more than what he feels in this moment. When he doesn't answer, Steve glances back to him, and all Bucky can do is nod lamely, unblinking. Steve chuckles and looks off again. "Uh... what else?" he wonders, assuming that Bucky wants him to keep talking. "I just wanna be able to do all those fun with my kids one day – Halloween, Christmas... Takin' them to Coney Island... Or my boy to his first Yankees game... Havin' a little girl I could be overprotective about..."

They both chuckle softly. Steve meets his eyes again, and for a moment, they stay silent.

"And you, what about you?" Steve asks. "You want any kids one day?"

Bucky's eyes trail down his little sister and he smiles again. She looks like a tiny little angel when she sleeps. "Yeah," he answers. "I don't know *when*, but... one day. I don't know how good of a dad I'd make, mind you, but--"

"A great one," Steve answers. His eyes don't move from Bucky's face. "The way you act with Amy? With Ben? You're going to be an amazing dad one day, Buck."

"You too," Bucky replies shyly. They're staring back at each other from over top of Amy's head, and Bucky finds himself wanting to stare at his best friend's lips again. Swallowing and making himself look away again after a few seconds, he gestures to the door and says, "We should... You know, dinner and stuff."

"Okay..."

They get off the bed carefully, and Bucky ghosts a small kiss on Amy's forehead. Putting the book back where it came from, they tiptoe out of the room; turning the light off behind them and closing the door most of the way shut. The entire time, Bucky can't help but wonder if this is a slice of what a life like that with Steve Rogers would feel like.

It's unfair - how much he realizes he'd love to have exactly that, *one day*...

Things take a terrible turn after dinner's over.

Steve and Bucky offer to do the dishes, since Rebecca and Ben helped their parents cook. His brother and father are in the living room, preoccupied with one of Ben's many games. Rebecca's still sitting at the dining room table, eyes stuck to the screen on her iPhone, while Annie's making herself a hot chocolate and conversing with them.

Steve handles the washing while Bucky does the drying. Bucky's so wrapped up in conversation – his mind distracted – that he doesn't even realize he'd pushed up the sleeves of his shirt to his elbows. The scarring all along his left arm is out in plain sight. Steve notices and luckily makes him aware of it before his mom can notice. "Buck," he mutters under his breath. When he looks to Steve curiously, the blond tips his chin down a bit, and Bucky's focus follows it. He sees his exposed arm and immediately burns red.

"*Shit*," he whispers under his breath. Pulling his sleeves back down quickly, he casts Steve a tight, appreciative look and replies, "Thanks." Steve must assume that if Bucky feels the need to hide his arms even around his *family*, it must be because it's a sensitive topic for all of them. Or maybe one that Annie tries to bring up whenever she happens to catch a glimpse of Bucky's actual arm. They'd both be good – and *accurate* – guesses on his part.

They're just about done putting the last couple glasses away when Bucky realizes that Rebecca's been staring over at them. With the *way* she's looking, Bucky's suddenly wondering just how *long* she's had her eye on them like this. It's unnerving – she's definitely thinking *something*, but Bucky can't figure out what.

"Uh... hi?" Bucky says.

"How come you two haven't kissed in front of us yet?" she asks bluntly. The blood practically drains right out of Bucky's face. "I mean, it's been, like, three or four days, and yet you two haven't kissed. Like, not once. At all. Sorta looked like you two were *about* to earlier, but then you got all weird when you saw me," she says strangely, like something isn't sitting right with her.

"We've kissed," Bucky lies.

"Yeah, sure we have," Steve chimes in, throwing on that easygoing smile while he dries his hands with the rag. "Just not somethin' we make a point of flauntin' in front of family. Especially not when they just met me," he adds, laughing.

"So you're worried about showing us any PDA 'cause you don't wanna make us uncomfortable?" Rebecca asks carefully, as if jumping all over that. Bucky narrows his eyes at her, screaming *Shut up, shut up, SHUT UP* in his brain. But unfortunately, she doesn't seem to hear it. Shrugging casually, she looks to Annie and says, "I wouldn't feel uncomfortable by it. Would *you* feel uncomfortable by it?"

"Not at all," Annie says. Bucky wants to groan and cover his face. *Not helping, mom – not the time!* "I mean, so long as it's still appropriate--"

"Oh god, *mom*," Bucky finally groans, mortified.

"See? It's fine," Becca says. "You can kiss each other in front of us; you don't always have to be so far apart. Seriously, Buck, you look like you're terrified of him touching you half the time."

Bucky suddenly recognizes that look – it’s another one she learned from him... It’s that *challenging* one; the one that says, *I’m onto you*. Is she on the fence again about the validity of their story? Has Bucky really been keeping *too* much distance between him and Steve? With a sinking feeling in his gut, he knows that he has, in his attempt to spare his own heart. But now, it’s clearly made them look unconvincing. If Becca makes him, she’ll never let him hear the end of it. *Yes*, Bucky put himself in this position – but that just makes him more desperate not to be found out.

So he rolls his eyes and snaps, “Jesus – *fine*, here,” before closing the space between him and his best friend. He places the world’s quickest peck *ever* on his lips – not even with enough time for Steve to even press his mouth back. Then Bucky’s leaning right back away again, looking to his sister with exasperation.

“Hey mom, I’m totally kicking dad’s butt; check this out!” Ben calls from the living room.

“Honey, we’re grounding Ben!” Mark jokingly adds. Annie laughs, completely oblivious to Bucky’s current plight, and leaves the room – leaving him *alone with Rebecca, the judge* – before he can find an excuse for her to stay.

His sister watches their mom leave, before looking straight back to them and exclaiming, “What was *that*?? What sort of kiss was that? That was like the way you kiss your grandma! That wasn’t a kiss – Steve, was that a kiss?”

“Uh--”

“Kiss him, kiss him, kiss him!” Rebecca starts chanting.

Bucky shoots Steve a panicked look, not knowing what to do. Steve holds up a hand in Rebecca’s direction and cuts in, saying, “Okay, *okay*, calm yourself!” Chuckling dryly, he shakes his head, the one to lean in this time and close his eyes as he presses an innocent kiss to Bucky’s mouth. Bucky’s eyes flutter shut the second the kiss makes contact, a startled sound getting caught in his throat before he breathes in softly through his nose. It’s stiff at first – done purely for show. Bucky can feel it, because he’s just as guilty of that as Steve is.

But then a couple seconds pass, and neither of them does anything different, but something *shifts*...

Bucky doesn’t know what it is exactly, but suddenly the tight purse in their lips eases away, and Steve’s pulling back just long enough to tilt his face to the other side and suddenly press his lips over Bucky’s again – this time, softer... and *intentionally*. Bucky relaxes against his mouth, body losing its tension as his mind goes blank. All he knows is the gentle pressure of Steve’s warm mouth against his, Steve’s soft little exhales washing over his face, and then... Then the feeling of Steve lifting a hand and cradling the side of Bucky’s neck, holding him close.

In reality, it only lasts ten seconds or so. But Bucky’s lost all concept of time. They pull away at the exact same time, slowly. Bucky doesn’t even open his eyes for another second. When he does, Steve’s looking at his mouth; baby blues, slightly unfocused. Then the blond’s gaze crawls up his face and meets his own, and Bucky looks about as lost as he suddenly feels.

“Um... ‘Kay, you win,” Rebecca says awkwardly, breaking the silence. Bucky had completely forgotten she was still there. From his peripherals, he can see her get up from the table and leave the room, staring back down at her phone. *They*, on the other hand, are still staring at each other.

Too much. This is too much, and Bucky *cannot* do this right now. This is the one thing he’s wanted most for the last five years, and he only got it because they had to *fake* it. For something that felt so perfect, nothing has also ever made Bucky feel so broken, either. He wants to yell at Steve for doing that. He wants to grab his collar and yank him back in to kiss him again. He needs to call this whole thing off.

He can’t.

He needs to reel himself in and get a hold of himself.

He *can*’t.

He wasn’t supposed to feel *this* strongly about Steve – wasn’t allowed to. That was the only way to protect himself. One job, he had *one* fucking job: *don’t* fall in love with Steve Rogers.

Of all the things he’s chosen not to do, that of course is the *one* thing he went ahead and actually *did*.

Part one of the stereotypical rom-com trope *accomplished*: he’s gone and done what he absolutely refused to do and fallen *head over fucking heels in love* with his best friend. It never seems to feel this painful in the movies, though.

“Buck...?” Steve says quietly, still searching his eyes.

Bucky can’t do this right now. Not here, not right now, not with his family in the other room. The walls feel like they’re suddenly caving in on him and *oh Christ, he needs to get out of there*. He opens his mouth to croak out an apology, but before he can form any words, his face is going blank and he’s turning away completely.

“Buck,” Steve repeats, sounding more and more thrown off by Bucky’s reaction.

Bucky power-walks out of there. When he gets to the stairs, he breaks into a run because he can *hear* Steve following him. Heading straight for the bathroom, he ducks for cover in there and shuts the door behind him, locking it. Pressing his back to it, he squeezes his eyes shut tight and slides down to the floor, trying to catch his breath through clenched teeth.

Sure enough, those heavy footsteps get closer, and Steve knocks on the door as loud as he can without waking Amy from her room down the hall. “Buck?” Steve calls to him through the door, voice gentle.

“I just need a minute,” Bucky replies on autopilot, trying to will his voice to sound cheery, *unphased*. It comes out broken and unreliable anyways.

“Bucky, please, open the door.”

“I just – I just need a minute,” Bucky says again, a bit more desperately this time.

There’s silence on the other side. Bucky isn’t sure whether he’s left or not, since he didn’t hear any footsteps. But if Steve *is* on the other side, he stays quiet and gives Bucky his space for a few minutes. Bucky spends those with his head in his hands – thoughts crashing around and smacking into each other in his head on fucking *turbo drive*... All while he tries to control his breathing...

After a while, Steve tentatively tries to speak to him again. “Bucky? Can you please let me in? Please?”

“I’m sorry, Steve,” Bucky says, staring up at the ceiling, tears now rolling down his cheeks. “Just please... I...”

Don’t know how to finish that sentence.

“I put your phone on the shelf in your closet,” Steve then tells him. “Do you want me to get it for you? Maybe talking to Tasha or someone back home can... can help, or something?”

Bucky feels so awful. He knows Steve’s desperate to help him in some way right now, but he just can’t. He can’t give Bucky what he wants, and Bucky knows that. It’ll only make things worse if he comes clean about it. He *might* be better off talking to someone like Natasha, who – other than Steve – is his go-to friend when he has a problem. She doesn’t know nearly as much about him as Steve does, but she’s a pretty close contender for second place. But if he’s going to have this conversation with her – if he *chooses* to at all – he wants to be calmed down first.

“I’ll feel better in the morning,” he answers. It tastes like a lie. “I just...” He sighs, and his voice shakes; comes out sounding wet. “I need to be alone, okay? Just for a little bit... If my mom asks, please just tell her I suddenly felt sick to my stomach or something... Please? I’ll be fine, Steve, I promise. I just need some... some *time*... Okay?”

It takes a few seconds, but then Bucky can hear Steve sigh from his spot on the other side of the door. “Okay, Buck,” he says ruefully. “Let me know if you need anything.”

“Okay, I will.”

(He won’t. Bucky only ever suffers in silence.)

This time, he waits until he hears the footsteps get further away and head back downstairs before Bucky crosses his arms over his knees and drops his forehead against them. What the fuck had he been *thinking*? How did he ever, for one second, assume this would be a good idea?

Bucky’s never been in love before - but if this is how it feels, the hopeless romantics in the world can take it all for themselves. He’ll gladly offer up his share... because no one ever warned him just how much this could *hurt*... Wanting what you can’t have.

God, he really does hope he’ll feel a little better by morning. Even if he doesn’t, he’ll have to *pretend* he does.

He needs to try a *lot* harder, that’s for sure. How does the saying go...? ‘Fake it ‘till you make it’...?

Bucky had come to visit his family this week, under the impression that he’d have to fake being in love with his best friend. Now his only mission is to fake that he *doesn’t*, while still acting like he *does*. If that sounds complicated and confusing, it’s only because it absolutely *is*.

In short?

Bucky’s *fucked*.

***Chapter 4*: Chapter 4**

Funny enough, Natasha wasn't the first person to ever find out about Bucky's crush on Steve. Believe it or not, it'd been Tony. The thing with Tony is that for all of his obnoxious behaviour and his unfaltering persistence to cover *any* signs of his big heart with arrogance and quips, the guy is actually a huge softie. He'll be the first one to poke some harmless fun at his friends, but the second anyone *else* even thinks of doing it, he's their greatest defender.

It'd been a night back in 2011 – Steve's twentieth birthday, actually. Tony's always made a point to hold as many of his friends' birthday parties at his own place, since it's spacious and makes for the most luxurious of get-togethers. Some of their friends jump all over that; after all, who *doesn't* love feeling like they get to go to a night club in someone's house *for free*? (Not that any of them has ever taken it for granted, mind you, but still.)

Steve was never like that, though. Despite Tony being a master event coordinator – capable of creating a guest list twice as big as the number of friends you actually thought you even *had* – and making every social event as entertaining as possible, Steve always puts their friend's plans to a gigantic halt. A living room fit for fancy lights and dancing and *dozens of guests* turns into a mostly vacant space – instead, housing their small group of no more than ten. Just sitting around, drinking and watching movies and talking, *maybe* with music playing quietly in the background. Steve's never needed all of the attention focused on himself. Frankly, Bucky knows he doesn't *want* it.

Bucky can't remember the specifics, or what it even was that'd tipped Tony off. Bucky had probably been staring too much. When he drinks, his inhibitions tend to lower and lower, until they're practically non-existent. He only holds onto enough dignity to stop himself from opening up *completely*. When it comes to Steve, that means it's always only ever been by the skin of Bucky's teeth that he's held back from pulling him aside and blurting out, "So hey, I sort of like you."

Or even just saying *fuck it* and kissing him. That could've always gotten the point across, too.

But Tony had seen *something* that night. And despite his in-your-face personality, he *knows* Bucky, too. Maybe not as well as Steve or Natasha (and even then, Natasha only knows so much), but enough to know what's a sensitive topic for Bucky and what isn't. So he'd deliberately waited until Bucky had been pouring himself another drink to swoop in and get him alone. Bucky hadn't even noticed him walking up because he'd been too busy sneaking glances at his best friend, the birthday boy. Steve was laughing and chatting away with Natasha, Sam, Clint, and Bruce. Perhaps it'd been the dim lighting, or the way the alcohol made Steve's startlingly blue eyes twinkle even brighter... But Bucky remembers having thought that he'd never looked more beautiful.

"Hey, Chief," Tony had said casually, reaching for the brandy to tip up his own glass.

Bucky jumped. "Oh, hey."

"You having a good time?"

"Mm? Yeah – yeah, this is great. Thanks again for puttin' this together."

Tony had smiled with a shrug, lifting the glass to his lips and downing a small swig. Bucky was then trying his hardest *not* to look at Steve, but the damage had been done. Turning to lean against the counter was probably a deliberate choice on Tony's part, so none of the others would be able to see his face, or – in Clint's case – read his lips while he spoke next.

"So... Rogers, huh? How long? A while, I'm assuming."

Bucky remembers his blood feeling as though it suddenly ran cold. Frowning and keeping his eyes down, he shook his head and mumbled back dumbly, "Whaddaya mean?"

"Look, I'm not planning on going and telling the guy – or *anyone*, for that matter. It's none of my business," Tony replied, still speaking nonchalantly, as though they were discussing the weather. "I just felt a warning would be handy, just in case you *didn't* want him finding out. I mean, if you plan to go and make a move, then keep looking at him like a lovesick schoolboy. It's cute, honest. But..." He paused, then shooting Bucky a sympathetic look. "Something tells me you have no intention of doing that, so... Better *I* see it before *he* does, right?"

Bucky had held his gaze for a second; eyes slightly widened, brows creased, lips tight with a frown. He hadn't known how to answer that, but he remembers it'd left him feeling embarrassed. And also confused. If he admitted to it, he'd have to open himself up to someone else seeing just how foolish a crush like that was for him to have in the first place. If he didn't, Tony would know he was lying. He decided to play it safe anyways and had stuck to his guns when he finally said back tensely, "I don't know what you're talkin' about. It ain't like that."

"Barnes, there's nothing wrong with having fee--"

"I *said* it ain't like that, okay?" Bucky had snapped. Grabbing his drink, he'd set his jaw and declared, "Whatever you think you saw, get it out of your head. I *don't* like Steve like that. Excuse me." Then he'd walked past him and ducked out of the party to leave that floor and go to the one below it. Heading onto the balcony, he lit up a cigarette and tried to reel himself back in.

He'd thought he'd get some privacy by picking the balcony he did, but a few minutes later, Bucky remembers hearing the door slide open and shut. "Hey Buck," Steve's comforting voice suddenly said. Coming up beside him, his eyes on Bucky's face and assessing the state of his friend, Steve kept his voice light as he asked, "What're ya doin' all the way down here? Party's *upstairs*."

Bucky had given him a tight smile, trying to force it to reach his eyes. "Just needed a few minutes, was all." He looked back out ahead of him at the heart of the city, sucking from his cigarette while he saw Steve from his peripherals lean forward and rest his forearms on the railing. They stared out together, Steve letting Bucky have his silence, even if it wasn't in solitude. It's not like Bucky had minded – not with Steve there. He always found himself wanting Steve there.

"Saw you talkin' to Stark," Steve had eventually said, breaking the silence after a few minutes. He got a little wry smile at that, though his gaze had still been focused ahead of them. "Then you left. Knew you'd be down here, so I excused myself. You doin' alright? He didn't, like, get too *Tony* on you, did he?"

Bucky snorted, blowing out more smoke. "Takes more than that to get under my skin, Rogers. I was just feeling a little stifled in there and could use the fresh air. How'd you know I'd be down here anyways?"

He hoped Steve wouldn't go for the obvious questions next: *Why downstairs then? Why not the balcony on their floor? How could he feel stifled in a room that large, with so much free space?*

Steve hadn't asked any of that. Turning his head slightly, he'd just smiled warmly at Bucky and replied, "Because I know you; I know how you think."

"It's your party. You shouldn't be missin' your own birthday party because I'm being a lousy sport and needed to walk away for a breather."

Bucky remembers Steve shrugging... Shrugging and then his voice going gentle as he said, "Not a party without you there. Yeah, I love everyone in that room, but... I have the most fun around you, y'know."

If Bucky continued to breathe, he *wouldn't* ever be able to remember that fact. The cigarette was burning away between his fingers, but all thought for that had abandoned Bucky's brain, because he was too busy staring at Steve like he was lost and didn't know what to do with that comment. All he had been able to do was swallow and quietly ask, "You do?"

"Yeah. You're my best friend. I like havin' you around."

It was like Steve had been waiting for him to say something next, but Bucky wasn't sure what to say. He was too drunk for that conversation. If he opened up his mouth any further, too much was going to come tumbling out... *especially* with the way Steve was smiling at him like that. Steve had smelled like booze, too. He remembers having the fleeting thought, *I wonder how his breath would taste if he was moaning into my mouth...*

Then that thought passed, because one second, it felt like Steve was doing the impossible and leaning in, when suddenly it was more the *entire floor* that felt like it was flipping *up* beneath him. An unexpected tightness clenched his throat as his saliva grew hot and sour, and *fuck!* Bucky hadn't even felt sick a moment before. But he was going pale then - pale, and turning on his heel to race into the house and get to the nearest bathroom before he hurled all over Tony's expensive furniture.

Bucky remembers spending the rest of the night with his head half in the toilet bowl at Stark's place, moaning miserably that usual vow that people his age make whenever they get sick - *I'm never drinking again*. If he wasn't saying *that*, he was apologizing profusely. Because for the rest of the evening, Steve only left his side to refill glass after glass of water for him, and at one point, to head upstairs to tell everyone else that Bucky wasn't feeling well.

Steve had missed his own birthday party so he could sit in Stark's bathroom and rub Bucky's back while he puked his guts out. Not once did he seem annoyed with having to do that. In fact, every time Bucky would catch his breath enough to insist that Steve go back and hang out with the others, Steve would just chuckle and tell him that it was *fine*. Everyone apparently understood. It's not like the rest of them had never experienced something like that before (with the exception of Natasha, whose stomach seemed to be a bottomless pit and whom they'd never *once* seen with a hangover).

Bucky also remembers Steve calling them a cab somewhere around midnight and helping Bucky get home. The last coherent thing Bucky can ever remember from that point on was his head pounding and the inside of his mouth tasting something foul – while his stomach churned, but not entirely from the liquor. It had been in part to do with the fact that he'd let himself get weak long enough for Tony to catch onto his secret. He was supposed to be better at hiding that shit. He couldn't risk Steve ever finding out – and the only way you can guarantee that a secret absolutely *remains* a secret is if you're the only one to ever know it.

Somewhere, in-between the ride home and thinking about *that*, Bucky had passed out with his head on Steve's shoulder. Because he was asleep, Bucky could never remember that Steve spent the remainder of the trip petting his fingers through Bucky's hair.

If he snuck a kiss onto the brunet's sweaty forehead, too, that was something only he and the cab driver ever had to know.

Technically, when it's said that 'Natasha found out second', it's *more* accurate to say that she and Sam found out at the exact same time, about four months later. In terms of bonds, theirs is very similar to Steve and Bucky's (minus the whole '*and I also pine for you so badly that sometimes I wanna die, whereas you just like me as a buddy*' thing). Unlike Steve and Bucky, though, they've been friends even longer - since high school, actually.

Unlike with Tony, in which Bucky had vehemently denied the accusation, Bucky had been the one to spill the beans and offer it willingly to them. Well, *okay*, he'd meant for only Natasha to hear – but she hadn't known that he was about to go spilling something like that out, which Bucky had done only *seconds* after striding straight into her dorm room. He'd been so frazzled that he hadn't even noticed Sam sitting at her computer table, lazily dicking around on her laptop.

Thank fucking *god* it'd been Sam and not *Steve* himself who'd been sitting there, because the first thing out of Bucky's mouth, before Natasha could even shut the door, had been, "I like Steve!" It'd been more of a shout, really.

Why had he been so frustrated that day? *Right*, it'd been because... *Yeah, that's it* – they'd been grabbing a coffee between classes; making conversation, laughing easily at what the other said, as effortlessly as it always was between them. Then some guy behind them had recognized the blond from a sculpting class they apparently were both in, and Bucky knew *immediately* that that guy swung that way. He'd been friends with Steve long enough to recognize the look people gave him when they *also* couldn't quite get over how unfairly good-looking he is.

Steve just smiled politely and entertained the guy's conversation, but Bucky could sense that Steve was most likely doing it just to *not* seem like a shmuck. Because he kept shooting Bucky these little side-glances, like he felt bad that now Bucky was being treated like a third wheel.

And then that's sort of *exactly* what'd happened. As they'd inched their way forward towards the counter, buddy would *not* stop blatantly flirting with Steve. The weird part, Bucky remembers, was the *looks* Steve kept shooting his way – almost like he expected Bucky to jump in and *say* something of some sort. The problem had been that

Bucky had absolutely no idea what exactly it was that Steve wanted him to say. So he'd said nothing not at all.

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Then the guy had asked for Steve's number; suggested maybe they go for a drink sometime. Once again, the blond's gaze pivoted back to Bucky, and *what the fuck had he expected Bucky to do about that?* It's not like Bucky was his parent; Steve didn't require his permission, if *that's* what he was looking for, for whatever reason. Sure, maybe on the inside, he'd been fuming and suddenly felt like decking this random loser in the nose.

Except he'd known that the jealousy it stirred inside of him was unfounded – and the guy probably *wasn't* a loser. Chances are, he was nice. But it wasn't like it would matter in the end... Though he never let Steve see it, Bucky found a reason to dislike *any* and *every* person Steve had ever gone out with during their friendship.

So buddy had been staring at Steve, but *Steve* was looking to *Bucky*. Not knowing what to do, Bucky just shrugged and mumbled, "Don't need *my* blessin', buddy. S'not like *I'm* your boyfriend." Then he'd glanced to the stranger and wedged his foot even *further* into the back of his throat by clarifying, "I'm not his boyfriend."

"I sort of figured," the guy chuckled back, and *wow, that'd sort of been a douche thing to say*. What if Bucky *had* been his boyfriend? What the fuck had been wrong with *him*, that this asshole just automatically assumed they weren't together? Bucky remembers thinking, '*Fuck that – this guy is a fuckin' loser.*' Then he proceeded to daydream punching him in the nose again.

The absolute worst part had been the fraction of a second when something akin to frustration seemed to flash over Steve's face. Then it was gone in the blink of an eye, and Steve threw on another polite smile and replied, "Yeah, sure. Why not, right? Hold on, lemme grab my phone..."

They'd exchanged numbers, Bucky's back to them then as he'd glared daggers at the back of the innocent person's head who stood between him and ordering their drinks. When he heard buddy chuckle and then say, "You mind if I add you to Facebook? I can't believe we never added each other before – I literally see you in class *all* the time!" Bucky had made a disgusted face and childishly mouthed, '*I literally see you all the time.*' Then he shook his head and scoffed, only to throw on a cheery smile when it was finally his turn to tell the barista what they wanted.

It was only afterwards when they'd been walking around on campus, sipping from their coffees, that Steve had jokingly said that he thought maybe Bucky would've 'saved the day' and told the random classmate that Steve was taken, since Steve 'didn't really feel in the mood for datin' until exams were over, at least'. Had Bucky not been a *complete idiot* – capable of picking up on the most obvious cues – his little family vacation with Steve would've actually been the *second* time they pretended to be boyfriends.

(Instead, he'd totally missed his chance. For the record, Steve actually wound up having a great time, and Bucky once again acted like it didn't feel like his guts were being ripped out when he found out that the two started dating a few weeks later. Steve and Peter Parker were together for seven-and-a-half months after that, and Bucky had irrationally despised the guy for *every goddamn second of it*. Peter actually did prove to be a decent guy... Not that that changed anything.)

Right after the incident where Steve gave away his number, though – *that'd* been the catalyst for Bucky to storm straight to Natasha's and voice his confession out loud for the first time, *ever*. Steve had class, and Bucky hadn't; not for a few more hours. He just needed to vent and get that shit off of his chest or else he'd felt like he was going to blow up.

So... yeah. "I like Steve!" was their greeting.

"Nice to see you, too, Bucky," Sam had jokingly said from his chair, a tiny, amused smile on his face.

Bucky jumped and looked horrified when he realized that *Sam* had heard that, too. But then he just threw his hands in the air and kept shouting, "No! You know what? I don't even fuckin' care – *you* can hear it, too! I. Like. Steve Rogers. I *like* Steve." Then the words and their full weight did that annoying thing where it'd *hit* him again. He'd lost his steam as quickly as it came; face falling and going desolate as he fell onto Natasha's bed and stared at the ground.

"I like Steve," he repeated miserably, much quieter this time. "I think I've liked him since the second I ever saw him."

Bucky couldn't tell which had been more frustrating: the fact that he was feeling that way at *all*, or the fact that neither Natasha *nor* Sam were even remotely surprised. "Yeah, we know," Natasha had said simply – one could say *bluntly*, for that was Natasha Romanoff all over, after all... Straight to the point and never sugar-coating it. But there *had* been a hint of care in her tone, too, as if the rest of that sentence was an unspoken, '*Do you want to talk about it?*'

"You both knew?" Bucky had croaked weakly. Groaning, his head fell into his hands. Natasha patted his shoulder while Sam shuffled his chair up closer to them.

"Yeah... basically," Sam said.

"For how long?"

"Since the first time I met Steve and saw you two together," Natasha had answered, having been friends with Bucky before Steve.

"And for me, since the first time I met you," Sam added, the situation having been the opposite for him.

"*That long?*" Bucky exclaimed. He probably could've cried at that point if his body hadn't been so busy burning up and blushing scarlet. "The fuck, guys? Why didn't either of you tell me I was bein' so fuckin' transparent!?"

"If it's any consolation, I don't think Steve's ever caught on," Sam said, trying to be reassuring.

"Yeah, I doubt he even noticed."

"Wow, thanksfor *that*, Tasha," Bucky had muttered, dropping his head down again.

"Sorry. You know that's not what I meant," she said, now rubbing circles on his back. "I just meant that he's never acted strange around you, right? Steve's pretty perceptive; if he'd caught on, he would've said something by now, don't you think?"

"I don't know," Bucky sighed. "Or he could've just never said nothin' because he wouldn't want to hurt my feelings and ruin our friendship." Lifting his head and giving them a pleading look, he then said, "*Tell me* he doesn't know... That I'm just bein' stupid and paranoid, and Steve doesn't know about this. *Please.*"

The glance they'd exchanged didn't make Bucky feel overly reassured, or hardly any better. Though, it sort of did when Natasha had eventually answered, "I'm sure he doesn't know, yeah."

"He would've said something if he did," Sam added.

"And he *wouldn't* let it ruin your friendship, if he ever *did* know," Natasha finished, sounding a little more like a protective mother hen at that. They'd sounded sincere enough that Bucky could believe them. *Still*, he'd asked (*had to make sure*), "You two ain't ever gonna tell him 'bout this, right?"

"No."

"Of course not, Bucky."

"You swear it?" Bucky had pressed.

That had Natasha rolling her eyes affectionately and grabbing her pillow to swat him upside the back of the head. Bucky had made a sound of surprise, but couldn't help but smile. "Snap out of it, James," the redhead ordered. "We're all stressed out enough as it is right now with finals coming up – you don't need to be freaking yourself out any more about stuff that's not there."

"Yeah, man, we're not gonna say anything," Sam had promised, smiling that friendly smile Bucky's way. It'd helped relax the knot in his stomach a little bit. "Steve's never gonna find out unless it's 'cause *you* tell him."

"Okay... Yeah, okay, you're right," Bucky said, trying to force himself to stay positive. He remembers that being a lot easier said than done. "Yeah, m'just bein' a stupid prick. Overreacted. It'll be fine. You think it'd be cool if we... y'know... like, forget this whole conversation ever happened, maybe? I sorta feel humiliated enough to last a lifetime; once is good enough for me."

"*What* conversation?" Sam had (thankfully) joked. "I've already forgotten every word you just said. *Why* are you even here?"

Chuckling anxiously, he let Natasha grip the back of his neck and pull him into a quick sort of embrace to show that she cared. When she backed off, Sam had hopped to his feet and clapped his hands together, suggesting that the three of them find a way to squeeze onto Natasha's single bed and watch a movie on her laptop. Bucky remembers having been willing to do *anything* at that point to move on from what'd just happened, so he was only too eager to say yes.

When Sam briefly left to go make a bowl of popcorn using the microwave in one of the dorm kitchens, Bucky decided to bring up the conversation *one* last time... Just one more, and then he was going to drop it forever. If he had to, he'd even *deny* in the future that it ever happened in the first place.

Eyes cast down to his hands wringing nervously in his lap, Bucky has quietly said, “Natasha?” From the corner of his eyes, he’d seen her turn her head to look at him, saying nothing but waiting patiently for him to ask what was clearly on his mind. “...I’m gonna get over this, right? This... These... *feelings*, or whatever they are. They don’t mean nothin’, right? Like... This isn’t love. I’m not... y’know, in love with him or anything. You think I’ll get over this, don’t you?”

Bucky remembers it unnerving him that – though her face was a perfect *neutral* mask – something in her eyes hadn’t seemed as confident when she’d answered, “Love is for children. Love like *that*, anyways. It’s just a fairy tale, James. Yeah, don’t worry, you’ll get over it.”

For some reason, it’d felt a lot more that time like she was just telling Bucky what he’d wanted to hear.

Tuesday morning, Bucky wakes up before Steve.

The night before - after the whole ‘kiss’ incident - had been uncomfortable, to say the least. After keeping himself locked away in the bathroom for almost a half hour, his dad actually had to use it, and out Bucky went. The second Mark got a look at his face, eyes red and cheeks looking like Bucky had been trying to scrub any and all evidence away, he’d faltered in his step. But Mark and Bucky have a certain kind of relationship, always have. In fact, he’s sort of a blessed relief compared to everyone else – namely because, aside from the odd comment, he really doesn’t pry into Bucky’s life. Sometimes, he actually tries to steer Annie *away* from prying if he feels Bucky needs a break from it. He always knows when something’s troubling Bucky, but he lets Bucky come forward about it on his own time, if he chooses to at all.

Truthfully – *and Bucky knows this* – most of the reason why he prefers his dad’s approach is because it makes it easier to keep pretending that everything’s okay. Sometimes, it makes him feel bad. His mom has all the best intentions, but she can try too hard. His dad, on the other hand, tries the passive approach with the best intentions, but it’s also not enough. Neither option actually makes Bucky open up, but that’s not *their* fault. Bucky’s wished – on more nights than he can count – that he could tell them everything he’s felt in the last six years. But the longer he distances himself from it, the harder it is to want to talk about it. It just means there’s more shit that’s piled on that he’d then have to face.

At the moment, it always seems easier for Bucky to push it all down and convince himself that he’s fine; he can do everything on his own. But when he’d seen his dad’s unexpected surprise at the state of Bucky’s face, and Bucky could see right through him... That all Mark wanted to do was break his rule and take a page from his wife’s book; ask Bucky outright if he was okay and to tell him what was wrong... Bucky, too, almost let himself slip. For a split second, he just about crumpled and walked straight in for a hug; so he could rest his head on his dad’s shoulder and let himself be held, while he reverted back to a child – a boy who just needed his father – and *cried* and *cried* until he got it all out.

Neither of them acted on their impulses. Mark's mouth had twitched, and Bucky panicked – worried that something along those lines *was* about to happen – and so he just threw on a forced smile and apologized for hogging the bathroom for so long. He knew his dad didn't believe him, because when he deliberately asked how Bucky's stomach was feeling (*guess Steve did as Bucky asked and covered for him*) and Bucky replied that it was a little better, all Mark did was hum. He watched Bucky with consideration and a frown to match, and then hesitated. Bucky just turned to head back downstairs, saying over his shoulder, "I'll be all better by morning, I'm sure. Don't worry 'bout me."

Then Bucky straddled a line between *too talkative* and *too quiet* for the rest of the night – never fully acting like himself – until he decided he just wanted to go to bed. Steve had stayed downstairs and hung out a bit more with his family, but all the same, Bucky was still awake by the time Steve finally came quietly into the room and went to blow up the air mattress. Bucky couldn't have fallen asleep if he tried.

Until he finally managed to fall asleep, Bucky's entire body had been tense from the moment Steve entered the room. He pretended to be sleeping when he *heard* and then *felt* his best friend approach his bed... Lean over slightly to see his face... Whispered, "Bucky?" But Bucky just forced himself to be as still and convincing as possible. After a few seconds, Steve had sighed and lied down on his spot on the floor. Only then could Bucky open his eyes again, and he stared at one lone spot on the wall across from him for what felt like hours.

But despite only getting *maybe* four hours of sleep, Bucky's up now, at the crack of dawn. Carefully, he gets out of bed, fishes his phone from the spot in the closet where Steve told him he'd hidden it, and then tiptoes out of the room. The cottage feels different when everyone else is still sleeping. In a way, the silence is relaxing. He can still know that the people he loves are with him, but his favourite place in the world can also be his own for just a little bit.

After making himself a cup of coffee, he goes barefoot outside and makes his way down to the dock. The water is clear and the air is already warm, with just the perfect breeze. Today's going to be a scorcher, from the feel of it, so Bucky's glad he can enjoy his idea of the perfect kind of weather while the world is still peaceful; gives him the chance to do some proper thinking without any distractions.

He sits down at the edge of the wooden dock, crossing his legs and laying his coffee cup, pack of smokes, and his lighter to his side. After lighting one up, he sneaks a glance behind him to make sure he's still alone, and then turns on his iPhone. He isn't sure who to text first, so he goes with the first name that comes to mind and shoots a quick message to Sam. He won't lay this all on him at the moment, since he *does* have some exams this week; he's just going to open the door to casual conversation. He's sure that after he talks to Natasha, Sam will probably hear all about it anyways. This time, he's actually glad of it – makes one less person he needs to sound like a jackass to.

Hey Wilson. Hope your finals go well this week, kick some ass. Vacation's going alright, but looking forward to being back home. Coffee next week?

He hits send, then he's immediately calling Natasha. It's not even six in the morning yet, so he feels a little bad when she picks up and it's no surprise that he's woken her up. She groans and then bypasses any greetings with, "Do you have any idea what time it is, James?"

"Yeah, I know Tasha, I'm sorry," Bucky says genuinely.

"It's my day off. Days off are meant for sleeping in."

"I'm sorry," he says again. "You know I wouldn't have called if it wasn't an emergency."

There's a pause on the other line, and then she asks, "What time is it even?"

"I think almost six."

Another groan. "Why the hell are you even *up*? Aren't you on vacation? If you've been getting up at the asscrack of dawn every day to do *work*, Steve and I are going to have a very serious conversation when you two get back. I may have to get him to kick your ass, and then kick *his* ass for letting you do that."

Bucky hesitates, taking a few drags from his smoke while she talks, before exhaling and then telling her, "Steve's the reason I'm calling."

Silence. Natasha's a smart girl and puts two and two together quickly, so when she speaks again, her voice is clearer and more awake. Bucky imagines she's just gotten out of bed and has given in to the fact that she won't be going back to bed for a while now. "Alright, I'm listening," she says. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah," Bucky says automatically. He catches himself. "I mean... *no*, not overly. It is and it isn't, I – I don't know how to explain what's going on."

"Take a breath – of *real* air, James; not those fucking cancer sticks you're always sucking on. Tell me what happened," she says, her voice already getting that protective edge again. Natasha can be brutally honest – sometimes to a fault – but she's also an incredible shoulder to lean on, if ever he needs one. She's almost as good of an ear as Steve is.

So Bucky takes his breath, lets it out slowly, (glances behind him again) and tells her everything. He tries to be painstakingly thorough, sometimes going back and filling in any blanks he might've missed. Walking her through the last four days, he starts from the moment they'd arrived at the cottage, talks about every single thing that's gone on between him and Steve, every comment that'd been made, the confusion he's felt, the thing with the kiss, and how Bucky reacted to it.

The very first thing she says after Bucky finishes and she asks him if *he's* alright, is to say, "I seriously don't understand how someone can be so oblivious."

Bucky assumes she's referring to Steve somehow, but when he goes to answer, he gets as far as replying, "I dunno, Natasha, he's just--"

And then she cuts him off. "I was referring to *you*."

"What?" Bucky replies, thrown off.

"Never mind the fact that you actually *lived through* everything you just told me; how can you possibly relay it all *back* to me like you just did and completely overlook what's very clearly staring you right in the face?"

Bucky's frowning down at the sparkling water. Running a hand through his hair before reaching out to grab another cigarette, he says, "Okay, seriously, I have absolutely no idea what you're even talkin' about. Like, I don't."

Natasha sighs on the other end. "He *likes* you, James," she then says. "Steve *likes* you. Now that I mention it, a lot of things in the past five years suddenly make a lot more sense."

"Steve does *not* like me, Natasha," Bucky argues, face flaring and suddenly feeling a weird combination of *hopeful* and *stung*.

"Oh no? Wow, James – come *on*. The way he talked about you to your family on that first night? The story he told about meeting you, and 'knowing from the second he saw you smile'? That *seriously* didn't ring any bells for you?"

"He was just doin' what he came here to do!" Bucky insists. "What *else* was he supposed to say – '*Oh, there never actually was a moment like that for me because none of this is real, and I'm not actually dating your son*'?"

"Okay, well what about the night he woke you up from your nightmare? Calling you 'baby', being that touchy with you, rubbing your back until you fell asleep? Those are the kinds of things you actually *do* with someone you're dating; they're not stuff you do with platonic friends," she retaliates. "Unless you can recall a time when you had Stark or Clint or someone rub your back until you fell asleep," she adds sarcastically. "I know *I've* certainly never done that for you before."

"He was just being a good friend. He was – he was still playing the part."

"For *what* audience, James? Steve never had an obligation to act a certain way around you once you two were alone, but he did it anyways. You're telling me that that doesn't tell you a few things?"

Bucky makes a frustrated sound and almost hurls his phone into the water. Instead, he just rubs his eyes and shakes his head again uselessly, even though no one's around to see it. Grabbing his coffee cup, he down half of it and then replies, "You weren't there, you don't understand."

"It sounds like despite *you* being there, you don't seem to understand, either. And – okay, *please* give me your justification for him sticking your phone down his shorts and then telling you to go and get it, because *that* sounded suggestive as fuck to me. I'm pretty much ninety-nine percent sure that, had your sister not interrupted you guys, he was going to make a move to kiss you."

Maybe this conversation was a bad idea. The problem is, everything Natasha's saying comes from a logical place, and also from a supportive one, too. Bucky knows that she's just trying to help; steer Bucky in a direction and see something that she believes him blind to. But they're also both hot heads, and a disagreement usually escalates into harmless bickering between them. Natasha's trying to help, but right now, Bucky feels she's actually doing more harm than good.

Because he *doesn't* have an explanation for that one, but all his mind keeps trying to tell him is, *She wasn't there; she wasn't there and she doesn't understand, and there had to have been another reason, because Steve doesn't like you like that. If he did, you would've known by now*. So what are her words doing to him? They're planting the seed of doubt. They're giving Bucky false hope. Those are very dangerous things.

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Bucky suddenly doesn't want to be talking about this anymore. He needed to get it off of his chest and talk through his feelings with someone he trusts, who's already in on his secret. But what exactly had he expected her to say? *This* isn't making him feel much better, but the alternative? Her listening and then telling him that he *is* right for feeling stupid, and rubbing in the fact that she knows Steve doesn't care about him in that way either? That would've hurt even more. In retrospect, it was sort of an unfair place to put Natasha into, as well as a lose-lose for Bucky.

"You still there?" she asks, cutting into his thought. Her tone is a bit gentler now. "James... I'm not telling you any of this to upset you. I just know how in your own head you get sometimes. There's a situation working out in your favour *right* in front of you, but you're not letting yourself see it."

"I think... I think I don't want to talk about this anymore," Bucky says, sighing. "I'm sorry for throwing all this shit onto you, and I appreciate you tryin' to help, but... Yeah, I don't want to talk about it anymore, please."

"Alright," she says after a small pause. "Before we do, though, can I ask you a question? You don't have to answer. Although, I feel like by *not* answering, you're still sort of answering--"

"What is it, Tasha?"

"Are you in love with him?"

That shuts Bucky right up. This time, Natasha doesn't press him to give his answer any quicker. He stays silent for almost a minute, while his hand holding the cigarette starts to shake a little and he tries to keep calm while he finishes burning through the rest of it. Saying it out loud makes it too real. Bucky promised himself he wouldn't make that mistake and inside, he knows he failed. But admitting it out loud seems to feel so much worse.

When he finally answers, he tries to deflect it. "I thought you told me once that love was for children."

"And it was over three years ago I told you that, so what does *that* tell you?" she remarks. "Besides, you know my views on that whole thing aren't the same anymore."

Bucky knows that, yes. She and Clint have been dating for the last two years, and it's more than obvious that they're crazy about each other – even if Natasha shows it in a more controlled, subdued way sometimes.

"I know..." Bucky bites his lip anxiously. "...And I think I do. About Steve, I mean. I love him."

There. He's said it. It's out in the open now... God, how can something feel like a gigantic weight off his shoulders, while *also* feeling like *more* weight at the exact same time?

"I knew you were."

Of course.

"You just wanted to hear me say it?" Bucky asks flatly. "Was that *really* necessary?"

"No," she tells him, "I think *you* needed to hear yourself say it. Because I'm betting that you hadn't yet."

Bucky's shoulders sag. "Any advice, then?" he tries to joke weakly.

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“Well... Honestly, I think you might be in the wrong business, Barnes,” she tells him. “Cause trying to ignore your feelings and pretend them away hasn’t really worked out for you so far. You’re totally a romantic at heart, otherwise you wouldn’t still be holding onto whatever it is that’s *made* you hold onto Steve for the last five years. So, you want my advice?”

“Will I regret asking for it?”

“Probably. I’m gonna give it *anyways*, though.” She takes a quick pause and then tells him, “The approach you’ve been trying to take all the way up until now? It’s not working. Maybe it’s time you try a different tactic. If your feelings aren’t going to go away, and trying to *ignore* that they exist hasn’t done anything for you, maybe what you need to do now is face them. You might be surprised at what you find.”

“If I tell you I’ll *think* about it, can we change the topic now?”

“Good enough for me,” she concedes, and Bucky breathes a small sigh of relief. He asks her to fill *him* in now on what’s been going on with her since he’s been gone. She laughs and reminds him that it’s only been *four days*, but Bucky just says, “Tell me anyways.” They keep chatting for almost twenty more minutes before her consistent little side yawns have Bucky taking pity on her.

“Go back to bed, sleepyhead,” he tells her, “before you pass out where you stand.”

“I am perfectly capable of sleeping standing up,” she says – then yawns again. He doesn’t know if that’s really true, but Natasha’s just about the one person he *wouldn’t* be surprised was capable of that, so he doesn’t dispute her. “You owe me dinner as soon as you’re back to make up for getting me up so early. I’ll be lucky if I can *actually* fall back to sleep properly now,” she says, sounding only a little annoyed.

“Sounds good,” Bucky replies with a chuckle. “Sushi?”

“I’m thinking steak and beer.”

“Great, now I want steak and beer at seven-thirty in the morning,” Bucky groans, his mouth suddenly watering. Natasha yawns again, and Bucky insists he let her go.

“Fine, fine, I’m going,” she says. “Love you.”

“Love you too. See you soon.”

“Kay. Say hi to Steve for me.”

Bucky’s stomach flops at the mere mention of his name. He’d actually been distracted from the whole thing until now. Keeping his voice even, he tells her he will. After saying goodbye and hanging up, Bucky keeps staring at the phone in his hand. He’s very tempted to check his emails and see if Pierce has sent him anything new since the day before. He opens up the Internet, but then hovers his thumb over the screen, hesitating.

He replays Steve’s earlier words in his head on loop. He thinks about just how much he hates Pierce, and his job, and how much he *has* been putting up with in the two years he’s been an assistant at the firm. Where was he looking for this to get him, anyways? Did he want to be a lawyer himself one day? He’d have to go to law school for that... Truthfully, Bucky isn’t overly sure *what* he really wants to do. The idea of not knowing always scared the crap out of him, so keeping himself distracted with his job for Pierce always kept that at bay.

Since that fucking accident... Bucky's been so meticulous about every detail of his life; like if he could keep that in order – feel in complete control – things would get easier again, and eventually, he'd have everything he ever wanted, and *then* maybe he could forgive himself and go back to way he used to be again.

How's that been working out for you? a voice in his head asks. It sounds just like Steve.

“Not well,” he replies under his breath. He knows he needs to start making changes, but he doesn't know where to start. And he's afraid to start because he *knows* he'd just insist he do it all alone – but this isn't one of those things he can afford to do without support. Talk about a Catch 22.

He hesitates for just a second longer and then lowers his thumb, exiting the Internet app. Instead, he goes to his text messages and composes one to Tony. He doesn't know for sure what he hopes to gain by doing it... Maybe he wants to know how it feels again to tell someone those words: *I love Steve*. It feels terrifying, but also freeing; dangerous but somehow comforting. And despite the fact that Tony technically figured out Bucky's feelings for himself, before anyone else bothered to bring it up, Bucky's never actually *confirmed* that he was right.

So he does exactly that; he texts Tony nothing except three words: *I love Steve*.

Thirty seconds later, his friend replies: *About time xoxoxo*

Bucky isn't really sure what else he expected, given that Tony already had his suspicions. Still, maybe a *little* surprise would've been helpful. But helpful for *what* exactly? Bucky sighs again – like hell if he knows. He's just about as all over the place as he can get. He turns off his phone before he can say anything else and make the situation even *more* confusing than it already is. Then he goes back to staring out at the water.

It's beautiful. This whole place is so beautiful. He remembers what it'd always felt like to come up there as a kid, when the world was still simple; when he'd begin every day without second-guessing his every movement. How many times had he gotten out of bed, taken one look at the lake from out his window, and then ran straight for it and cannonballed into the water simply because he felt the urge to? He used to live with such a reckless abandon. He used to be so different... It's almost like he can hear his own footsteps, glance over his shoulder, and *see* the old him barreling down the dock before leaping right past him with a grin on his boyish face.

Brows knitting slightly, he rises to his feet and brings his hands to the hem of his shirt, still staring ahead. He pulls the shirt over his head, lets it drop to his side, and then gives the gentle breeze a chance to brush his skin and get reacquainted with it. Biting his lip, he starts backing up – slow at first, but then a little quicker, and then a bit quicker than that.

When he's almost three quarters of the way back up the dock, he stops... Gives himself only a second's pause, before forcing himself to grab onto the impulse he's feeling and not talk his way out of it. He breaks into a full-on run, closer and closer to the edge, until his feet are no longer hitting wood and he's diving straight into the water. The water engulfs him all around his head first, and then the rest of his body only a split second later. It's cool... refreshing... invigorating... sort of *calming*... Bucky lets his mind go blank.

He's in the water, and he just keeps going; arms already moving and feet already kicking. He used to be a very strong swimmer in high school, and it's one of those things you never really forget, like riding a bike. He just starts swimming, heading further and further into the lake until he tires himself out. When the steam finally leaves him, he rolls himself onto his back and floats there for a while; first, staring up at the sky, and then closing his eyes and simply listening to the nature around him. When was the last time he just *enjoyed* what birds sounded like? There are a few in the trees, and Bucky likes the way they're talking to each other.

He floats on the surface lazily, which gradually inches him closer and closer to the cottage again, thanks to the direction the tiny waves guide him in. The concept of time has floated away from him, too, so Bucky doesn't know how long he's been out there by the time he finds himself close to the dock again. Still early enough that the rest of his family doesn't seem to be up yet, all the same.

He's back to circling his arms and kicking his legs to keep afloat when he sees Steve emerge from the patio door.

Bucky's heart rate picks up immediately, *fucking traitor*. But it can hardly be helped – Steve's one of those people who looks especially radiant when he first wakes up. His bedhead makes him look particularly *boyish*, despite his muscular build. Even though there are aspects to him that are most definitely masculine, Steve has a lot of things about his face that are *delicate*, softer... like the hue of his hair, or the way he smiles, or the length of his lashes. He's the perfect balance between handsome and pretty – and the gentle features are only accentuated first thing in the morning.

Admittedly, Bucky's also a little tense the second he sees his best friend because of what happened the night before. He knows his reaction to their kiss was weird, to say the least. Chances are, Steve's going to try talking about it. The problem is, Bucky doesn't want to. He's more than willing to swallow it all down and do his hardest to pretend he's perfectly fine if it means they can avoid that conversation.

"Hey Buck," Steve says, coming down the dock. He's got a little smile on his face – sleepy as he still clearly is – and nothing seems out of the ordinary in his tone, so Bucky hopes – *prays* – that Steve isn't upset with him. The blond is stretching his arms and back while he walks, groaning under his breath and then staring out at the stretch of lake and trees, the same as Bucky had.

"It's gorgeous out," he then says. "If only the rest of the day could just stay at this temperature, right?"

"Yeah, that'd be nice," Bucky replies, trying to stay casual. Staring up at Steve has suddenly made him remember that his *shirt* is right off to Steve's left, so he sinks a little deeper into the water to try and mask his shoulder. Steve's still staring out at the view and doesn't seem to notice.

"Sleep alright?" Steve asks.

"I slept okay. You?"

Steve shrugs, making a non-decisive sound. "Could've been better, but I still feel recharged, so that's good." Then he looks down to Bucky and his smile gets bigger.

"Didn't know where you were when I woke up, so I went looking for you. Didn't expect to find you in here."

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“Neither did I,” Bucky admits. “It was sort of a spur-of-the-moment decision.”

For a moment, neither says anything. Steve holds his eye contact and then averts it to the water *next* to Bucky. When he looks back, Bucky knows what Steve’s doing; the silent question he’s asking. So Bucky just keeps looking back, letting his own silence give the answer. He doesn’t want to tell him *yes*, because of what that could imply, but he also doesn’t want to say *no*, because he just wants Steve around him so badly.

Steve says nothing as he finally blinks and looks off, pulling his t-shirt from over his head. Balling it up and tossing it to where Bucky’s own shirt is, he leaps off the edge of the dock and dives head-first into the water in the same fashion as Bucky had, too. When his head emerges from the surface, he has a big grin on his face and lets out a surprised shout.

“Wow... fuck! That’s colder than it looked!” he exclaims, laughing.

Bucky grins, splashing water at him with one hand. “Better that you got the hard part over with all at once then, ain’t it?”

Steve swipes his bangs off his forehead and then looks all around him, sighing with content as he gets used to the temperature. “Good way to wake up,” he says. “Best way there is, actually. This place is gorgeous, Bucky. I wish we had more things just like this back home.”

“Mhm... yeah,” Bucky agrees quietly, looking out at the landscape, too. “Sometimes I wish I could stay here forever.”

“I don’t blame you. But y’know, you should come up here more, if you miss it. Like, in the summers and stuff.”

Bucky frowns to himself. “I guess,” he says. “I suppose I can think about it. It’s definitely quieter than New York.”

He can feel Steve watching him as he stares off with his little frown, and then suddenly he’s getting hit with a wave of water in his face. He looks to Steve in surprise, and the blond is grinning at him, hands outstretched from him splashing Bucky. “Stop overthinking things!” Steve encourages playfully. “C’mon, get your mind off of *whatever* you’re stressin’ yourself out about. Race with me.”

“*Race* with you.”

“Yeah. From *there* to... hmm, *there*,” Steve says. “Whoever can do the most laps in a minute, the *loser* has to make the other breakfast.”

“Have fun cookin’ for me then, Rogers,” Bucky says, sprouting a small smirk as he swims over so he’s by Steve’s side. They both stare ahead, their bodies now alert and getting into competitive mode. “I like my bacon extra crispy.”

“I’ll have my eggs over-easy,” Steve quips.

“One...” Bucky mutters. “Two sugars in my coffee, please.”

“I’ll have a glass of that delicious orange juice you got in the fridge. Two...”

They both pause, and then Bucky says quickly, “*Three*.” Then they’re off. It’s hard to keep track of how Steve’s doing because Bucky’s vision is substantially narrowed to only be able to see his own path. All he can do is move his fastest, try not to let his hair get into his eyes, and not go crashing head-first into any rocks around the perimeters. He *also* realizes that neither of them really set any way for them to actually know when a full minute passes, so they just keep going – sometimes passing each other, sometimes being side-by-side, in a perfect tandem.

It's probably about three minutes later when Bucky exerts himself to the point of needing to catch his breath. He slows down in front of the dock so he can reach up with his right hand and hold onto it, panting softly. Steve comes to join him, pretty much in the same condition Bucky's in. Steve holds onto the edge of the dock with his left hand, and it isn't until Bucky's vision gets a little less starry around the corners that he realizes that he and Steve are actually a *lot* closer than he'd expected. Steve's got a little open-mouth smile as they both continue to heave heavy breaths. Bucky tries to keep calm.

"I... don't actually know who won that," he says with a breathy chuckle.

"Yeah, me neither," Steve laughs. "Should've thought that one out a bit more." Then he holds Bucky's gaze for a few moments and says, a little softer, "Let's just say that *you* won."

Bucky swallows hard. He tries to turn it into a joke. "You can't *give* me victory if it might've already been mine, Rogers."

Steve just replies back just as sincerely, "I was going to cook for you regardless of who won, anyways."

"You don't have to do that."

"I want to."

Bucky realizes Steve's come a bit closer, and impulsively, he wants to find a way to back out and get the hell out of the water. But he's frozen where he is, like Steve's body is a fucking magnet and Bucky has no other choice but to be drawn to him. After a bit more silence, he watches Steve's gaze slowly move down his face and over to Bucky's left shoulder. Within the water, Bucky suddenly jolts when he realizes that Steve is trailing his hand ever so gently up the length of that arm. He doesn't exactly shy away from the touch, but he *does* try to shrink out of it when Steve's hand emerges from the surface and he finishes the pathway his fingers were on, touching Bucky's shoulder lightly.

Bucky's face is slightly pinched up, but he can't stop staring at Steve's face. There's so much sadness and concern in his eyes as he stares at Bucky's shoulder, and something *else* there that only reminds Bucky of Natasha's words from earlier. "Are we going to talk about last night?" Steve finally asks, still watching where the tips of his fingers are gently resting on Bucky's shoulder. *Then* he meets Bucky's eyes again.

"I just want to forget that happened," Bucky admits. His voice is hoarser and meeker than he means for it to be.

"The thing is... I don't," Steve says. Bucky didn't think he could freeze any *more* until he suddenly feels his friend reach that hand on his left shoulder up to tuck a strand of Bucky's hair behind his ear. There are a million ways Bucky can interpret that action, but in his stubborn state, he *still* doesn't let himself believe that it could possible mean *that*. He tries to tell himself that Steve's actions are being done out of *pity*... That this is all just leading up to Steve trying to let him down as painlessly as he possibly can.

"There's something I need to tell you, okay?" Steve asks, moving in closer still.

Now Bucky backs up a bit. His eyes are pleading, but he's forcing the rest of himself to be as controlled as possible. He replies, "Please don't. Whatever you're about to say... Don't? I just... I want to forget that happened. I just got... I was overwhelmed last night, with everything going on. I overreacted, but I'm fine now. Okay? I'm fine."

"Bucky," Steve says, now frowning and still trying to come towards him.

Bucky shakes his head and gives Steve a weak smile. "Steve, please. I'm asking you not to. I know what you're gonna say, so you don't need to say it. I just don't want things to change between us, okay? Please? I can't do this right now. I... I need you in my life, okay? Please just forget about what happened last night."

Now he's at the ladder, and he turns away and climbs straight up. The first thing he goes for is his shirt. Steve's out of the water by the time he's pulling it down his stomach; arms now covered once again. The shirt instantly starts soaking and sticking to him, but it'll have to do until he can grab a towel. Steve's frowning to himself, but there's no anger or annoyance in his eyes. He just leans down and picks up Bucky's things for him, before holding them out for Bucky to take.

"I want to talk about it," Steve says again, sounding disappointed. "But I'm not going to force you into anything, either." After Bucky takes his things hesitantly, Steve picks up his own shirt and then gives him a tiny half-smile. It doesn't meet his eyes – his eyes that, Bucky realizes, look just on the better side of *sad* now.

"I'll head in and start on breakfast," the blond offers, walking past Bucky and towards the cottage.

Bucky keeps staring ahead, eyes downward. His brows are creased. He's frowning, and when he turns towards Steve to offer back, "You don't have to; I can help if you w--"

Steve just answers with his back to him, "It's alright, Buck, I've got it." It's only when he steps off the dock that Steve suddenly stops, seems to hesitate, and then looks to Bucky from over his shoulder. "For the record, there's not a damn thing on this earth that would ever make me walk out of your life," he tells him. Sighing, he adds quietly, "I wish you'd *believe* that," and Bucky almost misses it. He would reply, but one – Steve's already halfway up the little grassy hill.

Secondly, Bucky wouldn't have known what to say anyways.

Throughout the rest of the day, Bucky's being a total coward and he knows it.

His family winds up getting up, one by one, while Steve is making breakfast. By the time Bucky heads back downstairs from the shower he'd chosen to take, there's enough food on the table to properly feed every mouth in the place. On the one hand, that makes Bucky feel a little disappointed, because if it'd just been the two of them, it might've felt like something along the lines of a *date* (stupid thought process as *that'd* been). At the same time, it's also a relief, because with everyone else around now, Steve wouldn't dare to bring up their earlier conversation again even if he wanted to.

And Bucky knows he wants to. As the morning turns into the afternoon, he can tell by the way Steve will glance over to him when no one else is looking. But then Steve's always turning that lost little look into a tight smile, forcing himself not to talk about it and try, for Bucky's sake, to now *also* pretend that the whole matter can simply be forgotten about. Bucky feels like an asshole, but selfishly, he just can't risk opening that door.

It is indeed hot as hell, so that makes for a lazy day. Annie had mentioned that they could all go into town to pick up a few extra groceries, but that plan gets abandoned pretty quickly. They all agree that they can have hot dogs for dinner and go to the grocery store the following day. Instead, they waste away most of the afternoon between swimming, watching movies, and doing their own thing. At one point, before dinner time, Rebecca decides she's going to go for her daily jog, and Steve offers to join her.

While they're gone, Mark invites Bucky out onto their little boat to try and do a bit of fishing. Bucky isn't particularly a fan of fishing itself, but it's something he and his dad did a lot of while he was growing up, which sort of makes it 'their' thing. Mostly, Bucky just smokes while he keeps the rod in one hand and gives up on waiting for anything to bite.

Mark always does a lot better than him (*somehow*), and manages to reel in two fish within the first twenty minutes. They're tiny though – not big enough to keep and cook. It used to be a tradition between them that if anything got hooked that was too small to keep, Bucky got to be the one to carefully free them and then toss them back into the water. He and Mark haven't fished together in well over six years... and yet both times, he dangles the hooked fish in front of Bucky so he can do the honours. Something about that makes Bucky almost want to cry.

They make casual chit-chat, but don't talk about anything with particular weight. Bucky knows they're both tip-toeing around a lot of topics, which is why he's surprised when – about a half hour later – Mark lights up a Colt, casts his line out into the water, and then says, "You know that your mom's only trying to look out for you when she gets worried, right?"

They both keep their eyes on the water, because eye contact would make them both uncomfortable right now. Bucky's already a little guarded when he replies, "Yeah, I know."

"I know sometimes she can come across a bit overbearing, but--"

"It's okay, dad, I know," Bucky mutters. His defence mechanism is kicking in, he can't help it. He just wants to shut this conversation down at the source.

That's what he knows his father's used to, and it usually works. This time, though, his dad just continues, "Look, no one in this boat is going to tell you that you *have* to talk about anything. If you want to keep whatever's going on bottled up inside, that's your decision; you're a grown man. But don't look at me and tell me that there's *nothing* going on, because we both know that's bullshit. You don't have to talk to me about it if you're not ready, but respect me enough to at least be honest about it."

Bucky's cheeks burn, like when he was a kid and he'd been caught doing something he wasn't supposed to. The silence between them is uncomfortable this time, yes... Quietly, Bucky mumbles, "Things have been stressful as fuck. Everything feels like it's either one big mess or complicated *at least*. But no, I don't want to talk about it."

"As long as you're aware that one day, you're going to have to," his father replies, reeling his line back in and then putting the rod down. "But if you don't want to right now, I can't force you. Hope you just know, though, that *that's* why we worry about you. Because we can tell, as much as you may try and hide it." Turning, he sits opposite

Bucky and lazily burns through his Colt, so Bucky lights up another cigarette and joins him.

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“Do you ever talk to Steve about that stuff?” he asks.

Bucky shakes his head. “No. He wants to know... I can see how much he wishes I’d open up to him, but I can’t.”

“It’s been six years, James...”

“You think I don’t know that?” Bucky snaps. Sighing, he apologizes quickly and then says, “Everyone handles things differently.”

“And everyone needs help sometimes, too,” Mark says. “Even if you don’t want it, you have an entire support system here who loves you. Your mom, myself, Rebecca and the kids, *Steve*... I know I haven’t really said anything to you about that whole thing, but you have to have least caught on that I obviously approve. The boy seems to worship the ground you walk on, and a love like that doesn’t land on your doorstep every day.

“Maybe you won’t be ready today; hell, maybe you won’t be ready in a year. But you have to accept *someday* that you deserve happiness, same as everyone else. And when that day comes, we’ll all still be here to help you. We’re your family – we’re not going anywhere.” He pauses, lets out a loud breath, and then awkwardly finishes, “Okay, I’m done. Consider that your pep talk for the last six years. Come back to me in another six and hopefully I’ll have some new material.”

Bucky huffs out a surprised, weak laugh, brows shooting up; not knowing how to react to that. He can’t remember the last time his dad actually sat his butt down and gave it to him straight like this. Chances are, it was just as uncomfortable for him as it was for Bucky to hear it, but he recognizes that it needed to be said.

“Thank you...” Bucky says slowly. “I know you guys are there for me... And I’m sorry I’ve been so closed off since I moved away, I just...”

Mark sees his struggle to continue and thankfully lifts a hand, shaking his head. “It’s fine, kiddo. That wasn’t some sort of ploy to try and guilt you into talking about it. You don’t have to explain yourself.” Bucky stays quiet and nods, so Mark then puts out his mini cigar in the ashtray they’d brought with them and suggests they head back to start dinner.

As he’s starting the boat back up, Bucky clears his throat. “Dad?”

“Mm?”

“Steve... Do you think he’ll still be there for me, too? If I still didn’t let him in for a while?”

Mark thinks about it, and then looks at his son. “Honestly? I think he has no intention of going anywhere,” he answers sincerely. “But the thing is, kiddo, relationships are give *and* take. You’ve already had him around for five years; that’s a long time to put yourself out there for someone who won’t give back. You deserve to have someone who’s willing to wait as long as it takes, and love you for every side of you there is to show – good *and* bad. But what about what he deserves, too? Does *he* deserve to constantly give, and wait, and never get anything in return *just because* you know he won’t walk away?”

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It's asked rhetorically, and yet it's a genuine question, all the same. Bucky hates how right his dad is – how twisted it suddenly makes his stomach feel. He'd never even realized that, though unintentionally, he'd been taking advantage of Steve's selflessness over the years. Because he *had* been doing that... He'd always trusted that Steve would never walk away from their friendship - as much as he always *feared* Steve eventually would - and so Bucky could get away with never fully opening up. If anyone had earned Bucky's complete and total trust, Steve certainly had over the years. Fuck, his *family* certainly had it, too.

Maybe Natasha was right... Maybe Bucky needs to start changing the way he's been doing things. You can only repeat wrong choices so many times before you reach a point where you have to admit that you're causing yourself more harm than good. Bucky doesn't know how to face everything he's been running away from... He just knows that he can't run anymore.

"No, he doesn't..." he finally says. Eyes feeling wet, he looks up at Mark and admits, "I really love him, dad. I don't think he knows just how much."

Mark reaches out and squeezes Bucky's shoulder. "From what I've seen? I think he does. I think maybe *you're* the one who won't let yourself see just how much that boy cares."

"Is it pathetic if I say that I'm afraid of that possibility 'cause I don't think I could handle it if he wound up leavin' me?" Bucky asks, chuckling dryly before sniffing and swiping at his eyes.

Mark smiles sympathetically. They start to head back towards the cottage. "I think love's a pretty terrifying thing," he answers. "First time I told your mom that I loved her, I threw up on her dress. Thought for sure that she was going to smack me and tell me never to call her again."

"You did not..." Bucky says slowly, now grinning. He's never heard this story before.

"Yeah, I did," Mark chuckles back. "You know what she did? She *laughed* – not *at* me, just... laughed; was the most beautiful sound I'd ever heard, given the circumstances. Then she tried to help *me* calm down, before taking her dress *right* off and getting something clean to wear – well. I mean, maybe not right away, but--"

"*Alright*, dad, *still* your son sittin' right here," Bucky says, barking out a loud laugh. "I really don't need to hear that."

"My *point*," Mark continues, "is that I was afraid of letting myself love your mom too at first, because I had myself convinced that a girl that incredible could never love a loser like me. I mean, I thought your mother was just about the greatest thing since sliced bread.

"But then I went and threw up on her and the very first thing she told me once I'd calmed down was, 'I love you, too.' And she's put up with me ever since, and I with her. We love each other *all* the time, not just when we're on our best behaviour, 'cause that's what real love is about. I'm sure there are things about Steve that drive you up the wall, but that doesn't make you any less crazy about him, right?"

"No..." Bucky admits softly.

“Well, that’s my point.” They pull into the little shed around the corner from their cottage where Mark stores the boat, and Bucky hops out to help him get it inside. “If Steve’s been interested since the first time he met you and stuck around all this time, even after getting to know your flaws, then it’s obvious that there isn’t a single part of you that he doesn’t accept,” Mark continues. Bucky can tell he’s choosing his words deliberately. He clasps a hand on Bucky’s shoulder again and says, “Trust that *he* won’t be any less crazy about *you* whenever you decide to open up to him.”

Bucky just nods. It’s easier than admitting to his father that it’s not really *Steve* he’s having a hard time trusting, but *himself*.

Liquid courage isn’t just a myth.

Later that evening, after Amy’s in bed and Ben’s inside playing video games, Bucky passes the evening in front of the fire. He’s got Steve to his left, Becca to his right, and his parents joining them as well. They chat – mostly, they reminisce about *happy* memories (so Bucky doesn’t mind taking part in that conversation) – while they make s’mores and watch the sun finish going down.

Steve and Bucky casually sip their way through some of the beer they’d brought with them. Even Rebecca is allowed to have just *one*, since she’s under supervision and all she’ll be doing is heading to bed afterwards anyways. Around midnight, Rebecca decides to turn in and hang out on her laptop in her room until bed. An hour later, and Bucky’s parents say their goodnights and turn in, too. They decide to stay outside and enjoy the crackling of the fire, working through another couple of beers.

Bucky’s got a definite buzz going on. His body feels light and his mind, a bit calmer. Steve’s one of those jolly drinkers, so his own tipsy state has him smiling and laughing effortlessly – clearly no longer dwelling on the heavy air felt between them throughout the day. They continue shooting the shit, with Bucky telling him a few funny stories from his childhood, and then Steve offering up some in return. Here and there, Steve will give him one of those warm smiles, and Bucky will make himself return it before looking away. Other times, it’s all he can do to stop himself from staring while Steve talks.

“What?” Steve will sometimes ask with a chuckle.

“Nothing,” Bucky always mumbles back, taking another sip from his bottle and averting his eyes quickly.

Then out of nowhere, they’ve fallen into silence, and Bucky realizes, *now’s his chance*. Easier said than done, though. It takes him almost five whole minutes – heart racing and anxiety making him feel like he’s about to fall into a panic attack – to suddenly clear his throat and force himself to say, “Did I ever tell you that Becks and I are only half-siblings?”

Steve looks to him with interest, raising an eyebrow. He shakes his head. “No, you didn’t,” he replies slowly, tone *already* gentle. He seems to pick up right away that whatever Bucky’s about to tell him is going to be difficult to get out.

Bucky nods, staring ahead at the flames. Absentmindedly playing with the beer bottle in his hand, he explains, “Yeah, well... we are. Got the same mom but different dads. Neither of us have ever met our dads. Um... I was eight when our parents adopted us, but Rebecca was only one, so... She never knew our birth mother. I didn’t either,

really... I think out of those eight years, I only spent *maybe* two of them technically *with* her?"

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He can see that Steve doesn't understand what he means, so he clarifies: "Our birth mom was a junkie. Heroin, I think... Maybe it was meth, I dunno. I'd be put in and out of foster homes whenever she fell off the wagon again or got herself in trouble with the law." He takes a small pause, pulling out his pack of smokes and lighting one up. "Wasn't like I had a *bad* life in foster care... Didn't get hurt or abused or any of that shit; it wasn't like that. Actually, I think I sort of preferred it there, 'cause my birth mom only ever felt like a stranger to me, y'know?"

Steve's still got his beer bottle in his hand, but he's not drinking from it anymore. He turns himself a bit to face Bucky better, but no matter how intently Bucky feels Steve's gaze on him, he can't bring himself to meet it just yet. He's just thankful that his tone is still even; that he isn't feeling any onset of emotions threatening to take him down.

"Eventually she got herself pregnant again and had my sister. Then, like... Fuck, how long was it...? Maybe a *little* before Becca's first birthday, children's services shows up at our door and I'm being led to my room to pack up my suitcase. I guess my birth mother was usin' again and was gettin' busted for whorin' herself out for drugs. She was so tweaked out that she didn't even seem to understand that they were takin' us away from her for good that time. She didn't put up a fight or nothin', just sort of... stood there. Watched."

"Jesus..." Steve whispers under his breath. Bucky shakes his head and waves half-heartedly with one hand.

"Nah, it wasn't like that. I understood when I got older that she was high at the time. But even at that age, it didn't really *bug* me. I was actually happy we were gettin' out of there, I think... Anyways, so not even a few weeks into the system and we get adopted by the Proctors. Lookin' back on it, I got lucky. Apparently a lot of siblings can get separated, especially if one's a baby and one's older. Older kids, it's harder to find homes for them, y'know? But mom and dad never even seemed to consider wantin' one of us without the other."

This is the hard part. Bucky takes another small break, gathering up the nerve. He's already come this far, so it'd be stupid to back out now. His hand holding the bottle has started shaking. When he finally speaks, his voice is shaking, too, but he fights as hard as he can to keep it calm. Looking to Steve, he says, "In order for the rest of this to make sense, I need you to understand how I used to be growin' up... What I was like..."

"Okay..." Steve says gently, holding his stare.

Bucky gets a strange smile then. It's wobbly and tight; not a *happy* smile, but a pained one. Tears fill his eyes but don't fall, and Bucky doesn't give into the urge to cry them out.

"I used to be like you," he answers simply, regret so palpable in his voice. "Just like you... I was... Not like this, at all. I was happy, popular... I laughed a lot, and took risks, and *dated*, and did all the things I don't do anymore. People used to..." He swallows the lump in his throat, "...call me 'charming'... I wasn't so... uptight, I guess? It took a lot to get me sweatin'."

“What happened...?” Steve asks when Bucky goes quiet again. He asks like he doesn’t know if he should be asking at all, and also like he’s almost *worried* about what Bucky’s going to tell him.

Bucky chuckles ruefully. “M’gettin’ to that, don’t worry,” he mutters, going back to staring into the fire. “So... Anyways... Becca knew pretty young that we were adopted. Mom and dad never wanted to keep that from her, so it was just a fact in our lives that they integrated into what they taught her when they felt she was old enough to start understandin’. We knew they loved us, and I mean... I knew our birth mother for eight years without ever formin’ no bonds with her or knowin’ her. Rebecca didn’t even *have* any memories of her, so there was even less to miss. She never grew up feelin’ like something was missing, and she never really cared that we were adopted. And I mean, neither did I... I think we both always felt like the Proctors were meant to be our parents...

“Um... So, a couple weeks before my eighteenth birthday, a letter comes in the mail with my name on it, and, uh...” He finds himself having to clear his throat again. “Anyways, it was from my... uh, blood grandmother, I guess. Turned out my birth mother had OD’d and I was bein’ told when her funeral would be, and I didn’t know if I’d go at first... I knew my parents didn’t want me to go, but they also weren’t goin’ to tell me what to do. So I wound up goin’...

“There was like five people there, includin’ me,” he remembers. “I felt like I didn’t even know why I was there. I just remember thinkin’... It was sad... I never knew what exactly had happened to her to make her life turn out like that, but she gave birth to me, and I was at her funeral, and it was like I was attendin’ the funeral of nothin’ but a complete *stranger*. Her mom – my *grandmother* – she, uh... recognized me, I guess. I suppose I looked a bit like her; made sense... She tried to come talk to me but there wasn’t nothin’ I wanted to say. I left pretty much right after it was over, then... Yeah. I guess I didn’t know how to feel... That’s when I started drinkin’.”

Steve reaches over and threads the fingers of his right hand with Bucky’s left. Bucky gives their hands a tiny, mournful smile before looking away again. He tightens his grip around the bottle in his other hand.

“I don’t really know... what exactly it was that got me feelin’ weird after that. I’d never really experienced death before, so it could’ve been that. It’s not like I was suddenly questionin’ my worth or dwellin’ on my life before my mom and dad adopted me, I just... I felt lost...? I didn’t feel like goin’ out for a while; I’d just stay home... Found where my dad stashed the key to the liquor cabinet... They were never big drinkers, but we had stuff in there from over the years, from events and shit. So I’d take that and wait ‘till everyone was asleep and then drink until I fell asleep. I’d act normal in front of them, right? So they didn’t know what was goin’ on...

“Anyways... the day after my eighteenth birthday – it was a... a Friday, and I was gettin’ shitfaced by myself in my room again. Both my parents were at work and it was my job to go pick up Becca from her lesson. She had swimmin’ lessons over at the Y at the time... And I...” He grits his teeth as shame floods over him. His breathing is rougher; tears prickling the corners of his eyes again.

“Buck,” Steve whispers, squeezing his hand. “You don’t have to keep going.”

“Yes, I do,” Bucky answers, chuckling bitterly again. He squeezes Steve’s hand back. “I do... I just... I *knew* I shouldn’t have been drinkin’, ‘cause I knew I had to go get Rebecca, but I just... *kept* doin’ it. When I picked her up, I was so wrecked that I could barely walk straight back to the car. I let her get into the front seat when she should’ve been sittin’ in the back... She was tiny as a kid... In Indiana, they don’t recommend you let a kid ride in the front seat until they’re thirteen. She was only eleven at the time, but I... I let her anyway...”

Bucky puts the beer bottle to the ground so he can rub his eyes, sighing wetly. He keeps his hand shielded over his forehead, eyes cast down. “The first time I ran a red, I didn’t even notice. She didn’t either. She had one of those... Those scholastic books that you can order from school? She was readin’ that... But then I ran another... Fuckin’ Dodge Caravan comes slamming into my side of the car. I don’t remember anythin’ after that... Last thing I heard before wakin’ up in the hospital was Rebecca let out this... fuckin’ *horrible* scream...”

“I didn’t even realize my arm was busted up when I came to. I was out for, like, six hours, so I was sobered up. All I remember happenin’ was opening up my eyes, seein’ my dad, and thinking my heart was gonna stop beating. I just shouted, ‘Rebecca’, and tried to leap out of the bed, but he stopped me. I thought I’d killed her, I – I thought...”

A small sob rips out of him and he smothers his hand over his face, gritting his teeth *harder* as his shoulders begin to bounce and hot tears spill down his cheeks. Steve shuffles his chair over quickly so he’s close enough to let go of Bucky’s hand and wrap that arm around Bucky, pulling him close. For a few minutes, Bucky lets himself cry; feeling like he’s falling apart, as all of the guilt and hatred he’s been holding onto since that moment hits him as brutally and deservedly as that Dodge had.

“Shh...” he can hear Steve whisper over and over. “It’s okay...” He rubs Bucky’s right arm and sometimes, Bucky can feel Steve kissing the side of his head.

When he calms down enough to get a grip again, he keeps speaking: “She wasn’t overly hurt, thank fuckin’ god... Had a... a concussion and a broken wrist. She was too young to understand why the accident happened, and I think my parents were tryin’ to spare *me* any added guilt by not tellin’ her the truth – not at first. I wound up feelin’ so bad a few years ago that I told her the real story, but she didn’t even get upset with me... She just hugged me and told me it was okay... But it *wasn’t* okay, Steve. She could’ve been dead ‘cause of me!”

Looking at Steve with a broken sort of anger in his eyes, he says vehemently, “The *only* thing that’s ever made me feel better – literally the *only* thing I’m glad about... was that we got hit on *my* side. I would’ve rather that thing smashed into us and splattered my fuckin’ brains out everywhere than if it’d gotten us on *her* side and had killed her.”

Steve grabs one side of his face in a stronger grip than Bucky could’ve prepared himself for. His own baby blues are wide; looks slightly teary. Shoving his forehead to Bucky’s, he shakes his head and seems to struggle to reply, “Don’t say that, don’t you dare say that... Jesus, Buck – you know how many peoples’ lives you made just be bein’ in it? I’m so sorry you went through that, I know you blame yourself, but... Christ,

Bucky, don't you fuckin' ever *say* that, or *think* that, or... I couldn't imagine a world without you in it..."

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"You didn't know me back then," Bucky argues, but his own eyes are closed now. He's holding onto Steve's wrist and struggling not to break down crying again. "Your life wouldn't have changed if you never met me."

"How can you say that?" Steve tightens his grip on Bucky's face, shakes his head again. "You honestly don't know how important you are to me? You think my life didn't change the *second* I first saw you? That I haven't been happier just for knowing you?"

Bucky opens his mouth to answer and then abruptly shuts it again. He's too close to fucking falling right apart. Sighing, he pulls back and sniffles, looking off miserably. "Can we go back inside, please?" he asks quietly. "I don't care if we keep talkin' about it or not, I just want to go in."

Steve nods, unwrapping Bucky from his embrace and rising to his feet. "Okay," he says, and then follows Bucky inside. Bucky takes a few minutes to slowly gulp down a glass of water, and then have another couple of minutes in the washroom to clean his face and calm himself down. When he walks past his bedroom, he sees Steve lying on one side of his bed. Bucky lingers in the doorway, and Steve looks to him with a small, sad smile.

His head is resting against the headboard; body slightly turned towards the center of the bed and propped up on his left elbow. He pats the empty space next to him, and so Bucky shuts his door and goes over, hesitantly lying down. He gets comfortable in the same way Steve is – body slightly turned towards Steve's and using his right elbow to prop himself up, while he rests his head back on the headboard.

"Do you want to talk about something else?" Steve asks.

Bucky frowns. "Yeah... But... I'm not done sayin' what I need to say yet."

Steve nods. "Okay."

"I just needed you to know why it is I'm... the way I am," he says quietly. "I closed off after that happened. Just... became the way I've always been since you've known me. At first... My mom tried to get me to go to counselling but I didn't wanna talk to anyone about what was happenin' to me, so I just... Learned how to lie." Looking away sadly, Bucky admits, "I used to tell my mom everything, that was just the sort of relationship we had. I never kept nothin' from her, and suddenly I was keepin' *everything* from her. I knew exactly what to say and how to act so every therapist would turn around and tell her that I was going to be alright... It was just PTSD from the accident, 'put him on these meds and he'll be fine'..."

"She'd try and get me to take them but I always found ways to avoid it. I told myself that I'd just get better on my own. I... I didn't want them all to be worryin' about me... Then I decided I'd go to school out of State, and the second I picked New York, I couldn't get out of there fast enough, and... I told myself that I picked New York for *this* reason, or *that* reason, or whatever, but... I was tryin' to run away, Steve. Like I could start over and forgive myself a little easier that way..."

"You stopped havin' relationships because you didn't think you deserved to be loved," Steve says.

Bucky gives a begrudging nod, unable to bring himself to actually say that. "That's why my mom was always askin' me about it... Because she knew I was never like that before. It was never actually *about* me bein' with someone... I think it was always just her trying to see if I was doing any better, but she didn't know how to ask me anymore 'cause I'd always lie... I'd *still* always lie..." He looks at Steve, feeling completely exposed and heartbroken at this point. "I'm *still* lying."

Steve looks back, nodding a little to himself. He looks to be deep in thought, weighing everything Bucky's just told him. Glancing down, his right hand reaches forward and closes over Bucky's again. "You know I'm here for you, however you need, for as long as you need me, right?" he asks.

"I know, and... I mean, I *have* known," Bucky says. The tears have finally subsided and he feels a strange combination of crestfallen and strangely *freed*. This time, it's like he lifted the weight off of his shoulders without also feeling shoved to the ground by it at the same time. "I just kept telling myself that I could get by on my own."

"The thing is... you don't *have* to," Steve says. "I'm with ya to the end of the line, Buck. I have been since the first time I got you to smile for me."

"I thought you were just making that up," Bucky tries to joke.

"I wasn't," Steve whispers. His eyes are still downcast, and suddenly... Suddenly, Bucky feels a numb sort of sensation on his left wrist. Following where Steve's eyes are looking, he realizes that he forgot to roll the sleeves of his shirt down from when he was in the washroom. His arm – ugly and broken and *a reminder* – has been out on display this whole time. Yet this time, as Steve trails his fingers up and down his forearm slowly, Bucky just lets him, swallowing hard.

"I wasn't lying when I said I knew," Steve says. Bucky's pulse is in his ears; eyes glued to Steve's fingers and body suddenly feeling very hot and... "I wasn't lying when I said all those things about you," Steve continues. "And I wasn't lying when I kissed you, either. Buck, look at me for a second."

He's almost terrified to, but he does. Steve's eyes roam all over his face, soft and unassuming and sincere. But his brows are slightly pinched in the center, like he's hurting so much inside *for* Bucky. When baby blues meet grey, Steve says, "Thank you... for trusting me enough to tell me that. You didn't have to."

"Yes, I did--"

"Hold on, I'm not done. Whatever you feel you need to do, whatever you need to get you back in touch with who you feel you've lost yourself from... I'm gonna help you however I can, okay? I never want you to feel you can't come to me. *Or* your family... You're *so* loved, Buck. You don't know how loved you are. Now... can I ask *you* something?"

Bucky's not even breathing anymore. He's pretty sure he isn't, at least. All he can manage is enough air to reply, "Yeah..."

Steve's eyes avert downwards – *god, his lashes*... - and then tentatively look back to his. Other than that, Steve looks completely calm.

"If I promise that I'm not asking just because of everything you just told me... And if I promise that it also has nothing to do with the alcohol... Can I kiss you?"

Stunned and frozen and *burning* and *needing* and *is this real life?* Bucky nods, quickly and just barely. Steve's hand leaves his arm and takes hold of the side of his face; fingers tangling into Bucky's hair. He leans in, and Bucky wraps his hand around the blond's wrist again... Waits until Steve's eyes close at the last second to close his own... And suddenly their lips touch.

Bucky's so unprepared for this moment that he doesn't know how to handle it. In fact, he's so overwhelmed that it's only seconds later and he starts shaking. Steve's answer to that is to tighten the grip he has on the side of Bucky's face and kiss him a little harder, though still just as slow. If Bucky *did* die, he'd want it to be right now, because he doesn't think there will ever be another moment in his life that will be as perfect as how this feels.

It's languid at first; innocent, but with intent. They breathe through their noses, and every exhale Steve makes that pushes against Bucky's face, Bucky feels like he's getting high off of it. Bucky can't help but moan softly under his breath when Steve starts parting his lips every time he ignites another kiss, so Bucky can part his and Steve can start gingerly touching his tongue to Bucky's bottom lip. When Bucky finally meets him halfway, Steve is sweet on his taste buds, and Bucky lets go of the blond's wrist so he can grab the side of his neck and tug him closer.

They're a little bit more frantic now. It's starting to sink in that Bucky's *kissing Steve* – after all these years, everything Bucky's felt, and everything he was so sure Steve could never feel in return, he's in his bed and he's got Steve's tongue in his mouth... His fingers in his hair... So he readjusts a little so he can properly lie down, and when he coaxes Steve to climb over top of him, he's finally got Steve's body on his, too...

He never realized how touch-starved he'd really been, all this time... His mouth keeps chasing back Steve's like he really *will* die if they stop. He holds him – *wants* him, *needs* him – as close as physically possible. What really throws him off is how *Steve's* kissing him back with that same desperation. Sort of like... He's waited long enough for this, too, and he can't control himself - can't hold back - same as Bucky can't.

Steve is a *phenomenal* kisser. His dad has made the comment about Steve seeming to worship the ground Bucky walks on, and that's exactly what it feels like with the way Steve kisses him. It's so intense and intimate *alone* that Bucky's toes are already curling. Steve's positioned between his legs, and Bucky can't help it – feverishly, he runs his hands up and down Steve's back, rucking up his shirt, before slipping them into the waistline of his shorts and boxers, sliding them down to clutch at his best friend's ass.

Holy fuck. Bucky's rock hard the moment he touches it. It's firm but still also soft enough to be nicely squeezed – and it makes Steve rock his hips down so their crotches grind together. That might be Bucky's favourite part about it so far. His eyebrows furrow, and the contact of Steve's own erection shoving against and grinding up the length of his own pulls a barely audible gasp from his lungs. Steve just exhales loudly and tilts his head to the other side; still rolling his hips slowly and diving back in for another kiss... More the beating and bruising of their tongues than actual kisses, really...

They flip each other over (and *over* and *over*) in the small bed while they continue to make out. Sometimes, Steve will slow the kisses down so he can open his eyes enough to stare at Bucky from half-hooded lids every time their lips re-meet. Bucky finds that incredibly erotic for some reason. Another thing that was never a big deal for him in the past but sets off fireworks inside of him now is the way Steve runs his fingers through Bucky's hair... Then when he *grips* it... *Oh*...

He realizes that he hasn't properly explored his body with another person in a *very* long time... So this isn't just a learning experience for Steve; it's a crash course for Bucky as well, all over again. There are spots on him that he'd forgotten get his head spinning, and he's just as unprepared when Steve happens upon them as *Steve* is. Likewise, he lets his hands roam over every part of Steve's body that he can and discovers where Steve likes to be touched best.

He's got Steve on his back, Bucky taking over to bear his hips down and undulate himself against Steve while they pant and release soft moans into each other's mouths. They have to be as quiet as possible, but it's difficult. When Bucky takes Steve's hands from Bucky's hips in order to pin the blond's wrists next to either side of his head, Bucky starts kissing along Steve's jaw... Down his throat... Licks along his collarbone – and Steve *whimpers*.

Steve... fucking *whimpering*... Bucky never knew such a sound existed, and how he could go his whole fucking life being deprived of that sweet, fucking *beautiful* noise. Growling under his breath, Bucky pinches the skin between his teeth. Steve grabs onto the back of his hair by the roots and gasps softly – yanking (oh god, yes, *please, fuckin' yank harder*), and making Bucky groan under his breath.

"Buck," Steve breathes, pulling him back up to crush their mouths together again. Between kisses, he says, "Tell me when you want us to stop... Don't wanna push you too far... Too fast..."

"No, I want you," Bucky answers. It sounds like a goddamn plea. "Don't want us to stop..."

"Oh good," Steve says, smiling against Bucky's mouth and exhaling a breathy chuckle. "I don't want us to either."

"You got no clue how long I've wished we'd be doin' this," Bucky murmurs, rolling their cocks against each other again. His eyes flutter up as he shudders, and beneath him, he can feel Steve's body quiver lightly at the friction.

"I told you... I wasn't lying, Buck... I've wanted you since the second I saw you. Five years... Five fuckin' years..."

Bucky moans into his mouth again and kisses him harder. He lets go of Steve's hands to hold either side of his face, while Steve immediately brings his to Bucky's sides. They feel scalding on his skin as they slide beneath his shirt; fingers slotting perfectly between every rib as he holds onto him, like he had a hand in *making* Bucky Barnes – perfectly suited for Steve Rogers, since the beginning of time.

Forgetting about the shame he's always felt over his left arm, Bucky straightens up to yank his shirt off. Steve arches his back so they can work him out of his right afterwards. The moment he's freed, Steve surges up and grips onto the back of Bucky's neck while he mouths along the brunet's shoulder, his bicep... Kissing and licking over scar tissue feverishly. He *hates* the arm but he *loves* Steve, and though he can barely feel it, he can *see* it, and the gesture is so much more arousing than Bucky could've ever known. All he can do is tip his head back and let his mouth fall open with a sigh.

Steve's lips graze from one shoulder to the other, coating his clavicles with kisses along the way, until he's sucking and nipping gently up the curve of Bucky's neck. Bucky tilts his head down and clumsily meets Steve's mouth, and then their hands are moving everywhere. Skin-on-skin, and Steve feels incredible to the touch. The dips and curves of his muscles are magnificent. He'd been right – there's nothing about Steve that isn't perfect.

Steve reaches between them and starts to undo the drawstring for Bucky's shorts. Once it's undone, he's pushing his palm against Bucky's cock from over the fabric and clutching his fingers around it. He starts to work Bucky from over his shorts, and Bucky groans; having to bite on Steve's bottom lip to keep quiet.

"Can I...?" Steve breathes.

Bucky nods, eyes still squeezed shut and mouth hung open. Steve turns them over so Bucky's spread out on the bed and Steve can slide his clothes off. Bucky reaches forward and snaps the waistband of Steve's own shorts off of his hip. Steve takes the hint and sheds those as well. Bucky's cock is now lying - thick and wet at the tip - against lower belly, and that's where Steve's staring. Bucky, on the other hand, is fixated on *finally* seeing Steve's dick for the first time.

Yes. Everything about him is perfect. It's been such a long fucking time since Bucky's been with another guy, so he's a little nervous, but this reminds him why he loves dick so fucking much. It's big, flushed, sticking straight out towards him – and it's *Bucky* making Steve react this way. He starts to reach out for it so he can feel how it'd be, nestled in his palm and fingers, but Steve's already leaning down between Bucky's legs. Fortunately for Bucky, Steve's lips against his chest... Down his stomach... It makes for a great substitute.

He lets out the tiniest *squeak* when Steve traces the V of Bucky's pelvis with the tip of his tongue, hands flying to Steve's hair and grabbing onto it. There's hot breath against his skin as Steve chuckles, making Bucky chuckle back. But then Steve's using that same tongue to lick up his cock, and Bucky's not chuckling anymore. In fact, when he feels the tip get wrapped up between Steve's lips and Steve starts to lower his head down, drawing him into his mouth, all Bucky suddenly knows is heat and slickness and *no one's done this to him in years*, and Bucky cries out – louder than he should.

Right away, he's correcting himself by letting go of golden hair with one hand so it can fly up and clutch to the headboard. This way, Bucky can turn his face in towards it and clamp his teeth down on the inside of his arm. He bites down and rediscovers that *oh right*, he does his fair share of whimpering, too. Steve, meanwhile, just breaths steadily through his nose and sucks Bucky's cock nice and slow.

When his eyes are closed, his lashes fan out against his skin. It's nearly a mistake to take in that sight, because what's even better than how good Steve is with his mouth is how good he *looks* while doing it. Bucky can't decide which detail his mind will focus on the next time he needs to get off and he's alone to the task: those fucking eyelashes of his, or the way his lips look stretched around Bucky's dick... How his face *overall* looks as he bobs his head and Bucky can see himself appearing and disappearing over and over again, cock shiny with Steve's spit...

Then Steve fucking *opens* his eyes. Bucky's never had anyone stare up at him so adoringly while having his dick in their mouth before. He almost appears as though he's getting off on it as much as Bucky is, which feels like an impossible idea to entertain given that *Bucky's* the one already feeling close to a goddamn orgasm. Bucky's pupils are blown wide as he watches; squirming helplessly beneath Steve and tugging on his hair, while at the same time fighting every urge to just shove his best friend's face *right* down against his pubic bone.

Bucky's trying to hold it together, but Steve's changing up his technique too much, and *everything* feels fucking mind-blowing. He'll keep his movements shallow, only to sporadically gulp Bucky all down and then swallow a few times around him. Sometimes he pulls his lips off completely so he can twirl his tongue around the tip and lick along the length. By the time Steve's sucking his balls, Bucky's back to biting down on his arm; his entire body going taut. He's surprised he's lasted as long as he has already, given how long it's been.

"Steve... Oh god, *wait*... Stop... Gonna c... come..."

Steve just licks straight back up his cock and then angles himself to suck it back into his throat again, moaning deep in his chest. Bucky thinks *that's* what's going to set him off – Steve's throat feels like a vice grip around him, especially when he fucking swallows – but it isn't. It's when Steve moves quickly and suddenly frees his mouth again to flatten himself against the mattress and spread Bucky's cheeks with his thumbs. Bucky isn't even given a *chance*. Steve's suddenly bringing his mouth to Bucky's asshole and darting his tongue at the small ring of muscles without mercy. Bucky fucking *loses* it.

A strangled sound gets caught in his throat, so he bites back on his arm to stifle the sound before it can escalate, turning it into a wheeze as he climaxes. Semen spurts all over his belly and chest, and Steve just keeps running his tongue back and forth over Bucky's hole the entire time. When Bucky feels Steve press the tip of his index finger against Bucky's perineum and push – just the slightest bit – Bucky's back bridges abruptly, and he feels like he's about to fucking come again. And he's not even *finished* with the first one. *Jesus f-fucking Christ...*

Bucky continues to tremble and moan shakily with every exhale while he catches his breath and gets over the aftershocks of his orgasm. He pets one hand through Steve's hair and whispers a curse under his breath when he feels the blond move back up and begin to lick away his release from his skin. Bucky peers down *just* in time to watch Steve run his tongue over the last little streak – *right* over his nipple – before closing his lips over it and giving it a small suck. Bucky hisses, making Steve smirk before he pinches Bucky's nipple gently between his teeth.

“Holy... shit... Jesus, Steve, *c'mere*,” Bucky begs, pulling him back up. They kiss, and Bucky can taste himself on Steve’s tongue. He isn’t sure he likes it – *he’s never really liked it from what he remembers* – but knowing Steve has Bucky inside of him like that? That, he *definitely* likes. His hands are touching all over Steve’s body again, and the thing is... Bucky wants to make this so good for him, but he’s lost all confidence in these kinds of abilities. He makes a small, urgent sound in his throat, signalling for Steve to pull away for a second. He almost groans again when he takes another look at Steve’s face. His lips are swollen and cherry red; eyes, so fucking dark. But there’s still that complete and utter adoration in them, like Bucky could ask Steve for the moon, and Steve would respond, “Would you prefer a *gold* or *silver* platter?”

“Steve, I--” He clears his throat shyly. “I need you to tell me what you like, okay? I don’t wanna mess this up.”

“I’ll like whatever you do to me,” Steve cuts him off, leaning back in and capturing his lips in another kiss. “Just touch me.”

“No, Steve, m’serious,” Bucky insists. His tone is enough this time to get Steve to pull back again. Bucky licks his lips, brows pinching in the middle slightly. “I haven’t done this in years. I’m probably shit at it... You told me I could ask you for help, so... I’m askin’ you now, ‘kay?”

Steve gets a small smile turning up one corner of his mouth. “Okay,” he whispers; pecks Bucky’s lips. Repeats “Okay” again before kissing him a bit slower, inhaling deeply through his nose. “Well... Okay, my balls are too sensitive, so try and steer clear of those,” he starts.

“Okay,” Bucky breathes back, making a mental note of it as Steve turns his face to the other side and kisses him again. His fingers are clutching Steve’s ass roughly, and he notices that just starting to talk about preferences and the like already has Steve rolling his body against his.

“I obviously love getting my dick sucked,” Steve says next, smiling against Bucky’s mouth.

“‘Kay,” Bucky repeats. He inches the fingers of his right hand closer to the crease in Steve’s ass. Experimentally, he drags the tips of his index and middle fingers down the center, adding a bit more pressure about halfway down so he can feel the heat hitting the pads of his digits when he’s brushing over Steve’s opening. Steve suddenly makes a small, throaty sound and pushes his ass back against Bucky’s hand instinctually.

“Yeah, *yeah*, that too,” he whispers quickly. “I love havin’ my hole played with... *God*, better stop that or m’gonna beg you to finger me...”

“Yeah?” Bucky asks huskily, getting a tiny, filthy smirk; can’t remember making a face like that since he was about seventeen. He nips Steve’s bottom lip at the same time that he pushes his finger against Steve’s ring of muscles again and traces a little circle around it teasingly.

“*Fuck*,” Steve mutters, spreading his legs open wider on either side of Bucky’s body and arching his back a bit.

“Can you lie down, maybe?” Bucky asks. Steve just nods, opening his eyes so he can move and let Bucky get up. They switch places, with Steve getting comfortable on his back; Bucky, climbing back on the bed and situating himself between the blond’s legs. He wants to bend right over and get a taste for Steve’s beautiful dick, but... He also needs a moment. Glancing back and forth between Steve’s feet, he trails his eyes up the length of Steve’s legs, following them with his hands.

“All I’ve wanted since the day I met ya was to be able to tell you how fuckin’ perfect I think you are,” Bucky says quietly. He can feel Steve touch his stomach with one hand. Bucky just lifts one of Steve’s legs and rests his heel onto his shoulder. Turning his face in, he presses his lips to his best friend’s ankle bone, before slowly kissing a trail up his inner leg, towards the knee. He keeps his eyes closed and just listens to the steady, deep breaths Steve’s pushing out.

When he gets to the knee, he holds Steve’s leg off his shoulder and straightens it a bit. It allows him to crouch and plant a kiss right behind the knee; lick it once with his tongue. They’re probably *both* a little surprised when it makes Steve gasp and breathe out, “Buck...” Then he exhales a light laugh.

“Sensitive?” Bucky asks, purposely doing it again. He just wants to hear Steve make that sound again.

He does. When he chuckles again, he whispers, “Ticklish... Feels good, though...”

“I wanna find a spot on you that’ll make you wanna come undone when I kiss it,” Bucky admits, letting Steve lower his leg so he can settle down on his own stomach and start kissing around Steve’s pecks, his abs. “Some place that no one else has ever found before.”

“Damn, Buck, you’re quite the sweet-talker, ain’t ya?” Steve asks. Smiling, his eyes fall closed again when Bucky drags the tip of his tongue down the center of his stomach, catching in the dip of his navel.

“So people used to tell me,” Bucky replies. He gets to Steve’s cock and then hesitates. Licking his lips, he glances back up and says, “I don’t know how you want me to do this. I don’t have any lube on me...”

“There’s some in my bag.”

“You brought *lube* to my family’s cottage?” Bucky asks with surprise.

Steve gets a funny smile and shrugs. “Emergency purposes? If your car had broken down on the trip up here and we had to live in the forest like a couple of cavemen, I would’ve wanted somethin’ a little more comfortable than just spit.”

Bucky rolls his eyes, but his smile is completely loving. “Yeah, ‘cause if we broke down in the middle of nowhere, jerkin’ off would’ve been the number one priority.”

“You mean you can think of something *better*?”

“At the moment? Yeah, I can, actually...” Then he tilts his chin back down and gives the underside of Steve’s cock a little lick. “Right now...” He darts his tongue out at it again. “I just wanna know... how this pretty cock of yours is gonna taste...”

He tilts it towards him with one hand and then licks the flat of his tongue against Steve's frenulum, before circling the crown with his tongue. Steve's cheeks are already dusted pink with the beginnings of a flush, and Bucky just *knows* it: Steve's going to be so fucking gorgeous to behold when he's being taken apart. But right when he's about to take him into his mouth, Steve breathes frantically, "Wait, wait, *wait*... Don't start until we actually grab the lube..."

"*Fine*, grab the lube," Bucky offers, pushing himself up and away so Steve can scramble off the bed. Once Steve is back – the thin bottle discarded next to his side – Bucky returns to his task and starts fucking his mouth off of Steve's cock. It's a bit tricky, since Bucky hasn't given a blowjob in even *longer* than he's fucked a dude, he thinks. Not to mention that Steve's not exactly average, which gets Bucky choking a little when he grows overzealous and tries to take too much at once.

But no matter what he does, Steve seems to be loving it. In fact, Steve seems to have sort of *melted* at the moment. For all of his dorky, boyish behaviour... For all of his muscles and masculinity... He looks like he's trying his best not to start moaning loud enough to wake everyone else up. He keeps licking his lips and tilting his head back into the pillow with little whimpers; brows knit and eyes closed and body *writhing*. He's got both hands holding the back of Bucky's head, and sometimes he'll nudge Bucky to speed things up, or tug by the roots when he wants to force him to slow down again. Bucky *especially* likes it when Steve guides him like that.

Then Steve becomes a goddamn work of art when Bucky sneaks some lube onto his fingers and starts teasing Steve's entrance. He can hear these desperate, barely-there whimpers - until a pitchy *whine* gets trapped in his chest when Bucky catches him off guard and starts pushing his middle finger inside of him. Bucky just pulls his mouth free long enough to whisper, "Shh..." Then he fills his mouth back up again so he can't talk anymore.

Steve nods, so Bucky starts working his finger in as carefully as he can; tries to remember how much it stings at first, especially if it's been a while. (He actually doesn't know how long it's been since Steve's been fucked, but he's definitely not about to ask. To spare himself, he's just going to assume it hasn't been anytime recently.) Steve opens up for him beautifully, able to take the lone finger within a few shallow thrusts, until Bucky can bury it to the second knuckle. A second finger gradually joins the first, and then another.

By the time he's pumping three long digits in and out of him, deep and punctuated, Steve's using only *one* hand to shove Bucky up and down the length of his cock, while the other runs up his own chest... his neck... brushes his fingers over one nipple and then the other, sometimes pinching them...

It's so sexy to see when Bucky can actually stop his eyes from rolling around behind closed lids long enough to *open* them, that he's completely hard against the mattress again. Massaging Steve's prostate has the blond gasping and suddenly bringing both hands to his hairline to clutch his bangs – teeth gritted to keep from shouting as he bows his back on and off the bed. And Bucky... Bucky's whimpers echo his as he grinds down against the bed to give his own erection stimulation.

Bucky can't lie... He *really* wants to know how Steve would feel inside of him right now. It's such a strong desire, in fact, that it almost makes his skin feel like it's crawling. But he doesn't know if he can do that just yet... He wants Steve. No, that doesn't even cover it. He still can't fully believe this is really happening, and he *needs* Steve as badly as he needs to breathe. But he's let himself be vulnerable enough already tonight, and he isn't sure he can handle anything more at the moment. He still wants to retain a tiny shred of control.

Besides... Steve's driving him crazy, falling apart like this. All because Bucky's finding what makes him tick, and working him *just* the way Steve should be worked. He supposes sex is another one of those things that's sort of like riding a bike – you might be a little dusty, but once you brush that off, your body's muscle memory takes back over and guides the way. Bucky was always told before that he was a good lover. Right now, he wants Steve to understand that for himself.

"Do you wanna come like this first, or...?" he pulls away to ask, voice slightly raspy from giving his throat such a workout.

It's a bit of a delay for Steve to answer. It seems to take a few seconds for him to even realize Bucky's talking to him. He just stares up at the ceiling, lids half-mast and eyes lolling around as Bucky's fingers continue to caress his insides, sweet and tender. But eventually, he slowly looks down to the brunet, fighting to regain his focus. He's completely dazed – sounds *wrecked* already when he lets out a tiny laugh – and prompts Bucky, "*Or...*?"

Bucky bites his lip, smiling shyly. But he doesn't want to look away anymore; doesn't want to waste any more time *not* getting lost in Steve's eyes. "Or... If you want, we can wait, so you can come with me inside of you..."

"If I want," Steve repeats back to him, rolling his eyes. "'Cause it'd obviously be a huge chore for me." Bucky just raises his brows and curls his fingers particularly roughly inside of him, and *that* wipes that smirk right off Steve's smug, perfect little face. Now, he's back to nodding. "Yes," he breathes, "I want it. Fuck me..."

Those words might as well be a fucking prayer. No amount of fantasizing could compare to way Steve actually sounds voicing those words. Bucky thinks Steve could just repeat that over and over in his ear and Bucky could come from that alone. Kissing Steve's inner thigh, he asks, "Can you say that again? Please?"

He's worried that he fucked up somehow when Steve stops trying to roll his hips down against Bucky's fingers. He looks to him nervously, but Steve's gaze – though, for some reason, *serious* – is still just as adoring.

"I can say more than that," Steve offers. He slides one hand to the back of Bucky's neck, just below his skull, and starts to gently pull. Bucky slides his fingers out of Steve and crawls up his body; never blinking, heart skipping beats. "I want you to fuck me," Steve whispers as Bucky's face gets closer to his. "I've wanted you since the moment I met you – wanted you to be mine. You're the most incredible person I've ever known. You're the most *beautiful* thing I've ever seen." Bucky's mouth is *just* ghosting up to his, and Steve tells him, "And I'm more in love with you than I thought I'd ever be able to know. I'm so in love with you."

Bucky exhales loudly and slams his mouth to Steve's, kissing him like *this* is the only way two people should ever kiss. It feels dire - as if everything they ever knew, everyone they've ever known, every mistake they've ever made, every moment they've ever waited, and every experience they've ever had... was all leading up to this.

Bucky loses himself in the way Steve's lips feel against his, how his tongue pushes into Bucky's mouth and meets his own; *tastes like heaven*... He's caged to Steve's body by strong thighs pressed to his hips, arms that wrap around him and clutch him there, and Bucky never wants to leave. He'd let himself believe for so long that Steve was too different from the man Bucky's been to ever love a fool like him. Ironical, really, that *that* was truly the thought that made Bucky foolish.

Because he's always seen Steve as being radiant, like the sun... Like *fire*... While him, he'd let his heart grow encased in ice. They were too contrasting to ever fit together. But the thing is, fire melts ice, yes... But ice also helps *regulate* flames if they get too hot. They have what the other needs.

Bucky's the ice, and Steve is the fire. Together, they are *Dissonance*... But they are also *Harmony*. He almost wants to apologize for the fact that there's no fucking way in hell that Bucky's ever letting him go *now*.

"Condom?" he pants between more hot, open-mouthed kisses.

Steve pauses and then gives a small shake of his head. "No," he confesses, constantly claiming Bucky's lips again. "Wasn't *that* prepared... Didn't wanna assume..."

"Oh... that's okay. We don't have to, then."

"Well, I'm clean," Steve tells him. *Another deep kiss*. "You?"

"Again, it's been like..." *Kiss*. "Two, three years..." *Kiss*. "Last time I checked, I was..." *Steve sucks on his tongue; Bucky groans*. "Haven't done anything since..."

"Then it's fine," Steve says reassuringly. He slides his hands down Bucky's back so he can grip his ass and start grinding Bucky down against him, just like how Bucky had down in reverse earlier.

"You sure?"

"Bucky, *stop*," Steve pleads, kissing him harder. "You don't need to do that with me... I'm *sure* that I'm sure... Wanna feel you... I mean, are *you* okay with it?"

Bucky nods. He's more than okay with it - and he's also having a bit of a tough time thinking past how good Steve's dick feels sliding against his own when there are no clothes in the way. Steve nods in response and then wraps his arm around Bucky's neck, pulling him even closer and getting Bucky to kiss him so hard, Steve's head crushes down into the pillow. Blindly reaching out along the mattress, Bucky grabs the bottle of lube and anchors his knees more securely to the bed. That way, he doesn't have to break his and Steve's kiss while he curls his back and makes room to slick up his cock, moaning quietly with the relief getting his hand on himself provides.

They never break the kiss, not fully; only to tilt their faces from side to side and dive back in again. Bucky carelessly drops the bottle out of sight, where he vaguely hears it roll off the mattress and *clunk* to the floor. Settling his weight back down, he gets a grip on his erection at the same time that Steve shamelessly lets his legs fall open wider.

When Bucky presses the head of his dick against Steve's ass, he pauses. For a fraction of a second, their lips do nothing more than brush against each other, but their eyes are still closed. Steve gives a small nod, and Bucky sinks into him.

It's like a sense of nostalgia washes over Bucky – like he's returning *home*, even though he's never been here before. Steve tenses all around him, hard as he tries not to, but that only makes the push in feel even better. Steve stutters against him, his mouth falling open with the softest of sounds, as if the air has just been punched out of him. But Bucky just keeps pushing deeper... Stretching his hole open wider and letting Bucky in... And before Bucky knows it, Steve's covering Bucky's mouth and licking into it with a blissed-out sigh, and *out the window goes Bucky's sanity*.

Steve clings to him and urges him to start moving the *moment* his hips are flush to Steve's ass. He starts off shallow, keeping most of himself sheathed within those tight (*so... fucking... tight...*) walls hugging him so snugly. They try to make as little noise as possible, but the bed still creaks and their panting can only be so contained, so Bucky hopes it'll make do. Chances are, he'd be so fresh off his post-sex glow the next morning that the only person he'd actually feel any guilt over *possibly* having heard them is Amy. Maybe Ben. Certainly not Rebecca. Much as he loves his sister, it'd serve her right for her little kissing stunt.

Steve keeps whining out what Bucky almost mistakes as little *hurt* noises – but he quickly discovers that they're *not*; that's just one of the many sounds Steve can make when he's trying not to scream, and it shouldn't make Bucky as horny as it does, but *holy fucking shit, does it ever*.

"Buck," he keeps breathing, like that's the only word Steve knows or cares about right now. Then sometimes, Bucky will thrust all the way into him and then rock them together, and Steve will whisper quickly next to his ear, "*Oh... Yeah... Just like that, just like that... A-Ah... Baby... Right there, please don't stop...*"

It's a bit of a mind-fuck, but Bucky would happily crawl on his hands and knees and be Steve's servant for the rest of his life, if Steve could just keep begging him like this. Apparently, it's also quite an Achilles' heel for him whenever Steve calls him 'baby'. Every time he says it, the room feels like it's spinning. He's also quite glad he came already, because his stamina is always much more accommodating during the second round. They stay in that position until they've grown overheated and sweaty against each other, and then Bucky breathlessly asks if Steve wants to roll over onto his stomach. Steve just nods, looking doe-eyed and fucked-out already, and flips onto his stomach as soon as Bucky pulls out of him.

Bucky guides Steve's legs together; urges him to get his arms and head comfortable. Steve winds up crossing them under the pillows and then resting his head to one side. Bucky strokes himself idly as he licks up the center of Steve's spine, to his nape, over to below his ear. 'M'gonna make you feel so good, Stevie," he promises, practically *growling*. Steve just exhales softly and bites his lip, peeking at Bucky from the corner of his eye.

Hair falling in his face, Bucky kisses back down his body before burying his face between Steve's cheeks and eating out his relaxed, slightly gaping asshole. Lying like this, Steve can bury his face into the pillow to muffle his sharp gasps and groans – which he utilizes frequently. Bucky, meanwhile, is in fucking ecstasy. Steve responds so well to being rimmed; seems to love it as much as Bucky loves having it done to him. Once he's able to get past the taste of lube in his mouth, he can sift past it and search for *Steve's* taste. Just like every other part of him, Steve's taste is exquisite.

After fucking his tongue in and out of him long enough that Steve's shuddering uncontrollably, Bucky works his body back up until he can drape himself against the blond's back. One knee anchored on either side of Steve's thighs, he guides himself back in and then fucks him that way. With Steve's legs together, the friction is almost unbearably good. He has one arm between Steve's own and his side, so Bucky can reach up and grip onto his lover's shoulder. The other hand palms the top of Steve's head and occasionally uses his hair as his grip, giving him more leverage to fuck as deeply into him as he can.

Steve's *tell* whenever Bucky grazes his prostate is that he groans out this almost *distressed* sound straight into the pillow to silence it up. When Bucky *really* hits it, Steve's left hand – now out from under the pillow – shoots up and clasps at the headboard almost *violently*, instantly white-knuckling it. Once or twice, Steve makes a fist and slams the side of it against the headboard, before literally raking his nails down it with a wheeze that'd probably be window-shattering, if not for the pillow.

"*Auh... Fuck... Fuck...*" Bucky's breathing out, his temple pressed next to the side of Steve's head.

"Harder..."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," Steve whimpers.

Bucky straightens his arms, pushing himself up. He slaps into Steve like that a few times, but even though it feels incredible, it's too loud. So he changes his strategy; straightens up completely and sits himself onto the back of Steve's thighs. Gripping his lower back, Bucky rolls his hips, riding Steve's body against the mattress. Bucky could watch the way Steve jostles back and forth along the bed literally *all day*. Maybe when they get back to New York and have some real privacy, he actually can.

Jesus Christ. Is this going to be their life now? He fucking hopes so. Does he have the right to assume as much now, given everything that's happened tonight? If Steve's in love with him, then there's no reason why they can't actually be together. The only thing standing in their way before was Bucky – and he sure as fuck isn't going to be a barrier between them anymore, so... *God, oh shit, he feels so fucking sweet...*

Steve's cock is trapped between his body and the bed. With how hard Bucky's forcing his pelvis to grind against the mattress, there's no way it's not getting a nice amount of stimulation. Suddenly, Steve's moaning out softly, "Baby, you're gonna make me come... *Oh god,*" he whines, "m'almost fuckin' there...*Mm...*"

"You gonna come for me?" Bucky asks under his breath, never breaking his stride.

"Yeah... *Oh*, fuck, yeah... Wait, wait, wait, wait – lemme turn back over."

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Bucky slows down. "You wanna be on your back again?"

Steve pants heavily and noisily gulps down air, nodding again. "I wanna be able to see your face," he says.

"Okay, just a sec."

He climbs off of him, and Steve rolls back over and then shuffles into the center of the bed again. Bucky gets in close, and since Steve's knees are still bent, Bucky takes hold of his shins expectantly. "You want me to fuck your prostate again?" he asks.

Steve gets a spaced-out grin. "I mean, *yeah*, but..." He heaves an overdramatic sigh. "If you make me come like that, I'm *gonna* wake everyone up. You're lucky I've been as quiet as I *have*."

"You a screamer?" Bucky asks, voice dropping with lust. He bites his lip with another small smirk as he lets go of one of Steve's legs to grip Steve's dripping cock and start fucking his fist over it slowly.

Steve's eyes roll up into his head with a sliver of a moan. Still grinning, he replies, "Sometimes it gets a little out of control. M'not as loud when I top, but... Yeah, I sort of get a little loud when I'm bein' fucked."

Bucky swipes his thumb over Steve's cockhead before pulling his hand away to slip that thumb between his lips. Steve licks his lips before biting his lip, watching Bucky gently suck the precome off his skin. Then Bucky gives him a filthy grin, letting go of his other leg in favour of climbing back over him so he can steal a kiss.

"Fine, I'll go easy on you *this* time, Rogers," he purrs. "But once we're back home, I want you screamin' for me... That sound fair?"

Steve hums, pulling Bucky down and kissing him, licking across Bucky's tongue with the corners of his mouth still slightly upturned into a smile. When they break the kiss, Steve stares up at him heatedly and promises, "Deal. Now make me come."

Bucky answers him with another kiss, tilting his hips until he feels Steve's hole against his cock, and then driving back into him again. Steve groans into his mouth with relief and then grabs onto the headboard with one hand. He shoves himself back down to meet Bucky's thrusts; his other hand holding onto the brunet's neck at first, until he decides where he *really* wants it is wrapped around his dick. Bucky can feel Steve's knuckles graze back and forth across his stomach, the blond jerking himself off in time with Bucky's movements.

Steve's eyes are squeezed closed with his brows knit, and Bucky can tell that he's focusing on trying to find his release. When Steve starts deliberately clenching tight around him to give Bucky more friction, Bucky feels that familiar pressure starting in his lower belly, his balls, the base of his spine... Feels it start slowly spooling up his spine and growing bigger and stronger as it crawls from his stomach to his chest, making his flush darken.

Steve tilts his head up and latches his mouth to Bucky's fucked up shoulder, once again kissing and scraping his teeth over the gnarled, raised bits of flesh. That's when he lets go of the headboard and clutches back around Bucky's neck to keep him from collapsing down to the bed again. It's the same thing as before: Bucky can only feel a little bit here and there, but it's the sentiment that surprisingly gets Bucky's body so riled up... That someone loves him *that* much that they somehow want even that part of him, scars and damage and all.

"Steve, m'close," he whispers, trying to give a fair warning.

Steve moans quietly against his shoulder. Kissing over to his neck quickly, he replies, "*Good,*" before kissing Bucky's lips again.

"You?"

"Yeah," Steve answers, nodding.

"You want me to pull out?" Bucky asks breathlessly. If Steve's answer to that is *yes*, then he'd better say something soon, because he's going to blow any second now.

But Steve quickly shakes his head. "No, don't," he mutters against Bucky's mouth. "Come in me... Want it, want your come..."

Bucky's nose scrunches up, brows creasing. "*A-Ah, fuck, oh fuck--*"

"Give it to me, baby," Steve encourages him, pumping his fist over himself faster. He gasps softly, eyes rolling back but then forcing themselves open again so Steve can keep watching Bucky's face. "Please, come for me, *mm*, baby, *yeah – oh* god, Buck, *Bucky...*"

Bucky comes first, thrusting sharply into Steve's ass and then stilling for a moment as he starts shooting his load inside of him. His jaw drops as he tilts his head up, eyes closing. The pleasure only just starts to crash upon him when Steve grabs him by the back of the head and pulls their foreheads together. That's enough to give Bucky a bit of clarity back. Opening his eyes a sliver, he locks his gaze with Steve's... Starts fucking him again, fast and deep...

His cock's still pulsing in Steve's ass – still filling him up to the point where Bucky can feel it *leaking* out of him and smearing against his pubic bone – and seconds later, Steve's breathing out these high-pitched whimpers before his jaw drops in a silent scream, painting their stomachs with his own orgasm. Shaking against each other, Bucky collapses onto him, burying his face into the pillow next to Steve's neck.

"Fuck... *Auh, fuck...*" he keeps exhaling.

Bucky *might've* blacked out once or twice for a second there, while coming down from his high. Steve's stroking his back lightly, just like he had the night Bucky had his nightmare. Bucky keeps moaning softly, planting noisy kissing against Steve's neck before breathing out loudly and going completely lax.

"So *that's* what we've been missin' for the past five years," Steve finally jokes, breaking the silence.

Bucky snorts against his neck. "Yeah... How many 'sorry's' will I owe you to make up for *that* one?"

“Just pay it back to me in orgasms and we’ll call it even,” Steve answers. “*God*, Bucky... You’re, like... *really* good at that. We may need to turn off every electronic we own and tell our friends we’re out of town for a few extra days so I can do nothin’ except ride you for, like, three days straight once we get back.”

“Yours to do with it as you like,” Bucky replies, more than happy with an idea like that. He kisses Steve’s cheek and then adds, “Use me as long as you want.”

“Oh, I plan to.” Steve chuckles. “Plus, that means there’ll be plenty of time for you to find that ‘one spot’ no one’s ever found before.”

“Damn, I *didn’t* find that this time, did I?”

“Well, I mean, the back of my knee was somethin’ I never knew about before,” Steve offers.

Bucky shakes his head. “Nah, not good enough. When I find it, we’ll know. I’m *gonna* find it.”

Steve grins. “I have no doubt that you will.”

Bucky smiles back, but then it gradually lessens a bit. Softly, he says, “All that stuff you said earlier – about loving me, and knowing since you met me, and stuff? ...That goes both ways, you know. I love you, too.”

Steve kisses him. Smiling against his mouth, he pecks his lips one more time and then lets his head fall back to the pillow. “*So*,” he says decisively, “I suppose there’s a very important question I need to ask you.”

“There is?”

“Well yeah. As much as I’ve enjoyed bein’ your pretend boyfriend – and believe me, I completely enjoyed it; was the time of my life...” He takes a deep breath and then says *completely* overdramatically, “I think it’s time that we take our relationship to the next level. Bucky, there comes a time in every couples’ life when they have to say to themselves, ‘This fake relationship was fun, but I think I’ve moved out of the beta testing phase now and am finally ready to play in the big leagues.’ Like in the movie *Karate Kid*, when the pupil becomes the Master... Like in *Star Wars*, when Luke becomes a Jedi--”

“Holy shit, are you *goin’* somewhere with this, Steve?”

“*Wow*, you let me keep going for a *while* that time!” Steve laughs. “I was wonderin’ how long you’d let me talk outta my ass; that’s gotta be a new record. Anyways, my point is, can you stop bein’ my *pretend* boyfriend and actually be my *real* boyfriend yet?”

Bucky’s smile grows into a grin. “Yeah?” he asks.

Steve tucks Bucky’s hair behind his ears. “Yeah. Y’know, much as I liked fakin’ it and all...”

Bucky bites his bottom lip, feeling like a giddy teenager all over again. “Yeah. Yeah, *real* boyfriends sound good.”

Grinning, Steve leans up and kisses him happily. They waste away a bit of time like that, until they realize they've got drying come on their skin. Making grossed-out faces, Bucky throws on a pair of pajama pants and wets a cloth in the bathroom. After he and Steve clean themselves up, they head downstairs so Bucky can have a cigarette before bed ("Definitely fuckin' need it after *that*..."). They brush their teeth and lock themselves back in Bucky's room, wedging onto the tiny bed together, tangling up their limbs to make the room.

Bucky's got his head where Steve's arm meets his torso. Wrapped up in Steve's arms, he passes by the silence alternating between staring off and gently kissing the blond's chest. He doesn't know after a while if Steve's fallen asleep, but he quietly asks anyways, "Hey, Steve?"

"Mm?" Steve replies, inhaling deeply. *Whoops*... guess he had been sleeping. "What is it, baby?"

"This might sound stupid, but... Can you tell me you love me again?"

Steve hugs him closer, smiling when he gently answers, "It's not stupid. You can ask me a million times if you want. I love you."

"I love you, too... Steve?"

"Mhm?"

Bucky tilts his chin up to look at him. "I'm still sort of messed up, y'know," he admits.

"We're all messed up," Steve says.

"No, I mean... Really. I'm a pretty broken toy..."

Steve reaches one hand up and strokes Bucky's cheekbone with his thumb.

"Lucky for us, then, I was always really good at putting back together broken toys. I'm not goin' anywhere, Buck."

And the strange thing is... Bucky actually *believes* it this time.

That night, for the first night since they've been there, Steve's allowed to sleep in Bucky's bed with him.

(It's stupidly uncomfortable and they wind up moving to the floor.)

****Chapter 5*: Chapter 5***

Bucky wakes up to the gentle feeling of Steve kissing his neck, and honestly, he wonders if he's still dreaming. It takes him a few seconds to slowly get pulled out from under the heavy blanket of sleep. Eyes still closed, he registers first that he's now awake, and next that he's on his back. Steve's lips are soft, as are the tiny exhalations out of his nose that brush along Bucky's skin. It feels like Steve's resting half of his head on the same pillow as him, with the other half buried against his neck and shoulder. Bucky smiles before he's even fully conscious.

"Mm..." he hums, eyes feeling too heavy to open. Sleepily, he whispers, "That feels nice..."

“Good morning, gorgeous,” Steve murmurs, smiling too. Bucky can’t see it but he can hear it in his voice, and it’s still just as beautiful. Steve inhales and plants another light kiss against his neck before trailing his lips up Bucky’s jaw, towards his chin. Bucky tips his head towards him, their mouths meeting. Both men keep smiling; Steve lazily pecking his lips a few times before nuzzling their noses and asking, “How did ya sleep?”

Bucky slowly opens his eyes. Last night felt too perfect to be real, and yet, Steve’s still right here. It almost feels like if Bucky were to blink too quickly, Steve would vanish - that’s how quintessentially surreal and amazing it is. Bucky had wondered so many times over the years what his best friend would look like to wake up next to.

Except now Steve’s not *just* his best friend anymore, but his *boyfriend*, isn’t *that* a fucking thought... And his boyfriend makes for the most magnificent picture to start his day with. Steve still looks groggy, but undoubtedly blissful. Bucky bites his bottom lip shyly.

“Been a while since I slept on the floor, not gonna lie,” he answers. “Could’a been more comfortable. But I still slept great.”

“Mm, I’m glad...”

“How about you?”

Steve inhales deeply and then lets it out with a grateful sigh. Letting his head fall fully onto his own pillow, he watches as Bucky turns over so they can face each other. Reaching up, he cups the side of Bucky’s cheek, stroking softly with his thumb; tracing the corner of Bucky’s mouth. “Perfectly,” he says. “Minus you snorin’, of course.”

Bucky scoffs. “I don’t snore.”

“You’re like a freight train.”

“I *don’t* snore, you fuckin’ punk,” Bucky insists, smile stretching into a grin.

Steve gives him a challenging stare, before it breaks just as quickly. “Yeah, yeah, m’just kidding,” he concedes. They do nothing but smile warmly at each other for a few seconds, before chuckling to themselves – still getting used to this whole thing; how their relationship has changed so much, so quickly. “So... breakfast,” Steve eventually suggests. “I’m thinkin’ I might be able to whip us up some pancakes.”

“We don’t got any batter.”

“It’s fine, I brought some with me, just in case,” Steve tells him.

“You brought stuff to make food?” Bucky asks, raising an eyebrow. Then he jokes, “Didn’t trust me and my family to feed ya?”

Steve leans in and kisses him again - short and sweet. It makes Bucky’s chest feel hot, regardless. “No, I just knew I’d wanna make everyone pancakes at least once,” he counters. “There any more fresh fruit in the fridge?”

Bucky tries to remember. It’s slightly more difficult when he’s still wrapping his head around having Steve here, *close*; with him like this. “Might have some strawberries left,” he answers distractedly. His eyes have fluttered back closed, and with Steve’s lips that close it’s impossible not to simply lean in and catch them again. So he does. Steve breathes out a soft sound and together, they lose themselves a bit in the kiss.

“Then you’re gonna make your cute little butt useful while I do everythin’ else, and cut up whatever’s left,” Steve instructs him - *after* one particularly deep kiss, and *before* turning his head to the other side to lean in and ignite yet another. “Mm, your lips taste good,” he whispers with a breathy chuckle. Bucky responds by holding the back of his head and parting those lips with a sigh. Steve takes the invitation. Bucky moans under his breath when he feels the blond slip his tongue into his mouth to meet his own.

Bucky tries to roll onto his back again and pull Steve over top of him, but all that makes Steve do is withdraw his tongue and peck him chastely with a shake of the head – a physical way of announcing, ‘*Aaaand we’re done.*’ Except that Bucky doesn’t want this to be done. The rest of the world can be put on hold for a few minutes – or *weeks*, or *years* – for all he cares.

“Not when someone could hear us,” Steve says, grinning like a real bastard. He stilllets Bucky pull him into another kiss, though – he just doesn’t let Bucky deepen it *too* much.

“We can be quiet,” Bucky mutters quickly. *Kiss...*

Steve snorts softly, lips pushing back. “Maybe *you* can.”

“You can be, too,” Bucky insists. Clearly he has a lot more faith in Steve than Steve has in himself on the matter. *Kiss...*

It’s amazing, really... He’d spent the last six years ignoring his sex drive and growing used to being the only one to tend to it. Aside from the very scarce occasions here and there when some making out might happen, or hands would get involved, Bucky can’t actually remember the last time someone *else* had brought him to climax before last night. But then he went and gave that part of him to Steve, and now he just... He just wants Steve to have all of it; wants Steve to take care of him, never stop putting his hands on him... He doesn’t even want to *masturbate* ever again (anunrealistic thought, he knows, but the sentiment is quite real) because he only wants Steve to have that right to his body - his pleasure.

To his frustration, Steve just keeps pushing, “You’ll live, Buck.” He chuckles, “C’mon, baby, *breakfast--*”

“Mm-mm,” Bucky replies quickly, shaking his head and lifting it from the pillow when Steve makes to pull away. Steve laughs as Bucky yanks him back down just as fast, coaxing Steve’s lips to his like they’re magnetically inseparable. “Breakfast *later.*”

Steve makes a low, pleased sound in his chest. “You make it *really* hard to resist,” he says; voice quiet, pupils dilating. It makes Bucky heat up and prickle from head to toe, because Steve’s so full of *shit* – what Bucky just put up against him could hardly be considered much of a ‘fight’. All it does is reinforce just how badly Steve wants Bucky, too, for him to give in so easily. Bucky doesn’t know if he’ll ever get used to feeling so fucking precious to another person; to entertain for even a second that maybe, just *maybe*, Steve loves him as vehemently as Bucky loves him in return.

“Then stop resisting me,” he begs. “We can make it fast – and quiet. Promise. C’mon, don’t make me have to deal with morning wood. You’re supposed to be my boyfriend.”

Steve nips his bottom lip. “I *am* your boyfriend,” he reminds him. Bucky smiles, matching Steve’s own. Steve’s already starting to kiss back down his neck. They’re not nearly as innocent caresses this time around. There are teeth involved; light little sucks – hard enough to remind Bucky that he’s *Steve’s* now, without risking marking him up enough for the family to see when they *do* return to the rest of the world again.

“Thanks for remindin’ me,” Bucky jokes, feigning innocence as his fingers get lost in the soft strands of Steve’s hair. “I almost forgot for a second.”

Steve kisses down Bucky’s chest, his stomach, before stopping to curl his fingers into the waistline of the brunet’s pajama pants. Glancing back up with a *filthy* grin, he reminds him, “Quick and quiet.”

“Won’t make a peep,” Bucky promises, sounding void of all breath already. Licking his lips, he watches Steve resume kissing along his lower belly, the lines of his iliac furrow... It makes him shiver, and Bucky realizes without saying it out loud that that might very well be *his* hidden sweet spot: the place where Steve traces his tongue that makes Bucky’s toes curl and his skin break out into goosebumps, making him shiver. Voicing it would be a total waste of time anyways, because this is the second time Steve’s done that and it’s provoked the same reaction out of Bucky, so... Steve’s probably figured it out, too.

Playing it safe, Steve gives Bucky what he wants – *soft of* – and helps his boyfriend get rid of his erection using nothing but his lips and tongue. After all, keeping Steve’s mouth full is probably the safest way to ensure that he doesn’t get too loud himself. Bucky has to resort to the good old trick of biting himself to make sure he doesn’t cry out when he comes. Steve tries to pull away after, insisting that he’s fine; Bucky doesn’t need to return the favour. He promptly shuts up with a laugh when Bucky gives him a flat look, as if to say, *Fuckin’ really?* As if Bucky would let Steve go untouched.

In the end, it takes Steve clutching a pillow against his face to stifle his own sounds, and when Bucky makes him come, he swallows it all down with his eyes glued up to the way Steve’s fingers are brutally digging into that pillow – *wishing* he could see his face, and *wishing* he could fuck Steve stupid, and *wishing* he could hear exactly how loud he gets when he screams. For now, getting him off like this has to make do. They have the rest of their lives for Bucky to be selfish. By the time they finish and finally head downstairs, Bucky’s long-sleeved shirt hides more than just his left arm.

It also covers the nearly *bloody* teeth marks on his inner right one, too.

Bucky is in one hell of a happy mood. It’s one of those kinds of moods that lasts throughout the day, with absolutely *nothing* capable of dampening it. The first thing he does when he strides into the kitchen that morning is throw his arms around his mom - surprising her - and give her a bear hug. Laughing, her face sprouts a large grin as she exclaims, “Good morning, sweetie!”

“Good morning!” Bucky cheerily replies. He squeezes her hard and tilts back to lift her off the ground, prompting her to laugh again and ask Bucky what’s gotten him in such a great mood so early. He only puts her down and casually replies, “I just had a wonderful sleep, is all – *mm*, this smells fantastic,” before grabbing a cup of coffee and heading out to the patio to have his morning cigarette. He greets the rest of the family with the same blissful enthusiasm; even does nothing but laugh and give Rebecca’s shoulder a loving shove when she suspiciously asks, “Who are you and what’ve you done with my brother?”

Bucky heads outside with his family looking amongst each other, slightly thrown off. Nonetheless, they’re all sharing a surprised little smile. Rebecca keeps staring at the door and voices what they’re all thinking when she quietly muses, “I missed him smiling like that...”

But of course, Bucky doesn’t hear it. He’s outside, enjoying the weather – even though it’s overcast – and replying to Sam, who’d texted him back the day before. They make plans to grab coffee the following week. Bucky also texts Natasha, telling her: *Took your advice and went for it. Steve told me he loves me too.*

This time, when Natasha replies that in her gut, she already knew that, all Bucky can do is smile to himself. This is one time he’s actually *glad* to hear it. He doesn’t even linger on his iPhone to check his emails; see how pissed Pierce must be with him right now for ignoring his work. Bucky doesn’t *feel* like stressing himself out today. Everything just feels perfect, and Bucky wants to be able to bask in it. On the off-chance that this *is* all just a dream, Bucky’s going to milk the fuck out of it.

Steve’s already started on the pancakes when he heads back in. Bucky can’t help the lovesick look that washes over his face at the sight of him. Did he already mention that Steve’s messy bedhead is just about the most adorable thing on the planet? Because it really fucking is. But then he’s proven wrong – because what’s even *more* adorable is the smile he gets in return when Steve turns his head and sees he’s walked into the room. Bucky’s not used to having people look at him like this, and it makes him feel like he’s buzzing all over from head to toe, light and airy.

That’s when it hits him more intensely... Steve said he’s been in love with him for *years*. And Bucky suddenly recalls all those times Steve would glance his way and look at him the exact same way he’s looking now. Bucky owes Natasha more than just steak and beer – he owes her jewelry or something. She absolutely called that one; Bucky had been completely fucking oblivious. Now that their feelings are out in the open, the way Steve smiles at him seems so obvious, even to the simplest of minds. Jesus Christ, Bucky had really been living in denial.

It’s a disappointing realization – a self-deprecating sort of revelation – as much as it is a happy one.

All the same, he strides past Steve, putting his hand on the blond’s back and letting it linger. Because they’re alone in the kitchen, Bucky sneaks a small kiss onto the back of Steve’s neck before asking, “Strawberries, you said?”

“Mhm,” Steve replies, still mixing the batter. “Whatever’s left, just cut ‘em into fours.”

“Roger that,” Bucky jokes as he goes to the fridge, opening the door to pull out the container. Steve rolls his eyes with a groan, and Bucky just laughs and points at him. “Hey, you’re not the only one who can make terrible jokes!” he says. “But too late – you’re already dating me, you can’t take it back!”

“Terrible jokes, terrible puns, they’re are supposed to be *my* thing,” Steve says, sighing playfully. “You’re supposed to be the Spock to my Captain Kirk.”

“You callin’ me an emotionless Vulcan?”

“Hey, he was *part* human – he cracked a smile, like, once or twice,” Steve teases.

Bucky starts cutting the strawberries on the chopping board. “Haw haw, you’re *so* funny,” he replies sarcastically.

“Told you bad humour was my thing in this relationship.”

“I changed my mind then; it’s *not* too late to break up.”

Steve laughs and kisses the side of Bucky’s face, making Bucky’s resolve break; turns his fake exasperation into another warm smile as he chuckles.

“Pancakes?” they suddenly hear Rebecca ask as she pads into the kitchen. She still looks like she hasn’t fully woken up yet, even though she’s been up for at least an hour. With her long hair in a messy bun and her housecoat draped over her, she takes a seat at the table and rests her head in her hands, eyeing the batter Steve’s now pouring into the pan.

“Yep,” Bucky answers. Glancing to her from over his shoulder, he adds, “Morning, by the way.”

“Mm. Morning.” She yawns, and then looks at something on her phone while Bucky and Steve exchange a quick look. No one else had made any comments about *hearing* anything the night before, so they were in the clear with regards to them. It’s still up in the air, though, if *Rebecca* heard anything. So far, she’s not giving them much to work off of.

“How’d you sleep?” Steve asks her casually. Bucky suspects he’s trying to test the waters, wondering the exact same thing as Bucky is.

“Slept alright,” she says with a small shrug. “You?”

“Bed was sort of uncomfortable, so we pretty much crashed on the floor, but good,” Steve says.

Rebecca’s right eyebrow raises while she continues to stare at her iPhone. Steve’s too busy flipping over the pancake to notice, but Bucky catches the quickest glimpse of it. It’s a subtle facial expression, but knowing his sister, it could mean a hundred different things. A few seconds later, her lips purse into a sort of *smug* little smirk, eyebrow arching higher – as if *knowingly*. Lowering her phone, she says, “Haven’t had pancakes in, like... man, few months, at least. Didn’t even know we had batter with us.”

“Steve brought it,” Bucky tells her.

“Really?” Rebecca asks, laughing.

Steve smiles her way, moving onto making the next pancake. “Yeah, well, you can’t have a proper breakfast without pancakes at least *once*, right?”

“Right,” she answers slowly, still with that little smile. “Hey, Steve,” she then asks, “you ever watch ‘Castle’?”

“Yeah?” Steve answers distractedly. “It’s a good show. Why?”

“Oh, no reason; was just curious.” Getting off her chair, she practically skips over to them, stopping behind Bucky to ask, “And what about you, Buck? You ever seen ‘Castle’?”

Bucky has absolutely zero idea why she’s asking. Did she bring the seasons with her and wants to know if they’d want to watch it or something? Looking over his shoulder to her, Bucky regards her suspiciously for a second before answering, “Um, no.”

Her face lights up, and Bucky doesn’t get what he’s just missed. She clasps a hand on his shoulder and replies, “Didn’t think so. Was just curious! Anyways, I’m gonna go grab a shower – smells great in here!” Then she leaves, beaming proudly, like she just solved some sort of riddle that everyone else was still dumb to. Bucky watches her go, confusion written all over his face. Next to him, Steve keeps working on the pancakes. Bucky doesn’t notice the little amused smile he’s sporting to himself.

“Any idea what the hell that was about?” Bucky asks quietly. “Some sort of reference I didn’t get, or...?”

When he looks back to Steve, that little smile is gone – replaced to look casual - and he shrugs. “I dunno what she meant either,” he says. “Teenage girls; never really *were* my forte.”

“And the whole ‘Castle’ thing...?”

Steve puts the measuring cup full of batter down and stares at it for a moment, as if he doesn’t know whether or not to say anything. Then he turns, resting his elbow on the counter top, and explains under his breath, “On the show, pancakes are sort of a joke that...” Steve huffs out a short chuckle, raising his eyebrows at Bucky like the rest should be self-explanatory.

Bucky puts down the knife and crosses his arms. “*Thaaaat*?” he prompts tiredly.

“Well, it basically means, ‘Thank you *so* much for last night.’”

It takes Bucky a second. Then he’s groaning, “Oh my *god*,” and leaning onto his elbows on the counter so he can cover his face. Steve barks out a laugh and pulls him into a hug. Bucky’s still groaning against his shoulder.

“At least she was subtle about it,” Steve offers, sounding like he’s about ready to fall apart into laughter. He kisses the side of Bucky’s head, chuckling next to his ear.

“Oh *god*,” Bucky groans again. His face is beet red already. “She’s my little sister, Steve – that’s so... *Ugh*, god damnit, am I gonna need to have ‘the talk’ with her now or something?”

“She’s *seventeen*, Buck, not seven.”

“Well, I don’t know the proper protocol for this shit,” Bucky hisses as he pulls back, trying to remind Steve that they have to keep their voices down. The rest of his family are only in next room, after all. “Jesus Christ, I can’t believe she heard us,” he croaks.

“We don’t know how *much* she heard,” Steve points out, ever the optimist. Bucky gives him a flat look. “Maybe she only heard a second or two?”

“*Still* a second or two more than she ever needed to hear,” Bucky replies.

Laughing again, Steve just wraps his arms around Bucky’s neck and pulls him back into another, gentler hug. “It’ll be fine,” he says reassuringly. “It happens. It’s not the end of the world.”

“You know the only logical solution to this, right?” Bucky mumbles tonelessly.
“What’s that?”

Steve pulls back to gauge the look on Bucky’s face. Dryly, Bucky jokes, “We pack up our things and leave before they realize they can’t smell pancakes anymore. Legally change our names. How’s Tijuana sound to you?”

Steve matches his expression and plays along, asking, “I dunno... Can I pick your new name?”

“Fine, then I’m picking yours.”

“Your new name will be Bocky Bornos.”

“...Never mind, Rebecca hearing us was better.”

Steve laughs loudly, and after Bucky shoves him with a tiny smile, they go back to making breakfast.

With the exception of Rebecca (which is awkward enough at first as it is), throughout the day, from time to time, someone in his family will give Bucky a weird smile – and Bucky can tell that they want to ask him what exactly is going on; what’s got him so chipper. But they don’t. He just gets an increased amount of sporadic hugs – even from Ben and his father – and finds himself giving them more in return. It feels nice. He knows he has a lot of work he’s going to need to do when it comes to accepting the affection being offered to him and actually *believing* that he’s worthy of it, but this is a good start.

And Steve... Jesus Christ, Bucky can’t stop smiling at Steve. Similarly, he has difficulty not being around him for nearly every second of the day. They’re not being all lovey-dovey or anything – *then something would be obvious for sure* – but there *is* definitely a change in the air around them. At one point, Steve’s in the middle of chatting with Ben and Annie; fingers laced with Bucky’s. Bucky catches his dad looking over at them curiously. All Bucky does is get a small smile, giving a quick nod. Mark smiles back, eyes warming with understanding thanks to their conversation the day before.

Bucky notices that now that Steve’s essentially gotten permission, he likes having some part of him touching Bucky at all times. Whether that’s holding his hand, or their knees bumping, or his arm around Bucky’s shoulders or waist - they’re nearly glued to the hip the entire day. Whenever they know no one’s looking, they’ll sneak quick kisses. Even a few times, they let themselves do it in front of the others, too. At one point, they’re sitting on the couch with Steve leaning into Bucky a little bit and *Bucky’s* arm around him, and Bucky turns his face down to place a light kiss to his temple without even second-guessing it.

Then suddenly they have Amy hopping up onto their laps. Having seen them, she giggles excitedly and says, “My turn!” resulting in Bucky pecking her cheek, and then Steve. That turns into them both diving in over and over to give her cheeks quick, loud kisses, until they’re both reaching out and tickling her sides. Amy screams with laughter, doubling over onto the rest of the couch, so Bucky takes over. When she finally manages to demand between loud peals of laughter, “STOP!” Bucky pulls away with a toothy grin. Glancing over to Steve, his heart somersaults at the way Steve’s staring back at him – just like the way they’d looked at each other after reading Amy her bedtime story a couple nights before.

Steve just lifts a hand and gently holds the back of Bucky's neck, stroking beneath his hairline with his thumb. *I love you*, he mouths. Bucky's grin melts down into a shy smile and he quickly mouths back, *I love you, too*. With Amy between them like this, it feels so domestic that Bucky can't help but fantasize about what it could be like for them to raise a child of their own together someday. If it were anyone but Steve, he'd worry that it'd be way too soon to even entertain such thoughts.

But Steve makes Bucky want to have everything he'd told himself for so long that he didn't deserve to have – he wants Steve to eventually get down on one knee as effortlessly as Bucky can imagine *himself* planning some elaborate proposal that'd culminate in him presenting a ring that'd look so perfect on Steve's finger that he could've been born with it.

He wants some nice, outdoor wedding with all of their friends and immediate family... Everyone smiling and cheering for them, and Bucky would write his own vows, and he could only imagine what Steve would come up with for his own. Despite being surrounded by other people, they wouldn't be able to see anyone but each other, as Bucky took in the sight of Steve in a dashing suit and promised to love him with every part of his soul until the day he dies. They'd laugh; maybe they'd have tears in their eyes until they could finally kiss each other as husbands. Bucky wonders if Steve would be so eager that he'd grab Bucky and close the distance between them before the officiant even got the chance to finish giving them permission.

He wants a nice little place in a family-friendly suburb, where their kid (maybe *kids*) could play on the grass, make friends at the playground, and go to a school where they could kick around a ball in the field. They could make sure to visit Indiana so that Bucky's family got to see them as often as possible. But they'd still be close enough to the city that *New York* would be born into their blood and be considered *home*.

Bucky knows that Steve doesn't have a lot of close family left; the closest thing he had were his parents, and yet he'd lost them both so much younger than any son should ever experience. New York and everything 'home' represents to him is so important to who Steve is that Bucky would want that passed down to their children. He imagines that if they adopted a baby girl, they could name her Sarah...

For years, Bucky had a very concise plan for how he wanted his life to go. He never kidded himself into believing that he'd be lucky enough to get married, and though he'd always wanted to be a father someday, it seemed more like a distant fantasy than a thing he could actually see himself getting his hands on and experiencing. Looking into Steve's eyes, Bucky sees a future that he not only *wants* to have (so much more than everything else he ever thought he wanted), but one that he feels he *needs*.

One day, of course. It doesn't need to happen any time soon, since they're still young – and despite how long-standing their love for each other has been alive, the relationship is also still so new. But this could actually happen for them – maybe it very well *will*. And that thought is enough to fill Bucky with so much joy that it feels baffling that he spent so many years forgetting that the sun is *always* there behind the clouds. Life seems to have so many possibilities for him now.

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That night, after they feel safe that everyone else is asleep, they sneak down to the lake and go for a late-night skinny dip. The weather had been gloomy up until about one

a.m., but now the sky is clearer, with even a few stars dotting the sea of black above them. The air has a small chill, and the temperature of the water is admittedly cooler than they'd like it to be. But what that provides is the perfect excuse to keep each other warm by pressing their goosebump-raised skin to each other as much as they can.

They horse around flirtatiously – splashing and dunking each other beneath the surface, all while trying not to wake anyone back at the cottage up – and always wind up with one of them wrapping their arms around the other's neck so they can seek refuge in each other's mouth. When kissing turns out to be more fun (and distracting) than actual swimming, they keep themselves hidden beneath the very end of the dock; Bucky reaching up and holding onto the edge to stay afloat, while Steve's legs wrap tightly around his waist as he practically eats Bucky's lips like candy.

They stay like that, making out in the water like a pair of horny teenagers until they're panting and shivering from their dwindling body heat. They very well *could* go back inside and warm up in Bucky's bed, but he's still feeling a little off-put by the chance of Rebecca hearing them again. So instead, Steve takes his hand and runs them both – *still completely naked* – to Bucky's car. It's shaded enough behind the trees that no one would be able to spot them from any of the windows. It's late enough that the risk of being caught is the farthest thing from their mind, while also adding a *little* more excitement to their actions when they quickly pile inside. They feel sneaky; it's an adrenaline rush.

It takes some maneuvering, especially for Steve's large build, but warming up turns out not to be a problem at all by the time he's straddling Bucky's lap in the backseat... Both boys moaning into each other's mouths between feverish kisses, as Steve grips the back of the seat in both hands and rides Bucky's cock until the small space smells of sex; the windows completely fogged up from the inside. Their bodies are slick from head to toe with sweat and lake water – hair matted to their faces as Steve's hips roll against his and Bucky's hands slide everywhere they can touch.

There's still the worry of being *too* loud, but it's nowhere near as bad as it'd be *inside*. So when Bucky finally gets him coming, Steve's body jolts and then bends back spectacularly; Steve straightening his arms enough to arch and let his head tip back so Bucky can watch his face as he falls apart. Bucky's rewarded with one fucking perfect, *wrecked* sob, and he gasps and uncontrollably spills himself deep into Steve the *second* he hears it.

Trembling and fighting to catch their breath, Steve buries his face against Bucky's neck and the two do nothing but cling to each other in silence... Sometimes share dazed glances from beneath half-mast lids before one of them steals another kiss between soft panting. When the windows are finally cleared up again, they regain enough strength to gather their clothes from the waterfront and head back inside to get ready for bed.

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Lying on the air mattress, Bucky's got Steve pressed to his back and a lazy smile on his face. Steve's arms tightly wrapped around him are hands-down the best sleeping

aid. He's halfway to unconscious when Steve whispers into his hair, just as satiated and fatigued, "Can I keep you...?"

Bucky hums, eyes staying closed and his smile growing. After inhaling slow and deep, he quietly replies, "How long?"

"Forever," Steve answers, hugging Bucky closer. Then he seems to think better on his words and adds, "Or however long you want me until then."

Bucky's heart skips. Pausing for only a moment, he says, "Forever sounds good... I can do forever."

Because he *can*... He really can. With that declaration, Steve seems satisfied and willing to go to sleep. "I love you, Bucky Barnes," he reminds him, saying the words right into Bucky's ear.

Bucky doesn't know how he ever got this lucky. He still hopes this isn't a dream, because he'll legitimately fall apart and cry if this doesn't turn out to be real. *Please* let this be real... "I love you too, Steve Rogers," he murmurs back playfully, unable to stop himself from wondering how his own name would sound if he ever got to take his boyfriend's last name one day instead.

Annie and Mark's anniversary party is the following evening, so the morning and afternoon leading up to it are spent getting last-minute arrangements together. Annie spends most of the day on her cell, taking calls from the extensive guest list of family members phoning to either confirm their attendance, or the few cancelling at the last minute. Every time Annie hangs up with a huff and goes back over her list to strike out a name, Mark rubs her shoulders and tries to calm her down by reminding her, "There's always *some*, aren't there? Don't worry, honey – the people who'll come are the only people we *really* want there."

That always gets her smiling tiredly and nodding, placing a hand over one of his as she leans into him appreciatively. Whenever Bucky sees them, it reminds him of what true love looks like... and the fact that he now has the type of relationship he'd grown up looking up to and wanting for himself. He's glad his mom and dad have each other. After the story Mark had told him while on the boat, Bucky feels like he appreciates his parents' relationship on a deeper level now.

Despite this day – and the event to come that night – being all about celebrating *them* and *their* marriage, Annie had taken the reigns when it came to planning the whole thing. Seeing how anxious she is, meticulously trying to go over everything and make sure the night will go smoothly *for everyone else's sake rather than her own*, makes Bucky feel guilty about just how little he realizes he'd paid attention over the last few months.

He never even knew his mom was basically orchestrating the entire thing, with help from his dad wherever he could input it. If he hadn't been trying to disassociate himself from his old life and those who loved him as much as he had, Bucky would've known this and he could've offered to help however possible. Annie probably could've used it.

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Instead, he'd treated the party like an *ordeal* to survive through, rather than something to show his support about – he gave her grief about bringing a plus one, and

waited until the very last minute to provide Steve's meal choice. Seeing her running around like a chicken with its head cut off – as guests try and change their dinner selections and ask for something *else*, on top of everything else – makes Bucky feel like a huge piece of shit. He should've been part of the solution, not the problem.

So the kids all try and band together to help out as much as they can; taking Annie's To Do list for the day and delegating tasks amongst each other to help alleviate some of her load. Amy, being the littlest and unable to actually *do* any of the things on the list, contributes her own by planting her butt down at the dining room table and drawing up a certificate for 'Best Mommy' (which promptly makes an overemotional Annie start tearing up once Amy gives it to her). Ben takes her phone, with Bucky instructing her that Ben will be taking any of the calls from family. Mark joins in and covers the phone calls from the actual venue, as well as anything pertaining to catering, the DJ, and the like. Rebecca's the one who palms their mother's shoulders and guides her to the couch, encouraging her to sit down and *relax* a little.

"We got this," she tells her. Annie, ever frazzled and feeling like she has to do *something*, tries to protest, but that's when Steve swoops in and plops Amy down on her lap with a book in her pudgy little hands.

"Your only job right now is to put your feet up and let us handle everything, ma'am," Steve insists with a charming smile. "Can I get you a drink or something?"

Bucky's already in the kitchen, working to finish up on cleaning the leftover dishes in the sink. Hearing the exchange, he immediately heads over to the fridge, calling out, "On it."

"You know that none of you have to do this," he hears his mom tell Steve and Rebecca. She sounds exhausted, but he can hear the tiny, grateful smile in her voice. "You're supposed to be on vacation."

"With all due respect? So are you," Steve replies. "Tonight is about you and Mark; you're allowed to just enjoy it."

"Yeah mom, c'mon," Becca adds supportively. "You do so much for us all the time – you shouldn't be this stressed out today. Just trust us, 'kay? We can handle it. If there's a problem and we don't know what to do, *then* you can jump in and save the day."

"Super Mom!" Amy shouts, shoving both fists into the air with a grin.

Bucky walks back into the living room to see Annie chuckling and wrapping his little sister up into a hug. He can tell by her body language that she's conceding, at least for now. Steve and Rebecca exchanged a satisfied smile, before Steve glances above her head and notices Bucky's presence. Bucky leans against the wall and crosses his arms, sighing lightly and saying, "We're still sort of low on groceries. Mom, you okay with water?"

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They'd completely forgotten to run into town and stock up on food, since the day before had been so crappy in terms of weather that it turned into another lazy, stay-in sort

of day. Annie *immediately* makes to move Amy off of her lap to stand up. As if reading her mind, Bucky starts to say, “Mom--” at the same time that Rebecca strides right up to her again and directs her back against the couch. Not missing a beat, Steve suggests, “That’s fine; that’s totally cool. Not a big deal. *We’ll* just go, we have a car. Buck?”

Bucky nods, turning to run upstairs. “Yep! I’ll get the keys!”

He fishes them out of the side pocket of his suitcase before grabbing his sunglasses. When he gets back downstairs, Annie has a glass of water in hand, while she and Amy stare down at the open pages of Amy’s book. Amy points to stuff on the pages; Annie, keeping distracted by reading the story aloud. With that taken care of, Steve and Becca slip on their shoes by the front door while Bucky finds his father on the phone in the den.

“Make sure she doesn’t give herself more work to do,” Bucky mutters to him quietly. Mark glances over to him with a smile and gives an understanding nod. Bucky can hear a loud voice chatting away on the other end of the phone – doesn’t know *who* specifically, but given the cutting pitch of their voice and the speed with which they’re talking, he assumes it’s his aunt. Mark jokingly mouths, *Save me*, and Bucky grins, squeezing his shoulder sympathetically before turning and heading out to the car.

He, Steve, and Rebecca drive the twenty-odd minutes into town until they pull into the parking lot of the little grocery store they’ve been shopping at for years. Bucky realizes they probably should’ve made a *list*, so as not to forget anything. But Steve just suggests that they start with the essentials first: vegetables, fruits, grains, breakfast, beverages, and meats.

“Once we cover those, we can look around and grab whatever else we think might be good,” he says.

“Yeah, there’s only, like, what? *Three* more days ‘till you guys leave anyways?” Becca chimes in, grabbing a bunch of bananas and placing them into the cart. With a shrug, she finishes, “We head back the day after you guys, so...”

“No need to over-shop,” Steve agrees.

Bucky frowns to himself, staring down at the cart he’s pushing as they continue to make their way through the produce section. He hadn’t even registered how quickly the week had been passing by. Rebecca’s right – he and Steve head back to New York in three days; *two*, if he didn’t count today. Actually, considering that they were planning to leave in the early afternoon on Saturday in order to take advantage of the sunlight during the long drive, that really only left one *full* day, not counting today.

“Hey, you think your parents would mind if I whipped something together tomorrow night for dinner? As, like, a *thank you* for havin’ me?” Steve asks to no one in particular, inspecting green peppers in his hand before dropping the ones he deems acceptable into a bag.

Bucky's still too caught up in his thoughts to answer. He feels awful, like he wasted half of his vacation with his family being such a grump. The first half of the week, he'd spent so wrapped up in his own negativity and issues that he hadn't properly let himself *enjoy* the time he was finally having with his family. Yeah, he's looking forward to being back in New York again. New York is home for him now; it's where he and Steve can start their life together.

But not yet... Bucky hadn't realized just how much he isn't ready to leave yet. He wants more sunshine, and lake water, and laughing, and camp fires, and his family, and summer love, and lack of responsibilities. New York may mean a whole new world of possibilities, but it *also* means going back to being an adult. It means returning to work, and being underappreciated – taken advantage of by Pierce. It means paying rent, and mundane routines, and not seeing his parents or siblings again for months. It means saying goodbye to his favourite place in the world for another year.

"Buck? *Hellooooo*, Earth to Buckaroo!" Rebecca's repeating, and Bucky realizes she's waving a hand in front of his face. Snapping back to attention, he blinks and looks to her and Steve quickly, saying, "Uh – what? Sorry, I was..."

Steve gives him a strange, inquisitive smile. Laughing, he repeats, "I wanted to know if I could grab some extra stuff to make dinner for everyone tomorrow... You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," Bucky lies, throwing on a casual airiness. "Just zoned out for a sec."

"What're you thinking of making?" Becca asks.

"Old family recipe," Steve answers. Narrowing his eyes at her, he leans in and says conspiratorially, "If I told you, I'd have to kill you."

Rebecca sneers harmlessly, shoving his arm. "I could take you. I could take him, right Buck?"

"She'd probably be able to take you," Bucky agrees with a small smile. "May be small, but she's tough as nails."

"You're probably right," Steve says, now looking off at the aisle signs. Distractedly, he adds, "M'still not tellin' you, though. I'll be right back; m'gonna grab some spices down aisle five, 'kay?"

"Alright."

He and his sister continue to make their way through the store, grabbing what they figure are the essentials while they make random chit chat. It only adds to Bucky's feeling of guilt when he realizes that for the amount of time he's spent around her this past week, he's barely asked her *anything* about what's going on in her life. So he does. They trail through the aisles – never seeming to run back into Steve – while he asks her questions about school, how her job's going, etc.

He even swallows his brotherly discomfort long enough to ask if she's seeing anyone, and it turns out that she's unofficially dating a guy named Erik. Bucky covers his basics – *how old is he? How'd you meet him? What does he do? He treating you good?* – until Rebecca gets sidetracked and begins to gush about how 'fucking cute' he is. That gets Bucky lifting a hand and interrupting, "*Okay*, that's enough! I think I'm good!"

She rolls her eyes, but all the same replies, "Sorry."

“That’s fine... I *am* glad you’re happy, though,” he says sincerely. He turns the cart and they head down the cereal aisle.

Becca hums. After grabbing a box of Lucky Charms and tossing it into their pile, she replies, “You too, you know. I like seeing the way you are with Steve.”

“Really?”

“Yeah... You seem different around him; happy. Like, genuinely.” In a rare moment of naked honesty, she gives Bucky a tiny, affectionate smile and tells him, “It’s sort of like looking at mom and dad. It’s like no one else exists for him the second he looks at you. It’s nice... You deserve that.”

Bucky stops walking. For a few seconds, they stand in the middle of the aisle, looking to each other. Bucky can’t remember the last time he had a conversation even remotely like this with his sister. Usually, it was always riddled with at least a *little* teasing or heckling. He feels like he could tear up right there in the open, in front of everyone. Instead, he swallows the lump in his throat and mumbles, “Thank you...” before throwing an arm around her shoulders and lightening the mood by pulling her into a small, half hug.

“You’re welcome,” she replies by his side. Then she’s pretending to shrug him off, joking, “Okay, that’s enough! We keep this up, and people might actually think we get along.”

Bucky chuckles under his breath, shaking his head as they both pull away. *That’s more like it.* “Well, we wouldn’t want *that*, now would we?”

“Definitely not... Where’s Steve anyways?” she changes the subject, now looking around down both ends of the aisle. “It’s been, like, ten minutes.”

“Maybe he got lost?” Bucky jokes.

“Knowing him, your man got sidetracked helping some sweet, little old lady who couldn’t reach something on the top shelf.” She strides up ahead of him to leave the aisle and go looking. Just as Bucky watches her start glancing from left to right up ahead of him, hands suddenly fly over his eyes, making him nearly jump out of his skin.

“Guess who!” Steve playfully says from behind him.

“Son of a bitch, Rogers! You tryin’ to give me a heart attack?” Bucky exclaims, batting his hands away. As he spins around to look at his boyfriend, his eyes widen when he sees a mother and her small child pretty much *right* next to them. The mom glares at him for his use of language, tightening her grip on her son’s hand and pulling him along to leave the aisle. Bucky watches them go, feeling mortified, while *Steve’s* eyes are squeezed closed – grinning and nodding to himself as he fights high hell and back to keep from bursting out laughing.

“Sorry!” Bucky calls after the mother. The second she turns the corner, Bucky glares at Steve, his face falling flat. “You’re an ass.” Steve cracks, now releasing a loud belly laugh as he tosses his head back and throws his hand up over his left peck. “Haw haw. That’s right, funny man, laugh it up,” Bucky says, nodding.

Steve practically has tears rolling out of the corner of his eyes by the time he’s able to breathe long enough to form words. “I’m sorry,” he says, palming Bucky’s shoulders, then his neck, then pulling him into a hug. “Ah god, I’m sorry, *ah--*” And then he’s fucking cracking up all over again.

Bucky lets himself be pulled into the hug all the same. Sighing over-dramatically, his resolve weakens – it’s impossible not to smile whenever Steve laughs – and he says with mock exasperation, “Taking joy at my pain, I see how it is. I get it.”

“C’mon Buck--” Steve may as well be dying, he’s shaking so hard and incapable of speaking much more than that from laughing so hard.

“No, no, it’s fine,” Bucky dryly teases.

Between chortles, Steve plants a quick, smacking kiss on Bucky’s lips before calming down enough to apologize more genuinely. “I didn’t think I’d startle you *that* bad,” he says. “And I *definitely* didn’t expect the swearin’ *or* the kid, otherwise I probably wouldn’t have done it.”

Finally, he’s able to get Bucky’s mouth to curl up into a smile, relinquishing and giving in. That’s when he notices that Steve’s got a basket of his own, with far more items than just a few things from aisle five. They keep walking – now, to find Becca, who’s still wandering around looking for *Steve* – and Bucky asks, “You get lost or something? Rebecca thought you might’ve needed some saving from little old ladies, you were takin’ so long.”

“Sorry. I needed to grab a few things for dinner tomorrow.” Steve gestures to the basket and then points ahead of him, saying, “Ah, there she is!”

Waving Rebecca down, she comes over and rejoins them before they all head to an available cashier and get their orders rung through. Rebecca calls shotgun for the ride back, since Steve got it on the way there. She fiddles noncommittally through the radio stations for the first minute or so, until deciding on one that plays classic rock. When Steve starts singing in a hilarious falsetto from the backseat, Rebecca joins in – and after enough coaxing, they’re both able to lure Bucky into singing along, too, until all three are rocking out and wailing (*horribly*) to the music.

It’s enough to make Bucky forget about the disappointment he’d felt back at the store. Because moments like these... Well, they’re simple, and uncomplicated, and happy. It feels just about *perfect* – and Bucky thinks he’s wasted enough years ignoring the little things like this that make life worth living, with the people he couldn’t live *without*. There’s a whole photo album of memories to hold onto, all with blank pages... and Bucky thinks it’s about time he starts to let himself fill them.

The party’s a black tie thing, *very fancy* – and honestly, Bucky feels a little uncomfortable staring at his reflection in the mirror. They all need to head out in a few minutes to be at the venue on time, so the entire top floor of the cottage is a chaotic rush of people running back and forth between rooms to make sure they have everything, or look nice, or *something*. For the dozenth time, Bucky smooths down the sleeves of his suit, hanging perfectly on his frame. He can’t remember the last time he dressed up like this. He sort of feels a little like an *imposter*, because really, this is hardly *him*. At the same time, a voice in the back of his mind can’t help but acknowledge how handsome he feels – and perhaps that’s the real root of his discomfort.

Bucky hasn’t been overly good at letting others compliment him, these past few years; let alone being the one to give *himself* a compliment.

But he really does look great. If he didn't already think so, the way Steve suddenly breathes "*Wow*" from the doorway is definitely an indicator. Bucky glances to him from over his shoulder with a shy smile. He opens his mouth to reply, when his own eyes take in Steve in his suit, and then he's fucking speechless. His stare dropping down Steve's body and then back up again, Bucky legitimately thinks for a moment that suits were invented *solely* because Steve Rogers was meant to wear them.

He's likewise never seen his boyfriend dress so fancy before, and it makes him lose his breath. Every daydream and fantasy he's had over the last couple days – namely the ones having to do with wanting to marry the shit out of Steve someday – hits him dead on, and it's only by the grace of fucking god and willpower made out of *steel* that Bucky doesn't blurt out, "Will you marry me?" right then and there.

"Wow, is, uh... Wow is right," he murmurs in awe. Steve seems to be paying no mind to how *he* looks to Bucky, because he quietly shuts the door behind him before walking up to Bucky to get a better look.

His baby blues widened with amazement, he touches Bucky's cheek and notices, "You shaved..."

Oh crap, that's right. Bucky's always had a bit of a five o'clock shadow in all he years Steve's known him. He'd even considered getting a real haircut for the big night, but decided against it at the last minute. Going sans facial hair is good enough in terms of 'change' – Bucky's already feeling anxious about seeing the entire family again after so many years. Still, he knows he looks a little different without the stubble – younger, a bit softer – so he looks down shyly and asks, "You like it...?"

"You look incredible." Steve tilts Bucky's chin up and leans in, kissing him. "It's different, but... Yeah, you look amazing. Like, you have no idea how hot you are; sometimes I think you're blind." When he kisses Bucky again, Bucky can feel Steve's mouth curl up into a tiny smile. "Sort of makes me wanna... get you out of this suit already," he then says, voice dropping into a purr.

Bucky can't help but smirk, his eyes still closed as he meets another kiss. "Really?" he murmurs back. He knows they can't sneak in a quickie, no matter how much they'd want to. There's just no time, and anyone could come walking in. He's pretty sure Steve knows that, too. All the same, his boyfriend hums and husks back, "Mhm," before kissing Bucky a little deeper; backing him up a few steps until Bucky meets the wall. Sure enough, when Steve presses up against him, Bucky can feel Steve's half hard cock against his hip. He groans, instantly wanting it in his mouth.

"You're awful," he breathes, because *great* – now he wants to bend Steve over and bang the fuck out of him while they've still got their suits on. They have to leave any minute now, and a boner of his own is *not* something he wants his family to see. That doesn't stop him from nipping Steve's bottom lip, though, growling quietly, "Make me want you when you know I can't do nothing about it. Fucking tease."

Steve chuckles against his mouth, deep and low. Breaking away to plant soft kisses up to Bucky's ear, Steve whispers into it, "I'll make it up to you later. Gonna spend all night wanting to peel you outta this suit, baby... You're the tease just *lookin'* the way you do." Bucky licks his lips before biting the bottom one with a soft exhale, eyes fluttering closed again when Steve pinches his ear lobe gently between his teeth.

“Steve,” he groans, “we gotta go...”

“I know.” Steve lets out a loud sigh, dropping his forehead against Bucky’s shoulder before pulling away completely. They share a glance, making them both groan and quietly chuckle again. Steve reaches towards him and makes a grabby motion with his hands, before bawling them into fists and saying, “*Okay*, I gotta leave before I do somethin’ that’ll get us in trouble. I’ll meet you downstairs.”

Fuck, Bucky wishes Steve would do the thing and get them into trouble. It’s actually unfair how fucking delicious he looks – only made worse by how strongly Steve wants him right now, too. So it nighly feels *painful* to give him a tight-lipped smile, nodding as he smoothes out his jacket again and tries to will his erection away. ““Kay,” he replies, promising that he’ll be right out. He can hear Steve groan *again* under his breath as he forces himself to go.

It’s going to be a long fucking night, Bucky knows it. He tells himself that there’s a positive to the pining, though – at least if he’s distracted for the duration of the evening by trying *not* to rip Steve’s clothes off in front of everyone, it might help take his mind off of how stressed he is to see everyone and be so social. The reward should more than make up for the wait. After all, a perk is that since the party is in town, his parents are putting the family up in a hotel for the night. They got Bucky and Steve their own room, so they could have some privacy.

Right now, all Bucky can think is how much he plans to make sure that room is *destroyed* by the time they’re finished.

Bucky’s all over the place.

They say that ‘every family has *one*’, and by that, the general expression typically amounts to: ‘every family has that one person you always have to grit your teeth and *tolerate*’. In his case, it’s not so much simply one as it is a good dozen or so. Because Bucky’s family is pretty big – he’d forgotten just how big – and it only takes five minutes into the night for him to remember why he always dreaded reunions.

It’s been years since the majority of them have been in the same room together, and probably just as long since they’ve seen Bucky. Once he moved out of State, that was basically it for most of them, minus the odd Christmas card or Facebook message on birthdays. It’s not that Bucky doesn’t like the family. In fact, there are really only a small handful he genuinely can’t stand talking to. It’s just that they’re incredibly overbearing – either far too interested in your life, or not interested at all. Both ends of the spectrum seem to have an opinion on everything, though.

Annie and Mark are the stars of the evening, but the kids are the next in line in terms of ranking. Bucky’s constantly flocked by *someone*, talking a mile a minute and asking him questions – *Oh my god, James! It’s been so long! How are you? Where’re you living now? Why’d you move away? Your hair’s gotten so long! You in school? You working? What do you do? Do you like it? Why don’t you ever visit?* He hates how many of his aunts and their *friends* seem to think it’s okay to touch his hair; whether it’s to comment on how nice it looks longer, or to infer in some way or another that he should cut it.

What he hates even more are the people who seem to have absolutely no regard about what's appropriate to bring up and what isn't. *Far* too many of them try to casually bring up the car accident in some sort of fucked up hope that it'll prompt Bucky to talk about it. Bucky's never been completely sure just how many people in his family knew about that, and he'll never want to ask, but he sure as hell knows that he definitely *doesn't* want to talk about it. Not tonight – not with them.

Steve is a fucking life saver. Every time he notices how flustered Bucky's getting – how anxious his body language is starting to become, despite the strained smile he's forcing – Steve will swoop in somehow and change the subject. Sometimes it's by sticking out his hand and cutting in to introduce himself; others, with a question about *whoever's* talking to them that'll steer the focus off of Bucky for a few minutes. He holds Bucky's hand as often as physically possible, to give Bucky an anchor. God knows that he needs it; he keeps Steve's hand squeezed in a vice grip hard enough to nearly cut off circulation. Steve never asks him to ease up. He holds Bucky's hand just as tightly.

Dinner provides a sort of reprieve from the peanut gallery. Because they're seated with the immediate family, things are far more comfortable and familiar. They all make easy conversation; Bucky, with Steve to his left and Rebecca to his right. The food is delicious, and for the duration of the entire meal, Bucky's left hand is hidden beneath the silk table cloth so he can continue to thread his fingers with Steve's.

It's an easy giveaway to judge his stress level based on how desperately he's holding Steve's hand. Right now, his grip is far more relaxed, though still just as adamant about not letting go. Bucky's much more in his element when he feels it's just him and his family again, but he still needs Steve to stay by his side. Steve has no intention of going anywhere, though, and Bucky knows it. Whether it's brushing his thumb back and forth over Bucky's knuckles as a soothing gesture, or giving him a sympathetic smile, or a light kiss on the cheek, or leaning in to quickly and quietly whisper "I love you" into his ear... Steve makes sure that Bucky knows he doesn't have to do this alone.

Of course, it's around dessert that Bucky feels himself getting tense again. All he does is glance around to see where the DJ's set up, and that's when he notices his cousin, Jason, sitting a few tables away – scowling at him with disgust. Bucky had been wishing that he'd be one of the people who for whatever reason chose not to show up. Averting his eyes quickly, he finishes his food in silence; focusing on fighting the urge to check if Jason's still staring.

Steve squeezes his hand. "You okay?" he whispers, frowning.

Bucky gives him a weak attempt at a smile and nods. "M'fine..." Wiping his mouth with his napkin, he puts down his fork, clears his throat softly, and asks, "Hey mom? Is there any time before you guys make your speeches that I can run out for a smoke?"

"Yeah sure, sweetie," Annie replies. "We got, uh... ten minutes?"

"Ten minutes, thereabouts," Mark confirms, nodding.

Bucky nods, backing his chair up and rising to his feet. "Okay, I'll be right back," he says. He only needs to glance to Steve once for the blond to take his cue, politely excusing himself and following Bucky to the nearest exit. Once they're outside, Bucky finds a place to sit as he pulls out his pack from his inner breast pocket and fumbles to get his lighter working. Steve asks him again if he's okay, rubbing a circle around his back.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm good," Bucky starts to lie. Staring off, he chuckles ruefully and then shakes his head. "Actually, I'm freaking out a bit. M'not used to doing big crowds like this anymore. They just ask too many fuckin' questions." He sighs, rubbing his face before keeping his chin propped up in his hand. Looking over to Steve, he asks, "How about you? You holding up alright?"

That's the other thing; the thing that Bucky didn't know how to warn Steve about. Most of the people in his family didn't actually know about Bucky's sexuality, because he was never close enough to any of them to care. His family supports him and sees no problem in it – and to be fair, a lot of the people Steve's been introduced to tonight didn't seem to bat an eye at it either.

But not *all* of them. There were definitely a few who hadn't been prepared for Bucky to show up out of the blue with a *boyfriend* attached to his arm... Definitely a few who Bucky should've expected were closet homophobes; casting Steve wary expressions until they had their suspicions confirmed. Then that look of disapproval on their faces only *grew*. Bucky knows that their opinions are worthless and he shouldn't give a rat's ass about them. But they're still uncalled for, and they still hurt, so he feels even worse that he's subjecting Steve to that same level of unnecessary scrutiny.

One thing that Steve feels strongly about is equal rights issues. He stands up for his community and walks with an even *prouder* stride when in the face of a bigot. Steve's a lot less secure in himself than everyone else seems to understand, but one thing he's *never* felt he should apologize for is his sexuality. Growing up small and sick? That makes him embarrassed. Feeling ugly for most of his life? That, too. Growing up gay? That was always the one thing about himself – from the stories Bucky's heard over the years – that he never let anyone else try and bully him for. More importantly, it's something he doesn't tolerate *others* being put down for.

So it's not all that surprising when Steve responds by shrugging; lips turning up into another warm, supportive smile. "I'm fine," he answers honestly, knowing exactly what Bucky's referring to. "It's not the first time I've gotten looks, and it ain't gonna be the last. That shit doesn't bother me – as long as they leave you out of it, I won't have any problems. And hey, not all of them were bad. Your mom's friend... What's her name?"

"Julie," Bucky says with a laugh, already knowing who Steve's talking about. Bucky thought her eyes were going to fall out of her head when she first laid them on Steve. Despite being thirty years older than Steve and *married*, she's been making an embarrassing display of trying to flirt with him ever since.

"Yeah, Julie! Sweet lady," Steve jokes. "She seems nice."

"She *seems* like she's willing to make a deal with the devil to get you someplace private," Bucky teases, before taking a long drag of his cigarette.

"Too bad for her then, huh? 'Cause I only got my eye on *one* guy here."

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“Oh yeah?” Bucky replies, playing along. He ashes his smoke and tilts his face over to Steve with a tiny smirk. “Who’s that?”

Steve keeps his stare for a few seconds. Then he looks away and jokes, “The *bartender* – I mean, he’s been givin’ me the eye all night. You think if I tip him well, he’ll--?” Bucky punches his arm with a chuckle, and Steve drops the act, wrapping him up against him. They sit in silence while Bucky keeps sucking through his smoke, his head on Steve’s shoulder as they stare ahead at the building and watch everyone through the window. Steve eventually asks, “So... what about the guy with the resting bitch face over at that table near the cake? He anyone I should be worried about?”

Bucky tenses at the same time that he sighs and straightens back up. Unable to keep from scowling, he drops his gaze down to the ground. “That’s Jason, one of my cousins. He’s a dick,” he mutters.

“How so?”

“I dunno, he’s just never liked me much. Always was fine with Becca, but seemed to hate me from the get-go,” Bucky explains, waving his hand dismissively. “I don’t think he ever saw me as an actual member of the family. Oh! And he’s also a *huge* homophobe, so he’s probably less than thrilled about me bringing you here,” Bucky jokes sardonically. “He found out back when I had my first boyfriend – y’know, when everyone posted everything on Facebook. For a good four months after that, his favourite nickname for me was Fagatron. Charming, right?”

Steve isn’t laughing. He’s not even chuckling. The more Bucky’s talking, the harder his jaw seems to be setting, until he has to look away. He nods to himself, seeming like he’s lost in thought. “Hmm... Yep. Very charming,” he replies flatly. Suddenly worried that Steve’s about to storm in there and rip the guy’s head off his shoulders, Bucky turns towards him and places a hand on Steve’s knee.

“But hey, that was a long time ago,” he says, as if trying to rectify the situation. “And he got in shit for it anyways once my mom found out. We haven’t even spoken in, like, four years anyways. So it’s fine, okay?”

Steve covers Bucky’s hand with his own. At first, the smile he gives him is tight, but then he relaxes and assures Bucky, “Don’t worry, I won’t say anything if he doesn’t. I’m here for *you*. I know any added drama isn’t gonna help.”

Bucky nods. He knows that he can trust Steve, that he wouldn’t instigate a fight. If anything, Steve’s not that person anyways – he’s the one who’ll stand up against an asshole and not back down if he’s defending what’s right, but not outright *look* for confrontation. Really, it’s Jason that Bucky’s still on edge about. The way he’d been glaring at Bucky from across the room definitely gave the impression that he had a few choice words he wanted to say.

They head back inside in time for his parents’ speeches. They thank everyone for coming; make a schpeel about how important family is, and how great it is to have so many familiar faces back in one room. Annie tears up when she dedicates a good five minutes to talking about her children and how proud of them she and Mark are, and when Bucky notices Rebecca trying not to cry, he takes her hand in his and holds it until she’s done fanning away any potential tears, insisting that she’s okay.

Bucky almost chokes up when his parents unexpectedly bring Steve into the speech as well. Hearing them say, “Welcome to the family,” is what does it for him. The way Steve glances over at him with a tiny smile of his own and his baby blues slightly wet is only another nail in the coffin. He’s thankful that Mark jumps in and makes a joke to get everyone laughing, Bucky included, otherwise he might’ve actually cracked.

His favourite part, he thinks, is when his parents start talking about each other. There’s laughter, and people actually *do* start crying, as they tell stories from their years together – both touching and sometimes embarrassing. Above all else, what Bucky sees up there is exactly the same thing he saw earlier in the day: complete and unmatched love. They’re the reason Bucky believes in soulmates, because they’re all the proof that he needs.

Eventually, it’s impossible for him *not* to shed a few tears, which he swiftly wipes away. Rebecca’s crying a little more, too, so Bucky wraps his free arm around her and hugs her close again until the speech is over. All the kids get up the moment Annie and Mark walk back to the table to give them a big hug. Steve waits until it’s over, probably so he doesn’t seem like he’s intruding on their special moment. But then he’s likewise getting to his feet and approaching them, shaking Mark’s hand and then embracing Annie into a hug. Bucky doesn’t hear what she says to him, but Steve nods and then pulls back, looking into her eyes with a smile as he replies, “Thank you... And I will. I promise.”

Bucky doesn’t think to ask about it until later on, once the tables have been pushed aside and the dancing’s started. Steve’s not the best dancer, and Bucky hasn’t really slow danced with anyone since high school, but all the same, he finds himself taking Steve’s hand and *finally* agreeing to one song after about the twentieth time of Steve asking him. They both have one arm wrapped around the other’s lower back and their other hands held together just below shoulder level. Bucky tries not to think about all the eyes that might be watching them, instead focusing his attention on the way Steve’s looking at him. Unlike Bucky, Steve doesn’t look like he gives a damn about what anyone else might be thinking. It makes it easier for Bucky to relax.

“You havin’ a good time?” Steve asks.

Bucky nods. “Yeah... Yeah, I am. Much more than I thought I would, to be honest. I haven’t exactly been looking forward to this over the last few months. I mean, no offense to my parents--”

“It’s okay, Buck, I understand,” Steve interrupts, chuckling. “You weren’t looking forward to comin’ alone.”

“Yeah... I’m glad I’m here now, though,” Bucky admits, voice quieting; eyes still glued to Steve’s.

“I’m glad I’m here, too.”

He smiles, and Bucky smiles back. They touch their foreheads together (Bucky definitely feels people staring now), and then he asks, “What’d my mom say to you earlier anyways?”

“Hmm?”

“When you hugged my mom,” Bucky clarifies, “she said something and you promised you would...?”

“Oh,” Steve says, suddenly grinning to himself. Closing his eyes, he exhales a chuckle and then leans his head away. “She told me that the whole family loves me and then asked me to take care of you. I assume she means when we head back home.”

Bucky’s own smile grows. His mom *would* say something like that. Biting his lip, he looks off and nods, humming quietly. When he looks back to Steve, he says, “Better not let her down then.”

“I won’t.”

“I can be quite the handful,” he playfully warns.

“You’re worth it,” Steve retaliates.

Bucky’s cheeks warm with a blush. “For all you know, that uh... might’ve been a lifetime commitment you just made for her. She’s pretty stubborn, y’know...”

“Buck...” Steve lets go of Bucky’s hand to frame the side of his face. “You don’t have to try and convince me to stick around. I’ve already made my choice. You’re it for me.” Bucky’s pulse thuds away as his face burns even hotter at the affection. He doesn’t even have a response – he’s too caught up in getting captivated by Steve, as is always the case – so Steve gets a lopsided smile and whispers, “I’m gonna kiss you now.”

“Okay...” Bucky dumbly mumbles. Steve starts to lean in, when they both hear a bitter scoff off to their right. Turning to glance at the source of the sound, they see Jason striding by with a beer in hand. Steve lets go of Bucky completely and straightens, zeroing his sights on him. “Excuse me,” he calls out, sounding far too polite to be believable.

Jason has to be drunk already, judging by the way he swivels a bit too much when he spins around. His demeanour is nothing but a cocky arrogance; his intoxicated gaze swerving from Steve to Bucky scornfully. “What – you talking to me?” he asks with a sneer.

“Yeah, c’mere for a moment,” Steve encourages, curling his index finger a few times. Jason, in his current state, doesn’t seem to realize just how *big* Steve is until he takes a scoffs under his breath and then takes a few steps – Steve meeting him halfway. Then his face is no higher than Steve’s collar bones, and Bucky sees him blink a few times, like he realizes he’s now face to face with the human equivalent of a brick wall.

Bucky’s completely tense; would probably say something to stop this if everything wasn’t happening so quickly. If his cousin takes a swing, Bucky won’t hesitate to jump in himself, even if Steve can handle himself. A few people around them notice, too, but for the most part, the party continues on around them, completely unphased. Jason looks up at Steve uncertainly but keeps his features level. Just as he opens his mouth to say something, Steve smiles and asks, “We’re not gonna have a *problem* here, now are we?”

It’s the single most satisfying thing in the world when Jason’s mouth opens and closes a few times, before his sobriety catches up with him *enough* for him to realize that this is a fight he’s not going to possibly win. He looks like he’s absolutely seething as he swallows down his argument and forces himself to bite back, “Nope. We’re not.”

Steve's smile stays even as he replies, "Oh, good." And then it tapers off, his expression growing more serious as he adds, "'Cause I don't like problems. You have a good night." His tone is still so calm, that paired with the look on Steve's face, even *Bucky* sees how intimidating he looks right now. He can't recall if he's ever seen Steve like this, and call Bucky weird, but it's actually attractive as fuck. Steve doesn't even give Jason the chance to back off, either; *he's* the one to turn and stride straight to Bucky, taking his hand and muttering, "C'mon."

They make their way to the patio door, where Bucky follows Steve back outside. Bucky can't take his eyes off of him – Steve's always been the epitome of cheeriness, so to see him take control like that and assert himself as someone *not* to fuck with is like realizing that Steve actually does have a darker side to him. When they finally come to a stop, Bucky's glad that no one else is around because he blurts out, "I wanna fuck you so bad right now," at the exact same time that Steve sighs with a tired smile and says, "Sorry about that – wait, what?"

"Huh?"

"You said--"

"What'd *you* say?"

"I said I was sorry," Steve laughs.

"Oh..."

"And *you* said...?"

"That I wanna fuck you," Bucky finishes with embarrassment, knowing that Steve heard him full well. "Sorry."

He gets pulled into a hug, Steve still chuckling. "I don't like getting like that," his boyfriend admits, "but I'm glad you found it a turn on. I'll keep that in mind." Before Bucky's brain can take that suggestion and start running away with potential fantasies of Steve acting like that with him in bed, Steve's already pulling away so he can take Bucky's face in his hands. "Are you alright?" he asks.

"Yeah, I'm good. That was actually tame compared to what I was expecting, so... It's fine, really."

Steve nods, momentarily looking solemn again, before stroking Bucky's cheek with his thumb and getting a small smile. "Anyways, where was I?" he asks, mirth sparkling in his eyes. "I feel like we were in the middle of something."

"Hmm, I dunno," Bucky says, playing along. "You might've been about to kiss me."

"Was I? Hmm... You think I wouldn't forget a thing like that."

And then Steve leans in, pressing his lips lightly to Bucky's. He's glad he's got Steve's hands on his face because without them, Bucky thinks he could very well up and float away every time they kiss. It's innocent and lasts only a few seconds, but it's still perfect. "That's right," Steve says, still close enough that his breath washes over Bucky's face and warms his skin. "Could never forget this. Stupid me."

“Stupid you,” Bucky echoes, lifting a hand to the back of Steve’s head to pull him back in. This time when their mouths meet, it’s more insistent, deeper. It draws a tiny sigh from Steve’s lungs, and Bucky hungrily swallows the sound. His other arm wraps around Steve’s back and tugs him close so their bodies are flush together. Something Bucky’s quickly learned over the last two days is that it’s never close enough. He always wants even more of Steve, as if direly needing to make up for all the years he’s missed with him. Bucky isn’t sure if this desire’s only so strong because everything’s still fresh between them, but something in his gut says that it won’t. Bucky will always want him this badly.

“Hey, hey, easy,” Steve winds up breathing when Bucky practically grinds up against him. He breaks the kiss, exhaling a chuckle, but his lips are slightly swollen and his own pupils are dilated when Bucky gets a good look at them. Steve drops his stare to look down Bucky’s body and then back up, gathering Bucky’s hands into his own and then lifting them between their faces. “Gotta stay golden,” he says regretfully, kissing Bucky’s knuckles. “Just for a little longer, okay? We’ll be back at the hotel soon.”

Bucky sighs and nods in agreement, much as he’d like to argue. The blood rushing south to his cock is making it a little hard to think, but he’ll do his best to keep it together until then. “Kay...”

Steve senses Bucky’s plight – seems to be feeling it, too – so he tries to distract him by glancing back to the building and then stepping away so he can stretch out his hand. “Dance with me again?”

From inside, Bucky can hear the beginning chords of John Hiatt’s *Have a Little Faith In Me* start to play, but outside like this, it’s muffled. “We can hardly hear the music,” he replies, but he’s incapable of masking his smile.

Steve shakes his head; keeps his hand out to him, palm up. “I don’t care, dance with me.”

He may roll his eyes harmlessly, but Bucky winds up taking Steve’s hand anyways, because he knows he always will. He laughs with surprise when Steve grins and then immediately tugs him over, making Bucky nearly lose his footing. This time, instead of doing things the traditional way, they both wrap their arms around each other’s waists and dance like that. For the first few lines, they share the song in silence; let whatever they’re thinking be translated in their eyes. But then the lyrics catch up to Bucky and strike a deeper chord in him, and he lets his head tip forward so he can touch his forehead to Steve’s again. Closing his eyes, they move in slow circles while he loses himself in the words, and the way Steve’s steady breathing makes for the perfect background music.

When your secret heart cannot speak so easily, come here darlin'. From a whisper start to have a little faith in me. And when your back's against the wall, just turn around and you will see... I will catch, I will catch your fall, baby. Just have a little faith in me...

“This should be our song,” Steve softly suggests when it’s almost over.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. If you want, I mean.”

Bucky smiles, opening his eyes to stare adoringly at his boyfriend. “You’re a bit of a traditionalist, aren’t you?” he teases. “A romantic a heart? I wasn’t sure people like you existed in real life.”

“Too cheesy?” Steve asks, narrowing his eyes with amusement.

Bucky shakes his head. “No. I like it.”

“I like *you*,” Steve quips, kissing the tip of Bucky’s nose. “*Love* you, even. I’m glad you’re alright with it, though, ‘cause I plan to romance the fuck out of you from now on.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. Something tells me you haven’t been spoiled in a long time, maybe even ever. I’ve been known in the past to be a bit of a Nicholas Sparks when it comes to cheesy, romantic gestures.”

Bucky laughs. “I *hate* those books.”

“Yeah, me too,” Steve agrees, “but the comparison’s still pretty bang on. Tell me to bring it down a notch if it ever becomes annoying.”

“I highly doubt that’ll ever be a problem,” Bucky admits, because he really doesn’t. On the contrary, the idea of being doted on and treated like that by Steve has a fresh batch of butterflies fluttering around in his stomach. He can’t wait to be able to do those sorts of sappy things for Steve, too. He hopes he’s not too rusty after all these years.

For a moment, Steve doesn’t say anything. But then he’s pulling away to reach into his jacket as he muses, “Well actually, *speakin’* of which--”

When there’s suddenly a huge commotion from inside.

Both their heads snaps in the direction of the noise. They have no way of seeing what’s happening, but there’s a lot of yelling and people talking – and the loudest person seems to be *Becca*. Sparing each other a reluctant glance, Steve pulls his hand back out from his jacket and the two run towards the venue. It’s chaos from the second they get inside. Near the door, there’s a circle of a couple dozen or so people.

In the center, Mark and another of Bucky’s cousins, Luke, work to pull Rebecca back and keep her contained. On the other end of *her* outburst is none other than Jason, who looks pretty stunned as he tips his head back and gets his face dirtied up by the blood streaming from his nose. Bucky’s aunt Helen and a few others are trying to dab at him with napkins, but Bucky’s focus is too preoccupied on his sister. She’s still shouting profanities at Jason, even as the men finally succeed in removing her from the crowd.

They run over to them. “What the hell happened?” Bucky shouts, going straight for Rebecca and gripping her shoulders protectively. He shoots an outraged glance to Jason, ready now to go lunging for him *himself* if the prick even *tried* to start anything with her. Steve instead addresses Mark, asking, “Everything alright?” in a much more level-headed tone.

“No! Everything is *not* ‘alright’!” Becca fumes.

“I don’t – I don’t know,” Mark says with a sigh. “I didn’t see what happened, I just got here in time to pull her back.”

“Everything’s *not* ‘alright’!” she shouts again. Pointing Jason’s way, she screams so everyone can hear, “That fucking asshole called Bucky a faggot! Yeah, he was talking and saying shit and called him a ‘cock-sucking faggot’! Said some shit about taking him a few miles over and getting him lynched – you fucking fucker--!” She cuts herself off in an attempt to run for him again, but now Bucky also blocks her way and wrangles her back.

“I never said that!” he hears Jason argue, having the nerve to sound incredulous.

“Yes, you did!” Rebecca shouts back.

“I didn’t fucking *mean* it!”

Bucky glances nervously Steve’s way. He’s likewise got a hand on Rebecca’s arm, and keeps calmly repeating, “Hey, easy – easy there. It’s fine, Becks, *easy*.” But when he looks to Bucky quickly, he can see the fire in Steve’s eyes. Bucky’s so preoccupied with making sure his sister doesn’t go putting the guy in the hospital – much as he’d deserve it – that there isn’t even the chance for Jason’s words to sink in and do any damage yet.

“What did you call my son?” they suddenly hear Annie ask. Most of the soft murmurings of the crowd fall silent as their mom stands a few feet away, staring at her nephew in shock. Even Rebecca stops fighting her restraints. They watch as the small circle parts *instantly* to give her room to approach Jason. He still hasn’t answered – still looking shitfaced but now *definitely* looking a hell of a lot less tough – so Annie demands again, “*What* did you call my son?”

Mark lets go of Becca and joins her. Jason looks between them, visibly shrinking in his cowardice. “I... I didn’t...”

“You think you can come here... to *our* party... and call *my* son a cruel, vicious thing like a ‘faggot’?” she angrily asks, voice rising.

Mark puts his hands on her shoulders to ground her, but his likewise sounds like he’s trying not to snap when he says in a low voice, “The next time you even *think* about joking about threatening Bucky’s safety, I will have you arrested. Do you understand?”

“Your mother raised you better than that!” Annie shouts.

Helen lifts her hand, eyes wide. “Annie,” she interjects, like she’s trying to be some sort of reasonable third party. “Mark... He’s been drinking, he didn’t mean--”

“That’s not a fucking excuse!” Ben shouts, sounding outraged. Bucky hadn’t even realized he was there. Dread makes his chest tight when he realizes that he doesn’t know who’s watching Amy. He doesn’t want *Ben* to see this, let alone *her*.

“I don’t give a *damn* how much he’s been drinking, Helen,” Mark snaps, his tone now with an edge.

“If you think that’s a justifiable excuse for your son making *death threats* about ours, then maybe part of the problem has to do with his *parenting*,” Annie adds.

“Steve,” Bucky says under his breath. They need to get his siblings out of there.

Steve nods, wrapping Rebecca up under his arm. “C’mon,” he tells her, reading Bucky’s mind. “Let’s go outside.”

“I wanna *stay*,” Becca argues through grit teeth. “I wanna kick his fucking ass.”

“Rebecca, *no*.”

“You’re just gonna stand there and let him talk shit about Bucky like that!?”

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“Becks, it’s *fine*, I’m *fine*,” Bucky cuts in, pulling her from Steve so he can wrap her under his arm himself. “Mom and dad are taking care of it; Steve knows he’s doing me better by staying with me. C’mon, do you really want Ben and Amy to see this?”

She glares at him, bouncing on the balls of her feet as she opens her mouth a few times, always shutting it shortly after. However, no arguments come out, and within seconds, her shoulders sag with a sigh, as the confrontation between their parents and their aunt continues. “No,” she admits. “*Fine*, let’s go.” Bucky leads her out of there while Steve grabs Ben. When they join them outside, Bucky’s told that Amy was taken to one of the rooms upstairs by a family friend to colour while things got sorted out.

Becca’s still so pissed that Bucky finds himself pulling out one smoke for himself, and then another for her, muttering to her and Ben from under his breath, “Don’t tell mom.” He knows that his sister secretly smokes here and there back in Indiana, but he’s never encouraged it (hypocritical as that made him). This seems like the time for an exception, though.

They don’t make much conversation at first – mostly, they all seem to take turns asking each other if they’re okay. Ben and Rebecca agree that Jason’s an asshole who they never really liked anyways. Steve winds up lightening the mood after a few minutes by pulling Rebecca to his side and praising her, “Looks like everyone was right: I *definitely* don’t wanna go a few rounds with this girl!”

She smiles in spite of the situation, and Bucky asks, “You seemed to get him pretty good. What’d you do – just straight up punched him in the nose?”

“Well *yeah*,” she replies, smile dropping. “What else was I gonna do? I heard him say that and it was like, *yeah, fuck that*.”

“What a piece of shit,” Ben mutters by their side.

“You didn’t have to do that for me, you know,” Bucky tells her.

Her eyes widen indignantly, giving him a look. “Um, yeah I did. You’re my brother, Bucky – I’m not about to let *anyone* say shit like that about you.”

“Atta girl,” Steve says. Bucky feels like he should be telling him that they shouldn’t encourage her like that, but he can’t bring himself to say it. Maybe it’s immature of him, but the fact that they care about him that much makes him feel proud. He knows he’d have done the same thing if he heard someone insulting Rebecca, or anyone else in his family. Clearly it runs in their genes.

They’ve already pitched their smokes by the time their parents emerge and come over to them. Annie goes straight for Bucky and pulls him into a hug, despite Bucky assuring her that he’s fine. Mark wraps Rebecca into his arms and asks how she’s doing, before checking in with Ben. Given the circumstances, it’s not all that surprising when they wind up telling Becca that they’re proud of her for what she did.

“Just no more fisticuffs,” Mark jokes. Annie laughs between sniffles, wiping away the tears she must’ve let herself shed on the way outside. “You ever hear anything like that again, you come and tell us,” he says.

“No promises,” Rebecca replies, “but I’ll try.”

“Honey, are you *sure* you’re alright?” their mom asks again, cupping Bucky’s face. “Helen left with Jason; we told him to leave. That’ll be the last time we let him anywhere near you again, I promise.”

“Yes mom, I’m fine. I appreciate it, though.”

“It was our fault,” she says with a sigh. Looking to Mark, she continues, “We should’ve thought of that when we sent out the invitations. He should’ve never been invited.”

“Mom, this wasn’t your fault,” Bucky insists, shaking his head. “You had enough goin’ on; I get why it wasn’t something that came to mind.”

“You couldn’t have known he’d act like that, ma’am,” Steve adds.

She nods, still looking guilty, which in turn, makes *Bucky* feel guilty, even though he knows he didn’t do anything wrong. This was supposed to be his parents’ night. Giving her another hug, he tells her, “Don’t let this ruin the night, okay? I want you to march back in there and have a dance with dad. Alright? I want you to have fun.”

“What about you?” she asks, looking between him and Steve. “Do you think you’ll come back in, or is it time to call it a night?”

He looks to his boyfriend, and Steve gives a small nod when he reads Bucky’s expression. Giving his mom a tired smile, he answers, “I’ll stay if you want me to.”

“What do *you* wanna do, sweetie?” she pushes. “None of us will mind if you want to head over to the hotel early, not after that. We won’t be offended – I know *I* certainly won’t be.”

“It’s alright, James,” Mark chimes in to show his support.

Bucky bites his lip and then nods, casting his eyes downward. “Yeah... Okay. We might head out, if you’re sure you’re okay with it. I think I got enough party out of me to last at least a few months.”

“Okay,” Annie says, “you got your key card?”

“I’ve got that, ma’am,” Steve says, patting his pants pocket.

“Alright, come here.” She wraps Bucky up into another hug, telling him that she loves him and they’ll all meet the next morning for breakfast in the lobby before their check-out time. Bucky works through the rest of his family, hugging each one and saying goodnight, as well as asking his dad to give Amy a kiss for him. When he sees his mom giving Steve a hug from his peripherals, he hears her tease, “Also, you can stop calling me ‘ma-am’ at any time, y’know. It’s making me feel old.”

“Sorry,” Steve chuckles. “Mrs. Proctor?”

“How about just *Annie*?” she answers. There’s a small pause, and Bucky’s stepping back over to them just as she adds, “Or, I mean, *mom* works, too.”

Steve’s face busts into a grin, and Bucky exclaims, “*Okay*, that’s our cue to exit; goodnight, everyone!” Everyone laughs as he grabs Steve’s hand and leads him away, his face burning. The sweet moment between them all *would* be ruined by his mom making a joke like that, even if Steve doesn’t seem to mind. They call a cab, even though the hotel is no more than a fifteen-minute walk away. They’re quiet during the short ride; Bucky’s head on Steve’s shoulder and Steve’s leaning against his own.

Now that he has a moment alone with his thoughts, the stress of the whole night starts to catch up with him, and Bucky finds himself unexpectedly exhausted... Anxious... Also a little hurt... Steve keeps stroking his knuckles with his thumb and kissing his hair, but Bucky just wants to get into their room so he can fall face-down onto the bed and sleep all the negative feelings away. Or throw something. Or shout into his pillow until the anxiety's all gone – whichever winds up happening first.

By the time they're finally unlocking the door and heading into the room, Bucky's tie feels too tight. He'd been trying so hard at the venue to push everything down and stay calm from the moment he got there, that it's like everything is now trying to crawl to the surface. Bucky doesn't *want* to end the night off with a panic attack, so while Steve shuts and locks the door behind them, Bucky's crossing the room and yanking himself free of his jacket and that stupid tie. It feels way too hot in there, even though when he checks the thermostat on the wall, the temperature seems fine. Maybe he just needs a window open; some fresh air for a few more minutes before he turns in.

He stands by the window, letting his forehead press against the screen as he stares out at the nightlife of the town in front of him. They're fairly high up – this hotel's the biggest one in the area – so the view is relaxing. He remembers to take slow, deep breaths, no matter how wound up his body's feeling. From behind him, he hears Steve remove his own jacket, tie, and shoes. A few seconds later, he's behind Bucky, palming his shoulders and then running his hands down Bucky's arms.

"Are you okay?" Steve asks gently. It feels like that's all *anyone's* been asking him for the last half hour. Bucky closes his eyes and stiffly answers on autopilot once again, "Yep."

Steve presses a small kiss to Bucky's nape. "Really, Buck... Are you okay?"

Bucky's hands tighten their grip on the window frame. Jaw tense, he takes another deep breath and pushes it out. "I'm *fine*," he stubbornly insists, thankful that his tone is as calm as he's trying to convince himself to be.

Another light kiss against the back of his neck. "Bucky, talk to me," Steve encourages quietly. "That's what I'm here for. You don't have to bottle things up no more. I know you're not okay right now, baby."

"If I try to talk about it, I might lose it," Bucky confesses, having difficulty getting the words out. He just wants Steve to keep kissing him like that – to not realize how fucked up and all over the place Bucky still truly is... *Will be* for a long time to come... Yeah, he's been on cloud nine the past couple days, so he's been in a wonderful mood. But how he's doing right now? *That's* been the real him for the last six years: wound up, tense, and complete shit at filtering through his emotions and handling them properly. He's terrified of scaring Steve off so soon. He wants to learn how to get better, but he can't be alone to do it. *I need you*, he thinks.

"I'm right here," Steve whispers. Bucky didn't realize he'd spoken that aloud. Bucky squeezes his eyes shut tighter and bites out an apology, but Steve cuts him off gently, "Shh, don't... Never say sorry for how you feel. It's okay, baby, I'm stayin' right here. What can I do?"

Bucky's eyes open and he looks back out the window miserably. "I... don't know," he admits. He wishes he knew.

“Okay,” Steve says with a nod. Kissing the side of Bucky’s neck now, he brings his arms around Bucky so his fingers can start undoing the buttons along his shirt. “Is it about Jason?” he patiently asks. Bucky wants to deny it, but he nods. “Okay... Is it about everyone from earlier, too?” Again, Bucky nods. Once his shirt is opened up, Steve presses his hands to Bucky’s stomach and slide them to his sides, pulling him to Steve’s front protectively. “If it helps at all, I’m so proud of you for how well you did tonight, Buck,” Steve says, kissing the back of his jaw. “I know how hard that must’ve been... I know it’s not easy. It’ll get easier, though. You don’t gotta do this alone anymore.”

“I’m not who you think I am,” Bucky mutters self-deprecatingly. His eyes grow wet but he swallows it down with a scowl. “Sooner or later, you’re not going to be able to handle it.”

“No.”

“You’re not gonna love me anymore.”

“Bucky, *no*.” Steve turns his face so their eyes can meet. Steve looks completely serious; maybe a little saddened. “I know who you are, okay? I’ve known you for years, and I fell in love with you because of how amazing you are. You *are* amazing, Bucky. What can I say for you to believe that I’ll never bail on you?”

Bucky’s mouth twists up, his expression pinched up in pain. “I’m so fucked up,” he keeps arguing. “I don’t even know where to start anymore. I miss who I used to be.”

“You’re gonna find him again, Buck, I know you will. I’ll help you, every step of the way – I swear it. You haven’t lost him.”

“But--”

“And you’re not gonna lose me, either,” Steve interrupts. “I love you.”

“Steve, you don’t get i--”

“Shut up, I love you,” Steve mutters, shaking his head and silencing Bucky with a firm kiss. Bucky whimpers quietly against his mouth, his heart aching, but he finds himself reaching up the second Steve’s lips are on his and grabbing the back of Steve’s head to hold him closer. He wants to believe it, he really does. He hopes that someday he will. For now, he just needs Steve to make him forget about everything – the night, the stress, *everything* beneath the surface that those things bring back up for him... He just needs Steve to love him even though he’s broken.

They part their lips within seconds, Steve’s tongue delving into his mouth. Bucky’s brows pinch together with another low whimper, and then he’s spinning around long enough for Steve to palm his shoulders and push him back against the window. He’s got the glass surface against his back and Steve crowding his front, and he feels caged in, but it’s still not enough. His hands fly to Steve’s shirt to rip open each button; meeting every one of Steve’s kisses with the same conviction as he’s getting.

And the way Steve’s kissing him... It’s desperate and hectic in its own right; like Steve’s hurting to prove to Bucky exactly what Bucky means to him. Like he feels Bucky’s pain and it hurts his own heart... Like he can take it into his own hands and relieve Bucky from it for just a little while, if Bucky will let him. He claims Bucky’s mouth like he wants to own it, and all Bucky can do is let it tip open and closed in response and beat his tongue to Steve’s when Steve’s licking between his lips.

He opens up Steve's shirt while Steve pushes up against him and slides his hand down his outer thigh – rucking it up and grinding himself between his legs hard enough to steal a whine from Bucky's throat. After pulling the shirt off Steve's body, Steve nudges Bucky's head back so he can latch his mouth to the curve of his throat; kiss and suck and bite softly down to his shoulder and back up again, while his hands clumsily open Bucky's belt and get his fly down. Bucky's got blood rushing in his ears and his cock straining against his dress pants, and between ragged breaths and startled moans, it's like he's only able to put his hands on Steve for a *second* before Steve's grabbing his wrists and pinning them above his head.

Steve's eyes are heavy-lidded when he lifts his head long enough to seer Bucky with his gaze and burn him from the inside out. He crushes their lips back together, making Bucky's head knock against the window. His wrists are freed so they can grab at each other; Steve fisting his hands into Bucky's shirt and pushing it down his arms so he can shrug out of it. Bucky can barely breathe as Steve starts kissing noisily down his body until his knees are hitting the carpet. Everything's happening so fast and the fucking room is spinning – Bucky, feverish and lust-drunk – that before he even knows it, Steve's freeing his cock and sucking it into his mouth.

Bucky's jaw drops, stuttering over a soft cry. Steve holds his hips in his hands and bobs his head back and forth, breathing roughly through his nose as he works Bucky deeper and deeper into his throat. It's so intense so unexpectedly that Bucky finds his legs shaking within a minute, before his knees give out on him. Steve doesn't let that stop him. All he does is rise fast enough to stop Bucky from falling, before they crash over onto the bed and Bucky gets thrown onto his back. Then Steve's kneeling between his legs and swallowing Bucky down again.

Bucky clenches Steve's hair and gasps uncontrollably, his mouth permanently slackened. He's digging the back of his head into the mattress and arching on and off the bed as Steve teases him with his tongue and sucks him so fucking reverently that Bucky's convinced his dick was meant to *live* between his boyfriend's lips. He feels one of Steve's hands on his left knee, keeping that leg pushed open wider, while the other slides up his stomach, his chest, to the back of his neck...

Steve forces Bucky's head up, tilting his chin to his chest. "Look at me, Buck," Steve pulls back to rasp. Bucky's eyes open and he groans at the sight. Steve's completely flushed; his baby blues even brighter from the glaze filming over his eyes. Steve bites his bottom lip with a tiny nod; whispers, "Watch me," and Bucky can only nod in return.

Steve's the prettiest fucking thing when he's got Bucky in his mouth. He's the pretty little fucking thing *always* – but the way his lips look all stretched like that, and the way he keeps his and Bucky's gaze locked as he sucks *up* and *down*... *Fuck*, he's such a picture. It's too much to stand, and Steve knows it. Maybe that's why he asked Bucky to look at him. It only feels like another minute or so until Bucky's nose is scrunching up and his breathing quickens.

He'd warn Steve that he's about to come, but he can't even form the words – and honestly, he bets that Steve's picked up on it anyways, because he picks that moment to free his mouth so he can stare up at Bucky and lick a single stripe from the root of his cock, all the way back up to the tip. He sucks him all the way back down with a little moan, like it's his way of giving Bucky permission.

Relief floods over him. With a sharp *Ah!* he unravels into Steve's mouth; forces himself to continue staring as he watches Steve's own eyes roll up and then close at Bucky's taste, nursing him through it and moaning quietly while he swallows it all down. A tiny droplet of his climax dribbles onto his stomach when Steve pulls away and lets his dick fall free. Steve moves quickly, coating Bucky's inner thighs with kiss after kiss until Bucky has to physically pull him up to meet his mouth.

They make out as they work to finish stripping each other out of the rest of their clothing, and once Steve's naked, he lets Bucky turn him onto his own back so Bucky can lean over him and jerk him off. They only break apart when Bucky makes a run over to the bag they'd dropped off when they all checked in earlier in the evening. Returning with the bottle of lubricant, Bucky throws Steve's legs over his shoulders and gets his own mouth on Steve's cock, distracting his noisy brain by losing himself in his boyfriend's shaky, endearing moans.

He's got two slick fingers buried inside of Steve's body, patiently working him open. Because they've been so used to fooling around at the cottage, Steve grabs for one of the pillows and habitually bites down onto it when he Bucky starts to tease his prostate. But they're *not* at the cottage, and Bucky's family isn't even in their own rooms yet. They're at a fucking hotel, and he doesn't give a shit about any of the other guests.

Staring up at him heatedly, he grabs the pillow and flings it across the room; curls his fingers unforgivingly and breathes, "*Oh, fuck...*" when Steve jolts and then tosses his head back, jaw dropping with a loud mixture of a whine and a shout when Bucky hits his sweet spot again. *Oh yeah*, Bucky can get used to this. He wants more – wants Steve to fucking *deafen* him. Quid pro quo is definitely in order, he thinks, so he focuses on doing nothing more than finger-fucking Steve's prostate... Watching Steve grip the headboard tight enough to get it groaning under the pressure, as he cries out *over* and *over* and whimpers *higher* and fucking *higher*...

Bucky needs him to come. He has to make Steve feel so good; need him like Bucky needs him. *Please*, Steve can't leave him; Bucky can be better. He can try – *please, I'll try so hard* – not just for himself, but so he can also be the person Steve deserves to have loving him. Steve must be blind, he must be living in fucking denial if he's loved Bucky this long and hasn't seen any reason to walk away. Bucky's sure it's there, though... His problems will be too much, and what if he doesn't recover fast enough? At what point will Steve reach his wits end and be unable to handle it anymore?

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"Come for me, Steve," Bucky's pleading. *I need you to come, I need you to feel good. I can make you feel good, I can – I can do right by you, and make you happy, and love you the way you should be loved; treated right, because you deserve it, you do. No one deserves it as much as you – you're so kind, you're so gentle, you're the greatest man*

I've ever known and I can't lose you. Please let me make you come, I'm scared, I'm scared, Steve, and I don't know how to be who you need me to be...

Steve continues to writhe, continues to shudder and choke on moans as his opening twitches around Bucky's fingers. He must be close, *oh please, yes--* "Come for me," Bucky begs again.

"Fuck me."

Bucky slows his movements but doesn't stop. "Yeah?"

"Yeah, yeah, c'mon, please," Steve says, nodding.

"Okay..." Bucky reluctantly pulls his fingers out and wipes them on the duvet. He crawls up the bed so he and Steve can resume kissing. With Steve's fingers framing his face, that's when it starts to feel like things begin to slow down. The urgency between them is still palpable, but their kisses grow less hectic now that Steve's got Bucky pressed to him again. Bucky still feels so fucking desperate – still feels like he's hurting inside – so he *tries* to speed things up again. Steve just keeps forcing them to slow, until his calmness feels like it's seeping into Bucky and making his body relax into the bed.

Steve seems so certain. Bucky doesn't know where this sudden shift in the air came from, but this is even more intimate than the animal-like, 'I need to fuck you *now*, and *fast*' vibe that'd been driving them up to this point. Bucky's questions get a few answers when Steve mutters between kisses, "I love you... I need you to believe me... I'm so sorry you've been hurting, baby, I'm sorry... I promise I'm not gonna do that, though. You're the only thing I want; that's never gonna change. I want you... *Buck...* You're the only one, okay? You're the only one..."

He understands now what Steve's asking for... That he wants Bucky to *make love* to him, rather than fuck him senseless. All the things he's saying – he's trying to tell Bucky that he's the only one Steve trusts to give himself up to like this anymore; that Steve will never want anyone else to have him again. His throat feels tight when he nods, getting as far as choking out, "I..." before his breathing hitches and he stops himself short before he starts to cry.

Taking the initiative, Steve presses another soft kiss to his lips and guides Bucky onto his back so he's hovering above him. Bucky keeps his eyes closed, even when Steve pulls away to find the bottle of lube, because he needs just a few more deep breaths to pull himself back together. He feels Steve taking his hand and placing the bottle against his palm; closing Bucky's fingers around it and then letting go to crawl back over him. Steve kisses his forehead, his temples, even over top his closed eyelids, and Bucky wishes again that he wasn't so broken. He hates how much Steve loves him when he doesn't deserve any of it. A kiss ghosts across his lips, Steve lifts a bit so he can gaze back down at Bucky's face, and that's when Bucky opens his eyes.

He's instantly left breathless.

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He isn't sure what it is right now, but Steve's *never* looked the way he looks at this moment. Yes, Bucky's seen him look like this a few times over the last couple days – hair messy, skin pink from his flush, eyes partially unfocused, lips bright red and slightly parted... But there's something there, in the way he's staring down at Bucky. It's pure,

raw vulnerability. He's Bucky's to take care of right now; that precious moment where the trust Steve has for him is screaming right at him, it's so naked on Steve's goddamn face.

He loves Bucky, and Bucky doesn't deserve it, but *still* he loves him anyway. He gives himself to Bucky in the most intimate way because he trusts Bucky with his life, and his body, and his fucking soul; knows Bucky won't hurt him, even if Bucky can't even trust that much of himself yet. And because of his own fucking walls, he'd been denying Steve that same level of trust. But it's there – it always has been, and suddenly, Bucky *wants* to be vulnerable. There's not a single other person on the planet that Bucky would give that to but Steve.

So he takes the bottle and – still staring up at Steve in awe – pushes it to his lover's chest. For a second, it doesn't click. But then Steve's brows furrow a little, and he covers Bucky's hand with his own so he can take the lubricant from him.

"You...?" Steve starts to ask.

Bucky's eyes search his. "Yeah," he breathes.

Steve's eyes grow wet, and when he lowers himself down and kisses Bucky again, Bucky knows in his heart that this is what he wants. He's scared – it's been so long – but Steve treats him like precious glass... stays draped over him so Bucky feels protected and trapped in that way he needs, while he helps Bucky accept one finger into his body, and then another.

It stings, just like he remembers, but Steve takes it so slow... Keeps an eye on his face even when Bucky's own are closed and he's whimpering in discomfort. He's breached and split open, and every thrust resonates in Bucky's heart. Steve covers his face in ginger kisses each and every time he worries that he's hurting him. Bucky can't even get the breath to use his words, but whenever he feels he can handle more, he'll nod, and Steve's always right there to give him what he needs.

It hurts to take Steve's cock at first. Bucky stays on his back through the prep, and by the time he's ready, he doesn't even want to move – he just wants to feel Steve inside of him, he *needs* it - *fuck, he needs it*... Steve holds himself up by his forearms so Bucky won't feel crushed, and right before he begins to push in, Bucky runs his hands along Steve's back, over his ass... Looks up at Steve, and Steve looks right back; brushes his mouth to Bucky's, and it's only when Bucky touches his bottom lip with his tongue and Steve meets it that their eyes close. Bucky trusts their bodies to say what he can't right now – that maybe, when this is all over, Steve will understand a little better just how much he means to Bucky.

There's stretching, then there's burning... Steve's much bigger than anyone else Bucky was ever with before, so the first few inches have tears prickling the corners of his eyes and a pained noise making his throat clench. Immediately, Steve stops; kisses his face more, even though Bucky's mouth is frozen open and he can't kiss back. It's overwhelming, both the discomfort *and* the need for more. As soon as it stops stinging so bad, he's swallowing a large gulp of air and touching his forehead to Steve's cheek. Using his hands to press down on Steve's ass, he signals that it's okay to keep going. They have to follow this system twice more before Steve's completely buried within him.

Something in Bucky snaps as soon as he feels Steve's hips pressing against him. Pride floods him – *he did it, he was able to take him* – but also something he can't process. Psychologically, everything within Bucky flies into overload. It's finally having let someone inside of him like this, but more than that, the fact that it's *Steve*. There's still some pain, but he remembers how incredible it feels to be so full. It's knowing that he's let himself open up and allowed someone else to see this side of him. It's fear, and love, and falling, and flying, and he and Steve are one fucking person right now and his heart bursts. Steve hasn't even had the chance to move yet and Bucky already begins to cry.

If it were with anyone else, they'd probably stop at this point; maybe freak out at Bucky's reaction. But Steve gets it. He can only imagine what this moment must mean to Bucky. So he doesn't pull out, nor does he ask if Bucky's okay. Instead, he holds the side of Bucky's face in one hand and kisses him... Kisses away the tears, the doubts, the *thank you* that Bucky wants to give him but can't voice... He starts to rock against him, keeping things shallow and letting Bucky adjust, and *it's amazing, Steve feels so fucking amazing*...

Nothing's more elevating than when he's able to *really* move, though. That's what feels the best – being oversensitive and completely aware of every *single* inch sliding out of him, and then taking over him again. It's having that stretch constantly lingering in the background the entire time, and forgetting who he is because right now, he's an extension of Steve's body. It's rediscovering what he sounds like when he's on his back like this, every moan or cry coming out wobbly and defenseless. It's feeling susceptible to *hurt* and somehow knowing that Steve won't let that happen.

"Buck," Steve will exhale from time to time, as they move together and Bucky's gradually able to grip Steve's ass and help rock him back and forth. Even when the desire to speed up makes Bucky feel like he's going to go crazy, Steve keeps it slow and steady. Bucky's thankful for it... Steve knows best right now; knows what Bucky needs... Knows that, in turn, he'll get what he needs, too. Every time he hears his name in that beautiful, breathless way, he'll whimper and capture Steve's lips again. He doesn't think he manages to get even one coherent word out the entire time.

His skin's misted in sweat by the time Steve wraps his fingers around Bucky's cock and strokes him in time with his thrusts. They stare into each other's eyes, Bucky's still shining around the corners, though he's not crying anymore. His brows are creased tightly in the center and his moans have died down. The world doesn't exist anymore... It's only them, only they exist, and Bucky trusts him so fucking much, and the only sounds that fill the room are the soft creaking of the bed and their heaving panting.

He's got Steve on him and Steve *in* him and Steve in his lungs and in his fucking *veins*, and Bucky will never deserve him, but he wants to. It feels too good, the way Steve's dick constantly impales him and teases his overstimulated rim with every little movement. It's been the better half of forty-five minutes at *least*, but it still feels like it's over far too soon when he feels himself stiffen painfully in Steve's hand. He makes sure he doesn't close his eyes when his orgasm hits him. This moment belongs to them, and he never wants Steve to forget it. There's so much he needs Steve to understand, and Bucky hopes this will give him an idea. With a helpless sound, he begins to come between their stomachs, and Steve looks absolutely *mesmerized* by him; hand continuing to wring Bucky's cock and strip his pleasure to the surface.

"Steve," Bucky whines brokenly, just as the ecstasy coursing throughout his body hits him a second, even stronger time. It's the first and only thing he's been able to say in an hour.

Steve's mouth twitches at the sound. Letting go of Bucky's cock, he grips onto him tightly and *finally* picks up his speed. Bucky's mouth falls further open at the sudden shift in sensations. He's still riding out his climax, and now Steve's practically drilling his ass as he gets closer to his own end. Bucky's legs are wrapped around the small of his back, fingertips digging between Steve's shoulder blades.

He clings to him and even tries to tilt his hips up to *meet* some of his thrusts. It hurts again but *fuck, it's so deep*, and Bucky sobs out a cry every time he's filled, until he finds himself biting down on Steve's shoulder with a wheeze. He hears Steve gasp at the sudden pain, but that seems to tip him over the edge. Moments later, he's moaning uncontrollably next to Bucky's ear and pumping him full of so much come that Bucky's already leaking with it before Steve's even finished.

Bucky's having trouble catching his breath with Steve slumped against him like this, but he doesn't want him to move. He doesn't want him to pull out. He doesn't want to be two separate people again just yet. He wants Steve to stay in him forever, so he can hold onto this feeling. Steve's shaking in his arms and continuing to gasp, long after it's over, but he lets Bucky turn his face and kiss away whatever air he has left in his lungs anyways.

When it becomes so much that Bucky actually feels like he could black out if they don't stop, *then* and only then does he let his head fall back to the pillow. "Can't breathe," he says. Steve blinks, concern flashing in his eyes, but when he makes to withdraw from him, Bucky doesn't let go. "No, don't, just..."

"Okay." Steve pushes himself up enough that Bucky can finally take a deep breath. Scanning his face worriedly, he asks, "Better?"

Bucky nods. "Yeah..."

"Are you okay?" Steve asks, pushing Bucky's stringy bangs from his forehead.

"Yeah," he whispers again. He is – he feels *perfect*. "Thank you..."

"You're welcome... Thank *you*, for trusting me enough to do that," Steve says. "Felt..."

"I know," Bucky murmurs, voice hoarse. "That was..."

"Yeah..."

"I just... I love you, Steve," Bucky tells him. He reaches up with a trembling hand and runs his fingers through Steve's hair, before trailing them down the side of his face and holding it.

Steve turns his face into Bucky's palm and kisses the center. "I know you do. If it's anywhere close to how much I love *you*, then I know you do, Buck."

"I don't want you to pull out yet," he admits. "You think we can just...? I mean, for a little bit...?"

"Of course, baby."

They stay that way for a while, kissing and whispering between each other; eventually, smiling, too. Bucky feels a lot more relaxed and leaps and bounds calmer than earlier. Though it's a fucking tragedy, he eventually lets Steve off of him so Steve can grab them a towel to clean up with. It's a non-smoking room, but Bucky breaks the rules by sticking his head out the window and burning through a much-needed cigarette while Steve brushes his teeth. Afterwards, Bucky does the same.

On his way back towards the bed, Steve peers over at him from his spot already beneath the covers and smiles. "You're so gorgeous," he says, propping his head up in his hand.

"Speak for yourself," Bucky replies, kneeling by their bag to grab his phone charger.

"Tie for best lookin'?"

"If you say so," he chuckles.

Steve pushes himself up into a sitting position. "Hey, would you mind grabbin' something from my jacket?"

"Hmm? Oh, yeah sure." Picking up the strewn coat from the floor, he looks to Steve for further instructions. He's told to grab what's in the inner breast pocket on the left-hand side. Curiosity gets the better of him, and spikes even *more* when his fingers touch something that makes a crinkly sound. When he pulls the item out of the jacket and gets a look at it, he laughs.

"A Ring Pop?" he asks with amusement, crawling into bed with it in hand. He knows he's missing *something*, but he's not exactly sure what. The only two-and-two he can put together is that it must be for him. A few years back, Bucky had had a four or five month period where he was obsessed with them; constantly had his index finger hooked in the loop of one, or sticking out of his mouth. The strawberry kind was his favourite, and sure enough, Steve gets brownie points for having remembered that also.

Steve smiles his way, watching Bucky tear open the packaging and eagerly pulling the candy out. "I grabbed that this afternoon at the grocery store," he explains. "I was gonna give it to you earlier, before shit went down."

Bucky looks from it to Steve, arching an eyebrow. "Why didn't you just give it to me when we left the store? I mean, what's the big deal about it?"

"Well..." Steve bites his lip, looking like he's thinking hard. Still smiling, he gestures to it and says, "It's more about what it *represents*."

"And... this represents *what* exactly?"

“Here.” Steve takes it from him and examines it for a few seconds. Then he takes Bucky’s hand, his smile turning goofy and boyish. “I had this big, huge, *completely lame* speech planned. Probably should’ve written it down somewhere--”

“Steve, are you about to propose or something with a *Ring Pop*?” Bucky blurts out, his eyes widening with shock. His pulse is off the charts all of a sudden, and part of him wishes he’d never asked that, but the other part of him can’t help it because *holy shit, is that what’s happening??*

Quickly, Steve’s own eyes widen and he squeezes Bucky’s hand, replying, “No, no! Sorry, I didn’t mean – okay, let me try this again.” He takes a deep breath. “*No*, I’m not proposing right now. But *yes*, this is... *sort of* a proposal. Kinda.”

“That clears things up,” Bucky jokes, still feeling lightheaded from the unexpected rush of adrenaline.

Steve chuckles quietly. “What this means is sort of like... a proposal to propose. ‘Cause the thing is... I love you. I mean, I’m *really* fuckin’ crazy stupid about you. I knew I wanted to marry you someday since the first time I met you.”

“... You did...?”

“Yeah... I know that might sound... *crazy*, or whatever, but I just knew,” Steve says. “Thing is, I wanna take things slow, do this right. You know?” Bucky nods, completely speechless. Steve keeps his stare and then nods, too. “I just, I want it to be perfect when the day comes that I actually ask you. But I don’t see the point in not bein’ honest with you about the fact that I *am* gonna ask you one day – it’s gonna happen, Buck. So if you don’t want that, you have plenty of time to change your mind.”

“I want that,” Bucky whispers. God damnit, he’s got tears in his eyes all over again.

Steve’s smile is shier at that, and it’s the most precious thing Bucky’s ever seen. “Okay... Great. I’m glad, ‘cause... Yeah, I wanna be super fuckin’ stereotypical with you; epically cheesy proposal, like somethin’ you’d see in the movies. Big house with a white-picket fence and two kids, maybe three. Or whatever you wanted,” he corrects himself quickly.

“And a dog,” Bucky says, reaching up to hold onto the back of his neck. “I want a dog.”

“A dog sounds good...”

“A German Shepherd. Maybe a French bulldog,” he keeps going.

Steve pulls him closer, still smiling as he stares back into Bucky’s eyes. “Or we can just have more than one dog and get both,” he suggests.

“Crazy dog dudes,” Bucky jokes. “Like crazy cat ladies. We’ll own five hundred dogs; pile them all in our soccer dad van.”

Steve laughs. “That sounds like the weirdest future ever.”

Bucky beams, pulling him in for a kiss. Right before he can, though, Steve pulls back and exclaims, “Wait, wait! One sec.” Giving him a silly smile, he holds up the Ring Pop between them, clears his throat, and asks, “Okay, so... Umm... James Buchanan Barnes, will you be my future fiancé?”

Playing coy, Bucky narrows his eyes and raises a brow, glancing down to the candy offering. Plucking it from Steve's fingers, he looks back up and teases, "God, you're such a dork," before tugging him in and answering Steve's 'proposal to propose' with a kiss.

Bucky Rogers, he can't help but think. *Bucky Barnes-Rogers... Bucky Rogers-Barnes...* What's nice about all of those options is that no matter which one he picks, it'll still be just as perfect. At least he has plenty of time to decide which one he likes best.

The thing is, Bucky knows the road ahead won't always be that easy. But he's willing to face it, and that's the point. It's easier knowing he's got Steve to help him get through it. His family, too, and his friends... Of course, he'll have his downs just as often as he has ups – truthfully, he might have a lot more downs for a while yet. He isn't sure where he'll have to start yet, but he will. Everyone starts *somewhere*. For Bucky, that somewhere is right here, right now, with his best friend kissing him back and a candy ring in his hand that promises a future filled with so much more than he let himself believe he could have.

And maybe he still doesn't fully believe that he deserves Steve Rogers or his love, but that's okay. In time, once he rediscovers how to properly love *himself* again, maybe he will. It'll be scary once it's time to face it, but for now, Bucky feels calm... Light... Hopeful. Maybe he's still dreaming, but if he never wakes up again, that'd be just fine.

The possibilities feel endless now, and mountains are so much easier to climb in dreams, after all.

****Chapter 6*: Epilogue(s)***

Bucky stands in the doorway of his room, drying his hair with his towel and just... looking. He has so many memories in this place. He remembers how it'd originally looked, that first summer his parents had bought the place. *Christ*, that had been all the way back in two-thousand. Fifteen years seems to have gone by both incredibly slowly, and in the blink of an eye.

His first kiss with a girl was at this place... Some cute brunette who'd been visiting with her family. Bucky was eleven, and his palms had been so sweaty. He remembers it being clumsy, all over the place... Started innocent, but then there was too much tongue. It might've been her first kiss, too. He can't recall her name, and he doubts that if they passed each other on the street *now*, that she'd even recognize him. Still, he also remembers that it'd been nice.

Lots of things have happened for him here. It seems to be the place where he always somehow discovers himself, in one way or another. After all, this was also the place where he came out to his parents about his sexuality... Right at the campfire, after Becca and Ben had gone to sleep. Amy hadn't even been born yet. That feels like another lifetime ago. He doesn't know what it *is* about this place for him. Maybe it's because the first time they pulled up, and his eyes – still so full of hope, hadn't been dimmed by the weight of the world yet – had widened at the sight of it, his first thought was that this place was *magic*. It has it ingrained into the wood; built in its very foundation.

Maybe Bucky never stopped believing in its magic. Perhaps he never stopped believing in magic at all.

What he knows is that he can feel the streams of the morning sunlight peering in from the window on his skin, and though everyone else is already downstairs, it's comfortably quiet. Serene. What Bucky knows is that on this day, for this moment, he feels hopeful. A little scared, too, *yeah...* And maybe also a little sad.

His bed is made, and he knows it's all in his imagination that it looks a little *lonely*, but he feels it anyways. It won't get touched again for another year, when Bucky can get the time off to come back. Steve's made sure that Bucky's promised himself of that. In fact, Steve thinks they should try to make a point to start coming back *every* year. Bucky thinks that sounds like a perfect idea. The air mattress is rolled up and leaning against the wall next to Steve's bag and Bucky's suitcase, which are packed; sitting off to his right.

It's still early. There's breakfast to be had and a few hours to spare before they'll be taking those bags and putting them back into the car. Then they'll hit the road – back to New York. Back to the real world. Bucky had been regretting this trip with every fiber of his being, but low and behold, now he can't help but think that it's the best thing that ever happened to him. He just wishes he could have a *little* bit more of it before he has to let it go.

Zippping open his suitcase, he finds extra room to shove in his towel before pulling out a fresh shirt to put on. It's still long-sleeved – *he actually didn't pack any t-shirts, not one* – but, after hesitating for only a few seconds, he finds himself pushing those sleeves up to his elbows. Unless in the privacy of his own apartment, Bucky hasn't worn a shirt like this since before the accident. It fills him with anxiety, *of course it does*, but he fights the urge to change his mind and tug them back down; hide himself again.

He's not about to kid himself – he knows that he won't be doing this right away once he's back home. It's not like Bucky's miraculously all healed now, not even close. He isn't ready to bare himself like that in public, and he isn't sure how long it'll take for him to get to that point. But this is a baby step he feels he needs to make, and one he's *capable* of making. They're his family, after all. He trusts them with his life, and he *knows* there's no need to hide from them.

He can smell bacon downstairs, and he decides with a tiny sigh that he should probably get the day started and go join everyone. When he walks into the kitchen, Becca's the one working on the bacon, while Steve pours himself a cup of coffee. They both turn to look at him. He notices Rebecca's gaze flicker down to his left forearm, prompting her eyes to widen just the slightest bit. However, just as quickly, she's looking back up to his face (if he hadn't seen it, he'd have never even realized she noticed), and to Bucky's surprise, she and Steve exclaim at the same time, "I must have the wrong house!"

Bucky blinks, not having expected *that* as his greeting. "Uh--"

"Sister!" Steve continues, trying to prompt him. Excitedly, he strides up to Bucky and pulls him into a hug. Bucky's laugh is muffled against his shoulder; laughs *again* when they both teeter slightly from Rebecca joining them and turning it into a group hug.

“Oh, I missed you so much!” she recites. “They waited up all night for you, you know.”

“It’s a... long way from West Africa?” Bucky says slowly, still chuckling. Is this *actually* happening right now? Being on the other side for a change makes him see just how *weird* of a thing this actually is for him and his sister. At the same time, it makes sense. His family has always been a weird bunch. That’s a big part of the reason why Bucky’s always fit in so well; why he loves them.

“Ohh, coffee,” Steve and Rebecca over-dramatically say at the same time. “I brought you something from *really* far away,” Steve adds.

“Really?” Becca and Bucky ask in sync.

From there, they recite the rest of the commercial altogether, as ridiculously and over-the-top as one could imagine they would. By the time they’re breaking out singing, “*The best part of waking up, is Folger’s in your cuuuup!*” Steve’s pretending to use a water bottle as a microphone, Rebecca has her eyes squeezed shut while she belts out the tune, and Bucky watches them with a grin. Steve was probably always meant to be a part of his family – he’s just as fucking strange as the rest of them.

“Anyways, good morning,” Becca says, giving Bucky’s shoulder a light shove before running back over to the stove to take the bacon out of the pan.

“Morning,” Bucky replies. Steve slides his arm around his waist and gives him a kiss on his temple.

“Mornin’, babe,” he quietly murmurs.

Bucky’s smile warms as he catches his boyfriend’s gaze. “Good morning.”

“You *actually* want a cup of coffee?” he asks, turning to the counter to grab the coffee pot.

Bucky nods. “Yeah, please.”

“Alrighty, comin’ right up. So, I thought that after we finish eating, I could run the bags down to the car, if you wanted?” Steve asks, glancing over his shoulder to him as he pours Bucky a cup.

Bucky hides his disappointment at the reminder. “Yeah, that’s fine,” he replies, throwing on a smile when Steve finishes making his coffee just the way he likes it, and taking it from him. “Thanks.”

“You guys aren’t leaving right away, are you?” Rebecca asks. Bucky’s surprised at the sliver of *worry* he sees in her expression when she glances to them. He knows his family’s likewise just as disappointed that he and Steve are leaving today.

“Why? You actually gonna miss me for a change?” he teases.

“Uh, *actually*, I just wanted to know how soon I could move my shit into your room. Didn’t mom tell you that it’s mine now?” she jokes back.

Bucky scoffs playfully, rolling his eyes as he takes a sip of his coffee. “Yeah, somehow I doubt that. After everything I’ve done in that room, there’s no way you’d wanna sleep in my bed.”

From behind her, Steve snorts over a laugh. Rebecca’s face gets grossed out as she groans, “Thanks, Buck, exactly the mental image I needed. You’re the best. Appreciate it.”

“Oh, you know I love ya,” Bucky sing-songs, throwing an arm around her and shaking her against him. “But no, we won’t be heading out until noon-ish, don’t worry.”

“Okay,” she says. Bucky can hear the unspoken ‘good’ that clearly follows. He and Steve share a smile – one that’s just a tad rueful – and then Bucky makes himself useful by setting the table. When everyone eventually piles in and says their ‘good mornings’, it’s like clockwork, the way Bucky watches each person notice on their own time that Bucky’s not covering his arms like he always does.

None of them outright comment on it, and he suspects it’s because they know better; understand how delicate of a thing this is. All the same, it overwhelms Bucky, the way they react to it. Ben makes the most nonchalant display, only blinking once when his eyes fall down to it. His facial expression doesn’t change, and he keeps on chatting like he’s completely unphased. But Bucky doesn’t miss the way that when he heads over to the table – his usual spot next to Rebecca – he mutters something Bucky can’t hear to their sister. Both their backs are to him, but from his peripherals, he sees Becca nod, and then wrap her arm around Ben’s shoulders to tug him in for a quick embrace. They’ve both got small, emotional smiles turning up the corners of their mouths. Bucky swallows the lump in his throat, casually asking his parents if they’d like anything to drink.

Mark’s way of acknowledging it is to whisper under his breath, “Love you, kiddo,” while joining Bucky at the fridge to fish out the container of orange juice. Bucky gets a wobbly smile and awkwardly mumbles back, “You too, dad.” When Annie notices, it’s a lot harder for her to mask her initial reaction – which is to cover her mouth with one hand as her eyes well up with tears. Immediately, Bucky’s own get wet, but he doesn’t want to make a spectacle of things – he’s already feeling exposed enough as it is – so he just quickly walks up to her and pulls her into a hug. Trying to lighten the mood, he forces himself to chuckle and encourages her, “C’mon, mom, don’t cry on me. Please? C’mon, it’s okay.”

“I’m sorry,” she quickly says a few times, her voice wobbly as she sniffles and tries to push everything down. “I’m just...” Pulling back, she takes his face in her hands and nods with understanding. “I’m so proud of you, James. You know that, right?”

“Course I do, mom. I know.”

“Why’s mommy and Bucket crying?” Amy curiously asks from her seat.

Everyone glances to her, and then amongst each other, trying to find a delicate way to put it. “I’m just a little sad that he’s going back home today, sweetie,” Annie answers, quickly swiping at her eyes and then sharing a soft chuckle with Bucky. “I’m just going to miss him is all.”

“Are *you* going to miss me, Peanut?” Bucky asks, making his voice cheery as he goes and takes his seat next to Steve. He’s actually glad that she interjected. As touched as he is by mother’s reaction, he doesn’t want his last few hours with them to be emotional like that. He isn’t ready for it; he needs to take things in the tiniest of baby steps. Luckily, Annie understands, and when she joins them only a few seconds later, her tears have been wiped away and she looks perfectly fine. She just has a permanent smile on her face, which Bucky likes to see.

Amy insists that she'll miss Bucky "the moistest", which prompts the two of them to go back and forth, arguing who will miss *who* more. Bucky eventually lets Amy win, as he always does, and then the family falls into normal conversation while they enjoy their meal together, for the last time during this trip. Beneath the table, Bucky's got his fingers threaded with Steve's again; his bare left forearm resting atop of Steve's right. Whenever they look to each other, Bucky can see the pride in Steve's baby blues, matching the little loving smile he shoots Bucky's way.

The kids handle the dishes, with the exception of Rebecca, since she helped cook. Bucky lifts Amy off the ground and keeps her up so she can wash the dishes, and then hands them to *Steve* who actually washes them properly. Ben's on drying duty. When Bucky's arms get tired, he plops his little sister onto the counter so he can take over and they can get the job done faster. She notices his arm; reaches over with her pudgy hand and touches it, making Bucky freeze. She'd been born shortly before the car accident, so the man Bucky's been over the last six years is literally the only version of Bucky she's ever known over the course of her short life. She's never seen his arms like this before – they've always been covered, every single time he's been around her. When she asks why he looks like that, referring to the scar tissues and unattractive discolouration that blotches around his skin in patches, Bucky looks between Steve and Ben uncertainly. They look just as unprepared.

"Uh--" Steve starts, still looking at Bucky. From the tone of his voice, Bucky can tell that the gears are spinning in his head, and Steve's trying to think of the simplest answer she can get; one that won't necessarily scare her.

Before he has the chance, Bucky's brotherly instincts take over and he gives her a warm smile, explaining, "Well, I got a booboo. A real *bad* booboo, way back when you were just a baby."

She frowns, clutching his arm with her tiny hand a bit harder. "Does it hurt?" she asks, sounding *protective* – like she could somehow do something to help her *adult* brother if his answer turned out to be yes.

Steve and Ben chuckle, and so does he. "No, sweetie, it doesn't," he says reassuringly. "It was a long time ago. My arm's always gonna look like this, but it just *looks* like it hurts, okay? It doesn't actually hurt. C'mere."

Scooping her up, she wraps her legs tightly around his back as he walks her out of the kitchen, thinking it might be best for her to be with their parents while the boys finish the dishes. On the way from the kitchen to the back patio, where he knows they're sitting and enjoying the sunshine for a few minutes, Amy keeps trying to twist to the side to look down at Bucky's arm.

So he tightens his grip on her with his right arm and lets go with the left; lifting it a little so she can take his wrist back in her hands. The way she touches it delicately makes Bucky's eyes wet again. Then he realizes she's mumbling something, and it makes him stop in the middle of the hallway, staring down at her with furrowed brows.

“Poor Bucket, poor Bucket,” she’s repeating in a soothing little tone, like she’s trying to comfort the arm itself. She strokes his outer forearm with one hand and tells it, “You’re all better now, it’s okay. Poor ouchie, you’re okay now.” Then she peers up at her big brother and surprises him by reaching up with both hands and grabbing his face. Her hands press against his cheeks, making his lips purse a little, and she stares at him without blinking and tells him, “I still think you’re beautiful.” Dropping her hands, she throws her arms around his neck and leans in, giving him a hug.

Bucky’s breath catches in his throat. Pressing his lips into a tight line, he wraps his left arm back around her and hugs her close, looking up to the ceiling to try and ward off anymore tears. When he blinks, they fall anyways. “Thank you,” he whispers, trying to keep his voice from cracking. For a few minutes, he stays like that, right there in the hallway – hugging his baby sister to him and knowing in his heart that she must really believe that, even if he doesn’t.

He winds up hanging outside with his parents for longer than he intends to. They keep the conversation light, save for the odd inquiry here and there that Annie will slip in where she subtly asks about what Bucky’s plans are once he’s back in New York. Bucky finds himself answering, “I’m thinking of quitting at the firm,” before he even thinks about saying it. He quickly catches himself by backtracking and adding that he isn’t *sure* yet, or even *when* he’d do it – because he doesn’t currently have a backup plan.

To his relief, all his mom does is squeeze his hand with a smile and assures him, “Whatever you do, we’ll support you.”

“You can do anything you want,” Mark reminds him. “Even if you turned around one day and, say... wanted to be a part of the traveling circus.”

Bucky laughs. “Right, ‘cause there are *so* many hidden talents I have that would be useful for something like that.”

They think on it with amusement. After a half dozen seconds, Mark breaks the silence with, “The world’s tallest midget.”

Bucky starts laughing again; jokingly says that he’ll keep that in mind. He knows what they mean, though. Knowing he’s got them behind him is comforting. He refuses to outright talk about things like *counselling* or *psychiatric evaluations* or the like, for a handful of reasons. Namely, because he hasn’t even voiced those thoughts out loud yet, let alone discuss them with other people. And he already knows that the first person he’s going to want to talk about it with once he gets the nerve is Steve. Steve first, then his parents... Eventually. It’s still a little too daunting to put a timeline on that just yet.

What he *does* promise them before heading in is that he’ll do a better job at staying in touch and visiting – and that he’ll keep them updated on his life. Even though what that means goes unspoken, a part of him can’t help but suspect that they have an idea, if the appreciative look in his mom’s eyes is anything to go by.

He heads back into the kitchen in search of Steve. When he rounds the corner, he finds him talking quietly to Rebecca – almost *privately*. It seems to be a lighthearted conversation... Steve’s got the faintest of smirks, and his sister’s right in the middle of rolling her eyes. What catches Bucky’s attention, though, is the fact that he catches them *right* as Becca appears to be slapping a ten dollar bill into Steve’s open palm.

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It's a very fast moment. As quickly as he sees them, they see *him*. Immediately, Rebecca's straightening and stuffing her hands into her pockets, making her face go blank. Steve closes his fist around the money nestled in his hand and flashes Bucky his infamous million-dollar smile, casually saying, "Hey, Buck."

Bucky narrows his eyes. Lifting a hand, he gets a suspicious smile and shakes his head. "Oh no, no, no – don't 'hey Buck' me. What was that about?"

"What was *what* about?" Steve asks innocently with a shrug. But Bucky can see it in his boyfriend's eyes, his smile – Steve knows exactly what Bucky's talking about, and he's only making so much of an attempt to hide it.

"Yeah, Buck, what're you talking about?" Rebecca adds from behind the blond.

"Why'd she give you money? Why'd you just give him money?" Bucky presses, looking from Steve to his sister.

Steve glances at Rebecca and gives her a look, like Bucky has two heads, before striding past Bucky and sticking to his act. "What money?" he asks, *really* laying the obliviousness on thick. "I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about."

"Uh-huh," Bucky replies flatly, watching him go. "*Where're* you going, exactly? Running away from the scene of the crime is damning evidence, y'know."

Steve spins around and continues to back step as he throws his arms up into a grander shrug. Smiling charmingly – *fuck, he's so goddamn cute* – he explains, "Hey, not my fault that your brother challenged me to one last round of Mario Kart. I promised!"

"Mhm, *sure sure*," Bucky says, unable to keep from sprouting a lopsided smile. "The perfect alibi."

Steve winks, his smile flashing to something a little more intimate – *Bucky's* smile, the one reserved only for when Steve looks at him. Then he turns back around and disappears as he rounds the corner into the living room. Bucky can hear him strike up a conversation with Ben, so he looks to his sister and sets his sights on her. Immediately, she lifts her hands and feigns naivety when she deflects, "Hey, don't look at me!"

Bucky crosses his arms and leans his back to the counter's edge. They play the staring contest for several drawn-out seconds – trying to see whose poker face will crumble first.

"*What?*" Becca breaks.

Bucky's response is to huff out an unconvinced breath from his nose and quirk his mouth; shaking his head and giving her a look that replies, *Really?* He can tell by the look on her face that she's growing tired of the charade. Sure enough, she rolls her eyes again before averting them away – but her lips are also pursed into a small smirk, too. Exhaling and letting her shoulders drop, she then places her hands on her hips and says, "You *really* wanna know?"

"Uh, *yeah*," Bucky answers, like the true, mature adult he is.

She nods to herself, just a couple times. To his surprise, then she tips her head towards the opened door frame and says, "Come down to the lake with me."

"The lake," Bucky repeats tonelessly. Jokingly, he adds, "S'too late for me to go for a swim, Squirt; my shit's already packed up."

Rebecca shoves his arm, still adoring that tiny smirk that Bucky can't quite figure out. "Seriously, idiot. We can sit down on the dock; it's more private."

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That definitely piques Bucky's interest. What sort of conspiracy was going on here? This means that there actually *was* a reason why Rebecca gave Steve that money, and it's apparently a discussion she thinks is better for them to have alone. Curiosity killed the cat, absolutely, because Bucky finds himself sitting down at the edge of the dock with a cigarette between his fingers – staring to his sister with interest and waiting for her explanation – within a minute of her suggesting it.

Rebecca's completely *loving* this right now, keeping Bucky held in suspense. She stretches her hands behind her to keep herself up; leisurely kicking her feet back and forth as they dangle over the edge, toes catching the surface of the water. She starts shooting him these devilish little side glances, just to fuck with him and rile him up. She's able to make him crack when he winds up grinning and pushing her shoulder harmlessly, demanding, "Seriously, *what?* What's going on?"

Rebecca stares out at the view ahead of them. As the seconds pass, her smirk tapers off and her eyes narrow slightly, like she's in deep thought. Calmly, she tells him, "Steve and I had a bet going."

"A bet," Bucky repeats.

She huffs out a short chuckle, still staring forward. "You're like a parrot today," she teases. "Yeah, a bet."

"A bet about what?"

Again, she doesn't answer right away. But when she *does*, it's to look directly at him and say, "You *really* thought I wasn't gonna catch on that you two weren't actually dating?"

Bucky's mouth falls open a sliver, his brain short-circuiting before completely flat-lining. That'd been just about the *last* thing he'd expected her to say. Bucky had been so certain that they had everyone convinced, especially after the kissing incident earlier in the week. He *definitely* didn't think there'd be any room left for doubt once he and Steve actually *did* hook up and make things official. Now he's quickly going over all the details from the last week with lightning fast speed, trying to pinpoint where they'd gone wrong.

Seeing his change in expression, she smiles sympathetically and explains, "It was sort of obvious. I mean, you two definitely had a 'we're *friends* but there's something *else* there' sort of vibe, but something just seemed off. You're not exactly hard to read, you know."

"Yeah, so I've been told," Bucky mutters, looking away now, too. Feels like the story of his life when it comes to *trying* to act a certain way around Steve Rogers and completely *failing* at the same time.

"For the record, I don't know if mom or dad figured it out," she offers. "Or Ben. If they know, they didn't say anything... And I didn't bring it up to them, either. And, I mean..." She lowers her gaze, looking like she's thinking again. "I'm *not* gonna tell them, you know."

"Why not?" Bucky asks. "I mean, you called it from the start. Isn't this the part where you say, 'I told you so'?"

"No," she answers simply – a little more quietly – as she glances back up.

“But *why*?” Bucky presses. He genuinely doesn’t understand why Becca’s promising to keep his secret.

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“Because you’re actually happy,” she answers after a short pause. They look to each other and she shrugs casually. “I mean... I see the way you two look at each other, I already told ya that. Okay, *maybe* you two haven’t been actually dating for as long as you say you have, but with the way you two very obviously feel about each other, you might as well be. I like Steve,” she tells him. “We all do. I want him to stick around.”

“Me too,” Bucky admits.

“He will,” she replies simply. “You can tell, with him. He loves you. I don’t think he plans to go anyone – not unless *you* make him.” She goes quiet, seemingly stopping herself short. Suddenly she’s lifting her feet so she can turn fully towards Bucky and cross her legs. Looking at him straight on, she gently says, “Don’t make him... ‘kay? Look,” she sighs lightly, “I know I like to give you shit and get on your nerves – that’s what siblings are for; it’s my God-given right. Just like *you* drive me up the wall ninety-nine percent of the time. But you’re still my brother... And I like knowing that you’re happy. I miss you when you’re not around,” she admits.

For a split second, Bucky looks back to her and sees that little baby girl he felt personally responsible for watching over when they were younger. He remembers back to a time when it was them versus the world, and she was the single most important thing in Bucky’s life. When did she get permission to grow up... Get so big?

He shuffles so that he’s facing her, too. Taking one of her hands, he gives it a squeeze. Keeping his eyes down, he mumbles back, “Miss you too, Becks. I should’ve visited more, I... I guess I’ve been a pretty shitty big brother the past few years, haven’t I?”

She gives him a tiny, tight smile. Covering their hands with her other one, she replies, “You did the best you could.”

“...No. I didn’t, actually. I could’ve done a lot more, for you – for mom and dad. Everyone. I should’ve been there.”

They stay quiet for a minute or so, both of them staring down at their hands and, by extension, Bucky’s left arm. He hears his sister softly clear her throat. Her voice sounds uneven when she says, “I never blamed you, you know. I was never mad at you. I told you before that I never had to forgive you, because there was nothing to forgive.”

“Rebecca,” Bucky immediately sighs, feeling himself beginning to close off as he peers up at her grimly. “Don’t. Please.”

“I’m not saying we have to talk about it,” she replies, looking just as emotional. “I’m just saying that... Buck, you need to be able to forgive yourself someday. I don’t want you looking at me for the rest of our lives and seeing nothing but your mistakes.”

Bucky’s frown deepens. “Is that what you think I see when I look at you...?” Now *she*’s the one to cast her eyes down, clearly fighting the urge not to cry. Her mouth trembles, and Bucky realizes... she got that from *him* – that refusal to look weak in front of others. He was supposed to set the example for her, that’s what big brothers are fucking for. Instead, he passed down one of his worst qualities. He doesn’t want Rebecca to close off to people the same way he did. Quickly, he takes her chin in a gentle grip and tips her face back up so she’ll look at him.

“Hey,” he whispers insistently. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry if I made you feel like that. I – you’re not *my* mistake, but not *any kind* of mistake, alright? You know what I see when I look at you? Hmm?”

Tears prick the corners of her eyes, but she still seems to be fighting letting them out. Sniffing lightly, she tries to roll her eyes again and asks, “What?”

Bucky doesn’t take his own off of her. “I see my baby sister, and the first real friend I ever had,” he answers. His voice cracks. “I see the only flesh and blood connection I have in this fucked up world, and I see my partner in crime growing up.” She releases a wet-sounding laugh, and when her eyes crinkle, a tear *finally* rolls down her cheek. “I see someone who’s a young woman now – but who I’ll always wanna argue is still that little girl who wore the ugliest fucking overalls in the world and refused to wear her hair in anything but pigtails until she was thirteen.”

Now they’re both laughing, and Bucky’s crying too, and he tugs her forward so he can bump their foreheads together. Then he gathers her up into a hug. “I could never look at you and think of a mistake,” he promises. “If I’ve ever made you feel like that, it’s only because you’re the most important person on the planet to me, kid. Have been since the day you were born. I was supposed to take care of you and... look out for you, and I failed, Becks. It’s never been about you. I just can’t... I can’t seem to forgive myself for what I did to you.”

She’s hugging him back just as tightly. When he finishes talking, they sniffle and pull away from each other. Rebecca takes both of his hands back into her and gives them a little shake. “I hope you *can* one day,” she says. “Because I mean... I’m fine. I’m still here. You’re beating yourself up about something that *could’ve* happened, and letting it take time away from what you could actually be spending with me – with *all* of us.”

“I know,” Bucky says, sighing wetly as he closes his eyes, a few more tears escaping him.

“Hey, it’s okay,” she tells him. “Just... can you please try? If you *really* feel you have some sort of debt you need to repay me, can you do *this* for me then – try to... I dunno... talk with me more? Come see us more?”

Bucky nods, smiling weakly. “I can do that,” he promises her.

“Maybe I can even come up to New York sometimes and visit you,” she suggests. “I’ve always wanted to try real New York-style cheesecake. See the Statue of Liberty, you know?”

Bucky exhales a chuckle, pulling one hand back to wipe at his eyes. Rebecca quickly takes note and does the same. “You got it,” he says, nodding again. “We can do whatever you want. You’ve always got a place to stay with me, if you want it.”

“Good... Now, let’s stop all this crying,” she says insistently, fanning her face before letting her hands slap off her knees loudly. Exhaling loudly, she sprouts a smile Bucky’s way, and he can’t help but return it as he agrees. Then she seems to catch herself and says, “Oh! Right, the bet... Yeah, uh, *basically* I bet him ten bucks that you wouldn’t admit your feelings to him by the time the week was over. He was really hoping you would, so he took the bet.”

Bucky blinks, immediately being pulled out of their sad, heartfelt moment. Face falling flat, he deadpans, "Thanks for the vote of confidence, Becks."

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That gets her laughing. "I'm sorry. If it's any consolation, I didn't bet against you because I *didn't* want that," she tells him. "It's just... you're my brother. I *know* you – it was *totally* fuckin' obvious that you were head over heels for him, but I didn't know if you'd let yourself go for it. I was hoping I'd get proven wrong, though. I'm glad I was... Best ten bucks I ever spent."

"Wait, hold on," Bucky backtracks quickly, scrunching up his nose. "Steve bet you that I *would* come clean about my feelings?"

"Yeah."

"And you guys made this bet *when*?"

"First coupla' days after you two got here," she answers with another one of those teeny, knowing smirks again.

What the fuck? It takes a second for things to click in Bucky's brain, but then suddenly his eyes are widening and he nearly shouts, "He *knew*!?"

Rebecca lifts her hands towards him and beams. "And he *finally* figures it out, ladies and gentlemen!" she announces jokingly to the empty air around them. Then she starts to clap.

It doesn't make any sense. Steve *knew*? Bucky doesn't know how to wrap his mind around this new information. "But, I don't – I... How long?" he demands to know. "How long's he known, did he tell you?"

"Apparently for the last few years," she answers.

What the fuck! Bucky thinks.

"What the *fuck*!" Bucky shouts. "He's known for *years* – seriously!? This *whole time*, he's known I liked him? Why the hell didn't he ever – oh, you know, *tell me*? Seriously, when did he even tell you any of this?"

"Okay, first of all, calm yourself," Rebecca says, lifting a hand. Bucky glares at her. "You remember when I went for my run and he offered to come with me?" she asks. "It was then."

Bucky shakes his head, eyes closed and face pinched up in frustration. None of this is making any more sense. "'Kay, Rebecca, I need you to be a little more helpful here," he pushes, fighting to stay level-headed. "You have to walk me through this. Did Steve tell you *why* he never told me?"

"Yes."

"Okay, well what happened!?" Bucky snaps.

She returns his bout of immaturity and snaps back, "You wanna hear the story or dontcha? Give me a second to actually *talk*, Buck." Bucky presses his lips into a firm line and waves his hand towards her hastily, physically giving her the go ahead. She takes a breath and then says, "*Okay*, well... I mean, I basically just flat out called him on the fact that he was very clearly into you."

"Okay..."

“And he didn’t even bother denying it,” she continues. “He paused for, like, a second, looked over at me while we kept jogging, and then told me he was. So then I told him that you liked him, too – *what?* It’s not like you *didn’t*,” she argues, when Bucky gives her a look. “Anyways, then he looked a little disappointed and turned around and told me he knew *that*, too, which I wasn’t expecting. I know! That was basically the exact same look I gave him, too!

“I was thinking the same thing you’re thinking now, and I asked him how long he’s liked you, and he told me that the story he told all of us at dinner that first night was completely true. He liked you from the moment you two met; something about love at first sight – I dunno, I pretended to gag, so I missed what he said *exactly*, but... Then when I asked how long he’s known you liked him, too, that’s when he told me. So, like, I asked him; I said, ‘Then *why* haven’t you told him yet?’ And you know what he said to me?” she asks.

Bucky frowns, his previous glare disappearing. “What?”

“That he *knew* you,” she answers. “He knew how you were, and he knew all these years that you weren’t ready yet. He told me, ‘Trust me, I wish I could ask him out every day, but it needs to be on *his* terms.’ He knew that until you were ready to let him in, things wouldn’t have worked out. You would’ve sabotaged it for yourself, Buck. He would’ve asked you out and you would’ve said yes, but you wouldn’t have been willing yet to open yourself up, ‘cause you still would’ve told yourself you didn’t deserve it.”

“I...”

Rebecca picks up Bucky’s pack of smokes and opens it. She pulls one out and then hands it and his lighter to Bucky, knowing that he’d benefit from one right now. Sure enough, he takes it from her, feeling completely speechless, and then lights up with shaking hands.

“Steve didn’t want to push you,” she continues. “He said it was hard as fuck and sometimes he second-guessed himself more times than he could count, but he knew in his gut that it’d only work for you two if he waited until *you* made the first real move. And that’s when we made the bet. He must’ve had a feeling or something – that maybe you were finally ready. I mean, he took the bet for a *reason*. Maybe it was just wishful thinking on his end at the time, I dunno. But, I mean, I’m *glad* you finally took the risk.” She nudges his arm. “Proud of you.”

Bucky’s completely dumbfounded. It was one thing for Steve to tell him that he’d been in love with Bucky for the last five years – but to know that *Bucky* felt the same way for that entire time, too? And Steve was able to stop himself from acting on it for *that* long? If not for the fact that he’s very clearly proven that Bucky was *never* a passing phase for him – “*You’re it for me*,” he’d said – Bucky would see Steve’s ability to not act on it over the years as a sign that he mustn’t have been very into him. Had it been Bucky in his position, he doesn’t know that he would’ve been able to exhibit that same kind of willpower. He would’ve been selfish and wanted Steve too much to think clearly.

But it's *Steve*. Steve's perfect; he's so damn good. And Bucky can feel how much Steve loves him, even if he isn't completely sure he's done anything to warrant it. So Steve having been able to stop himself for the last five years is nothing but a true testament to his feelings. He knew Bucky felt that way about him but he never acted on it for *Bucky's* sake... Because Steve wanted their relationship to *last*. He still does. It hits him then – just *how much* Steve worships the ground he walks on, just like his dad had told him.

How did Bucky ever get this lucky?

"You wanna go talk to him now, don't ya?" Rebecca asks teasingly, pulling him from his thoughts.

Bucky nods, looking over at her. "Yeah, basically."

"Try not to tear a strip off of him," she jests.

They both rise to their feet, and Bucky pockets his smokes, replying, "Wasn't even planning on it."

"Then *please* don't jump him, either," she shoots back. "Wait until after you leave, I'm begging you."

Bucky smirks, pulling her in and giving her a proper hug. "I love you," he tells her. "Thank you."

"I know, I'm pretty great," she replies good-naturedly, hugging back just as hard. "I love you, too."

When Bucky gets back into the cottage, he asks the first person he sees – which happens to be his brother – where Steve is. Ben replies that he went upstairs to grab their stuff and start packing up the car. Maybe it's a little over-dramatic for Bucky to *run* to the stairs and take them two at a time, but *fuck it*, he does anyways.

Steve's literally walking *out* of Bucky's room when they see each other. The blond has his duffel bag slung across his back, the handle of Bucky's suitcase in hand, and the air mattress under the other arm. Steve smiles and opens his mouth to say something, but Bucky doesn't give him the chance. He doesn't even slow down; just runs straight into Steve and throws his arms around his neck, pulling him in so Bucky can crush their lips together in a grateful kiss.

The momentum causes Steve to make a surprised, pleased sound in his throat as he stumbles back a few steps, back into the bedroom again. Bucky doesn't detach himself from him – just moves with him and keeps kissing at his lips. He can feel Steve's arms shuffle, and then the sounds of the air mattress and his suitcase knock against the floor. Next thing he knows, Steve's wrapping his arms around Bucky and kissing him back.

They're quick, hungry kisses – lips parting fast and their tongues beating together – and then Steve asks with bated breath when he gets a moment's grace, "Well *hello* to you, too. We haven't been apart *that* long, but I'll take it."

"A few years'?" Bucky hisses back, turning his face to the other side and stealing another deep kiss. "You *ever* hold out on me like that again, m'gonna kill ya, Steve, I swear--"

"I'm sorry," Steve replies, actually sounding genuine. They kiss again, still just as needy. "I'm sorry, Buck. I *wanted* to tell you – I *wanted* you so fuckin' much, you got no idea. But I... *God*, I couldn't, I'm sorry--"

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"It's okay. I'm not actually mad, I – I get it," Bucky whispers quickly. He moans softly in his throat – quick and barely there – when Steve fucks his tongue back into his mouth. Bucky nips his bottom lip. Steve sucks in a sharp, quiet breath. "You really love me, don't you?"

"Of course I do," Steve answers.

"Tell me."

Steve pulls back and stares straight into Bucky's eyes from beneath heavy lids. His own admittedly look a lot glossier now, and his pupils have exploded. Bucky has no doubt that his are, too. Steve reaches up and combs his fingers through the hair above Bucky's ear; holds the back of his head in his grasp. "I love you," he vows. "I *really* love you."

"Tell me again," Bucky begs.

"I love you, Buck."

"Again."

Steve leans in and presses a gentler, chaste kiss to his mouth. "I love you," he whispers, lips lightly brushing across Bucky's.

Bucky swallows hard, and then nods. He's holding onto Steve's wrist, turning his face the slightest bit to nuzzle his temple against the heel of his boyfriend's hand. "I love you, too," he answers just as quietly. He feels Steve's lips press to his forehead, then his cheek, and finally his mouth again. When they curl up into a smile, Bucky can picture exactly what Steve looks like, even though his eyes are still closed. He smiles back.

"Thought you were about to maul me with your door open and everythin'," Steve jokes, voice dropping slightly at the suggestion.

"Well, never say never," Bucky replies in a husk. "Thought for a second I might, too."

"Shame, really," Steve says. "We only got to fool around in your bed *once*. Hardly feels like we got to properly christen it."

At this, Bucky opens his eyes. Slowly, he voices the thought he's had since the night of his parent's anniversary party and says, "Well... I mean... We don't *have* to leave today, do we...? I, uh... I don't have to be back until Monday, really... You?"

Steve's looking back at him now. With a soft, curious look in his eyes, he replies, "I got tomorrow off."

"Okay..."

"Do you want to stay another day?" Steve asks, seeming to understand that Bucky wants this for a *lot* more reasons than he's saying at the moment.

There's hope in Bucky's eyes. "Would you mind?"

"I'd love to," Steve admits.

Bucky smiles again. "I wanna stay, too," he tells him. "Let's stay."

Steve grins and kisses him again. "I'll set the air mattress back up," he suggests, bending down to pick it up.

“Or... Since it’s our last night, we squish together in my bed and find a way to make it work,” Bucky slowly counteroffers. “Even if we wind up being uncomfortable as fuck. You know... I’m sure if we cuddle up tight enough, it won’t be so bad.”

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Steve’s grin is slow-morphing, and brilliant, and beautiful. “I think we can do that, yeah,” he says in agreement.

Taking Bucky’s hand, they head out of the room to go downstairs and find the family. As he takes in the way the wooden stairs feel hitting his feet, the way the sun’s streaming in through the windows, Steve’s fingers fitting between his like they were always meant to be there – all of it... Bucky feels on top of the world. The day is still so young – there’s so much he can do to enjoy the extra time he now has with his family. Maybe they’ll watch a movie. Bucky can cook for them. It’s pretty hot outside, maybe he’ll suggest everyone goes to the lake for a swim. Bucky might even be willing to get in there without his shirt on. Right now, he feels like cannon-balling straight off the edge without ever looking back.

It doesn’t matter what they wind up doing, really. He’s just thrilled to get just a little more time – one more day with the place and people that taught him what it’s like to believe in magic.

...

Through the sliding glass door in the living room of Bucky’s apartment, there’s the suppressed sound of New York traffic from below. The sky is filled with clouds, but they part from time to time to allow the sun a chance to warm the city from its increasingly chilly Fall air. Right now, it’s the middle of the afternoon.

But it’s also a Saturday. They have nowhere to be.

The TV’s still on, the volume lowered; the voices on the screen coming out soft. Two plates of half-eaten food sit on the coffee table. The couch sits vacant, but with a lone white t-shirt abandoned near one armrest. Just beside it, on the little table, there’re two framed photos next to the lamp. One is a group photo of Bucky, Steve, and their friends – Bucky, grinning as he looks to the camera, and Steve, with Bucky’s face in his hand and his lips firmly pressed to his boyfriend’s cheek.

The other is just one of him and Steve; a selfie they’d taken that’d actually been a fuck up. They’d been trying to smile nicely when Steve cracked and started belly laughing for absolutely no discernible reason. Bucky’s thumb tapped the capture button purely by accident, but the result was Steve and Bucky both cracking up, right in the middle of a genuine bout of laughter – Steve’s eyes squeezed shut and Bucky, glancing over at him. To date, it’s Bucky’s absolute favourite photo of them.

In the kitchen, on his fridge door, there’s a small piece of paper held in place by a magnet. A note. *Never forget that I love you :)* is scrawled across it in Steve’s handwriting. Next to it, there’s also a business card for a *Doctor Bruce Banner*, licensed psychiatrist. In Bucky’s penmanship, there’s an additional cellphone number listed, in the event of an emergency.

Random articles of clothing litter the living room floor, starting at that white t-shirt and working up to things like *belts* and *jeans* and *boxers*, all leading to the opened door of Bucky's bedroom. *Outside*, there are car horns and rumbling engines. *Inside*, there's nothing but the sounds of heavy panting... A bed frame knocking rhythmically against a wall...

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And Steve screaming in that beautiful voice of his.

He's on his back; his hands, currently above his head and gripping tightly to the bars making up the headboard. With his knees folded up so they're touching his chest, he's practically bent in half, ass lifted slightly off the mattress. He looks so *small* like this – looks so fucking gorgeous. His golden mop of hair is sticking up in messy tufts from Bucky yanking his head back to bite at his throat. Flesh that's normally a flawless, pale hue is now flushed a deep scarlet, from the apples of Steve's cheeks all the way down to the leaking tip of his dick. It makes the mess of come on his stomach stand out even more; the contrast of white against red as breathtaking as *art*, and *fuck, there's so fucking much...*

It's so pretty, it *is* – how bright his baby blues are, even more so than usual... thanks to the tears. Steve's so fucked out that he's been crying from overstimulation for the past half hour at *least*. One second he's begging Bucky to stop, the next he's begging for more. Bucky knows which one he really wants, though, so he hasn't stopped, *fuck no...*

He's relentless.

They've been at it for the last hour and a half. Started with hands, with tongues and teeth... They moaned and gasped and shuddered over each other's names the first times they were both separately brought to climax. But today, Bucky had felt inspired. It'd been one of those moments where he'd made the mistake of doing nothing more than *glancing* at him, and he knew. All he'd then wanted – all he *still* wants – was to worship his boyfriend's entire fucking body until he forgot his own name.

Doesn't matter that they still can't keep their hands off each other, even a couple months later; that Bucky's sex drive is through the roof for the first time in years, and all he wants is *Steve, more of Steve, all of Steve, night and day, on every surface possible*, even though things aren't as 'new' for them anymore. They've actually fallen into quite the domestic routine in a lot of ways. Because Bucky knows that there'll never come a day where he'll look at Steve and *not* be overwhelmed like this; *not* want to make him feel so, so good.

So he got Steve nice and comfy on his back and had devoted a solid twenty-odd minutes with his face buried between Steve's ass cheeks, and his tongue as deep as it could go in his hole. Bucky's long since gotten his regular stubble back, and his Stevie just *loves* the way it scratches his skin up until it's left raw. All Bucky had needed was one little finger; sneaking it smoothly within Steve's tight walls and fluidly curling it at *just* the right spot, and with a surprised cry, his boyfriend came a second time.

Bucky waited until it finished passing before licking a stripe up Steve's softening cock and closing his mouth over it; gently rolling his tongue around the length, over and over, despite Steve's weak protests. Steve *never* actually wants him to stop; he always

wants more, *every time*. He's got a permanent, constant hunger for Bucky, too. It's made for a lot of sleepless nights and a handful of broken furniture between them.

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Bucky was able to get him hard again within about five minutes. It took Steve a little longer to reach his breaking point the third time around, but Bucky's learned over the past couple months that if you massage Steve's prostate long enough, it'll force an orgasm over him – regardless of whether *Steve* thinks he's ready again or not. And they may have grown to switch often (Bucky could wax poetry about how much he loves to ride Steve's dick and feel it for *days* afterwards), but what Bucky lives for is to be the one to deconstruct Steve and take *him* apart. Nothing else makes him feel quite as powerful, or trusted, or loved.

He's holding himself up by his palms, pistoning his hips *back and forth* an exactly the right angle. With Steve folded beneath him like this, Bucky can hit his sweet spot almost every time – and that's the point. His favourite thing in the whole goddamn world these days is to spend whole *hours* fucking nothing but Steve's prostate. It's become a bit of a game for them: see just how many times Bucky can make Steve come from it before Bucky either loses stamina or takes pity on him.

Steve's a fucking *champ* when they do this, and Bucky knows it. Their record had been six, with little to no breaks in between each orgasm. Out of curiosity one time, they'd switched placed so Bucky could feel what that was like. He'd only made it to *three* by the time he was sobbing into the air; having a hard time *breathing* and so oversensitive that when he pleaded with Steve to stop, Steve knew from the tone in his voice that he was actually serious.

But Steve takes it like nothing else Bucky's ever seen in all of his life, and it leaves Bucky so fucking hypnotized at the sight of him. They're past six by now. He bites his lip and blinks the sweat out of his eyes – breathes fast and rough through his nose, keeps his gaze locked attentively on the younger man's face, and pounds into him even *faster*... And Steve's well on his way to *nine* by now.

His stomach is an absolute fucking mess, to the point where the constant jutting of his body along the mattress from Bucky's thrusts have it leaking down his side and dirtying up the sheets – growing as wet as the pillow beneath Steve's temple, which is *soaked through* from his tears.

God, the air around them is stiflingly hot; smells of sweat and semen and pheromones. Bucky always grows his hair out a little longer into the colder seasons. These days, it's shoulder length. It *had* been in a small, messy bun when they'd been innocently eating lunch on the couch. Not anymore, though. Bucky doesn't even know where the elastic went, only that they'd been making out hectically on the bed when Steve yanked it out of his hair and threw it away somewhere.

Everyone else can say what they want about Bucky's hair, they can make their snide comments and inferences that he should cut it – but Steve *loves* it. The more he can

bury his fingers into it and pull on it, whether he's topping or bottoming, the hornier for Bucky he gets (if such a thing were even possible).

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So his hair's in his face, matted to his forehead and neck, hanging in his eyes in thick and thin strands – damp to the roots from perspiration. He loves when they fuck to the point where they're practically drowning in their own sweat. They're the best workouts he ever gets. Plus, it guarantees them a shower afterwards, and the only thing better than hot, sweaty sex is hot, sweaty sex *followed by a relaxing shower where they lazily hold each other, and kiss, and laugh, and give each other shampoo mohawks.*

He drives into Steve harder because he picks up on the minute signals and can tell that Steve's close again – the biggest one being that all of his boyfriend's half-aborted babbling and hurt sounds have once again dwindled away to nothing but a litany of hoarse cries and loud whines. Steve only forgets the basic functions of speech when he's about to come like this. The first few times, Bucky still had enough of a grasp on his sanity to talk Steve through it and encourage him during these crucial moments. But he's too lost in their lovemaking right now; too focused on Steve's pleasure and making sure Steve's okay to do anything other than pant harshly and *sometimes* utter the odd curse.

Sure enough, he watches Steve's chest rise sharply and then pause, just for a heartbeat. Then Steve unravels, *and there's nine.* The noise he releases as the tip of his dick drools out a weak, thin stream of semen – the best it can do at this point – is more of a ragged, shrill wheeze than anything. And it only lasts a second before his upper body is heaving again and his eyes squeeze tighter shut, falling back into more blissed-out sobs. Fresh tears make the wet patch on the pillow blossom even bigger. It's so perfect and so fucking *hot* that Bucky could probably come right now, too, if he let himself.

But he doesn't *want* to stop. Nine's a great number, and he's so damn proud of Steve right now – and truthfully, Bucky's felt like he could come since they hit number seven. But he wants to see if they can get to *ten*. Ten seems like a solid, whole, and well-rounded off number. Ten is what he really wants.

He can see the understanding sink in on Steve's debauched face; that moment when he realizes what's about to happen. *Again.* Because Bucky stops thrusting only long enough to lean down and turn Steve's face towards him for a kiss. It's sloppy, clumsy... Steve's boneless at this point and doesn't even have the strength to hold the weight of his head up, so it's heavy against Bucky's palm. And their breathing is so laboured that the kiss is more so panting into each other's mouths and darting their tongues together than *actual* kissing. For a second, Steve exhales the smallest, softest sound while they do that – and Bucky realizes that it's a sound of exhaustion and *relief*. He's under the impression that Bucky's finally throwing in the towel.

But then Bucky doesn't pull out. He doesn't need to glance down and check to know that Steve's rim is most likely inflamed and a bit swollen right now. He can only imagine how sensitive his prostate feels; that Bucky's cock grazing it is starting to pain

him as much as the pleasure's unbearable, same as his orgasms now. But Bucky also knows *Steve*. If Steve really wanted Bucky to stop, he'd stop him. And he hasn't.

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Which is why when Bucky straightens so he can quickly run his hand through his hair and get it out of his face, before grabbing Steve's hips and manhandling him down the mattress a bit so the top of his head doesn't go smacking into the bars of the headboard, Steve's eyes widen the slightest bit, even with his completely unfocused gaze. It's why when Bucky hooks his arms beneath Steve's knees and then lowers back down, forcing Steve's ass to lift off the bed again as Bucky cuts off his air with another kiss and starts to rock within him again, Steve makes a noise of protest against his mouth and then weakly begs the *second* he can breathe again, "No, *no no*, no more, *no more--*"

And it's also why when Bucky growls back, "Yes," and goes from rocking to thrusting again, Steve continues to plead but *doesn't actually stop him*. They both want this. Bucky knows Steve's loving this, in fact, because even just the realization that Bucky wants to go another round has his cock showing signs of life once more.

"No more, *no more*," Steve keeps chanting deliriously, back to crying softly.

"One more," Bucky insists. He shifts his position around until Steve whimpers brokenly when he thrusts back into him, and then Bucky knows he's hitting the right spot again. That's exactly where he stays after that. "One more for me, Stevie."

Steve's using what little remaining strength he has to shake his head, which is really only sluggishly letting it tip from side to side because gravity does most of the work *for* him. "I *can't*," he croaks.

"Yes, you *can*."

"It hurts, it *hurts*, I can't," Steve keeps begging. He grits his teeth with a distressed sound, squeezing his eyes tighter shut again. With a strained whine, he digs his head back into the pillow, making his neck arch and the veins to strain tautly against his skin. He's so fucking *flushed*, he looks incredible. Bucky resigns with himself that the *moment* he gets Steve off this last time, he's going to let himself finish, finally.

Steve lets go of the bars above his head to reach down and get a feeble hold onto the back of Bucky's thighs, right below his ass. "God," Steve bites out, voice pitchy; gasps a few times and then cries, "Baby, *please--*"

"Yeah?"

"Don't stop, don't s-stop, *please... I... Mm, fuck*," he whimpers. "I *can't...*"

"Yes you can, Steve, you can," Bucky pants back. "You can, I got you. It's okay, Stevie, I got you, so good, you're so *fuckin' good* – you gonna come for me?"

Steve's so out of it that first he *shakes his head*, but then he's suddenly *nodding*, teeth digging into his bottom lip. Bucky's fucking into him so faithfully that the speed of his own pulse is beginning to make him lightheaded. His vision's starting to blacken in the corners, he's exerting himself so hard. Knowing that amazingly, Steve's already close again, *that fast*, has his balls starting to draw up tight. He's fluctuating in his rhythm just a tad. Bucky's cock has been getting squeezed and stimulated within Steve's tight body for the last hour without release. He'll be lucky if he doesn't pass out the moment he actually lets go.

“Okay,” he whispers back, nodding even though Steve’s not looking. “Whenever you’re ready, sweetheart. I’ve g... got you... Come for me, Steve. Just this l-last one, and then we’re done, I promise... *Ah, f-fuck...*”

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It’s only a dozen more thrusts or so, but Steve does, and it’s incredible. However this one feels for him, it draws an unexpected and *sharp* shout from his lungs, like they’d been punched out of them. It sort of sounds like the first syllable of Bucky’s name, but only *just*. Bucky can’t see Steve’s dick with the way they’re positioned, so he quickly pants, “You coming?”

Steve nods, still baring his grit teeth as Bucky watching a string of new tears just *stream* down the blond’s cheeks. And then, just like that, Bucky gives him one last deep thrust and lets himself shatter. It’s nearly blinding, it wracks his body so suddenly and forcefully. His mouth drops open and now his own grey eyes squeeze shut, as a loud “*Auh!*” rips from his throat. It takes everything he has *not* to slip out of consciousness, or collapse onto Steve either. That gets him trembling violently, as he continues to ride the waves of his climax and Steve, his. He starts mumbling the word “*fuck*” over and over, until he isn’t sure if he’s thinking it or saying it or *both* anymore.

Finally... *finally*... After what feels like years, the ecstasy ebbs enough for him to very mindfully pull out of Steve before tipping to the side and falling face-down onto the bed, to Steve’s right. Neither can gather the words to talk for the first solid ten minutes or so. All they can do is share the odd barely-there glance before Bucky’s or Steve’s eyes will roll back up into their heads from exhaustion.

A few additional minutes later, and Bucky has enough strength to lift his arm long enough to drape it across Steve’s chest and shuffle in closer. Both men still noisily gulping down mouthfuls of air, they look to each other again and Bucky asks, “You okay?”

Steve nods. “Yeah,” he breathes back. “You?”

“Yeah... That was fucking amazing...”

“*Yeah*,” Steve agrees with a little more enthusiasm. “Gonna be sore tomorrow; m’sore *now*,” he adds as an afterthought, chuckling only once before closing his eyes again and inhaling deeply through his nose.

“I’m sorry,” Bucky says, kissing his shoulder.

“Don’t be,” Steve answers, and Bucky knows he means it. “It’s the *good* kinda sore... Favourite kind, actually... *God*... Baby, you...” He chuckles, looking a little disbelieving – like he *always* does when they do this particular thing. “You fuck so goddamn good... Absolutely wreck me...”

“That’s just ‘cause I know what you like now,” Bucky replies modestly.

“Mm-mm.” Steve gives a small shake of the head. “You were always this good... *Fuck*, I’m completely beat; I’m passin’ out here...”

Bucky lifts his head – *feels like it weighs like a bag of bricks* – and peers back down at the impressively large puddle of semen glistening across Steve’s abs and still trickling down his side, onto the bed. “I think we need to get cleaned up,” Bucky points out reluctantly. He doesn’t want to move either, he *really* doesn’t. But if they fall asleep like this, they’ll be waking up with the sheets stuck to their skin, and there’d be nothing

pleasant about that. "I gotta throw these into the wash and grab the clean sheets from the closet."

"Do we *have* to?" Steve fake pouts. His eyes are already closed again, and his breathing's levelling out. "What if I don't wanna?"

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"C'mon," Bucky presses, kissing his shoulder a bit more firmly. "Tell you what: *I* clean up in here and *you* hop into the shower and get it ready. I'll be in in a few minutes, and we can make it fast. Then we can throw on a movie and pass the fuck out if we wanna."

"Oh, I wanna," Steve says with a tired chuckle. "I wanna right *now*, actually. But fine – if I must."

Bucky smiles, watching as Steve takes a deep breath and finally re-opens his eyes, bracing himself to sit up and deal with the inevitable mess that'll make. When he *does*, and that mess *does* happen, Steve's comical reaction is priceless; gets Bucky howling with laughter at the look on his boyfriend's face. Steve's hilariously clenching his glutes and hobbling away into the bathroom the moment his legs are functioning again, and when Bucky eventually hears the sound of his shower coming to life, he wills himself to roll out of bed, too, and do his part.

They're both still just as exhausted when Bucky finally joins him. Steve almost falls asleep standing up while Bucky's in the middle of giving his hair a quick wash to get all the sweat out. Still, it's relaxing and *nice*. It's even nicer when they stumble back into the bedroom and know they have a clean bed again to collapse onto. Bucky doesn't even bother with putting on a movie once his head is hitting his pillow. *Fuck it*, he's comfy now. They're both just gonna pass out anyways.

They settle together the way Bucky likes best: with Steve pressed behind him, holding him close; face buried into Bucky's hair, so all Steve has to do is tilt his chin a little to kiss the back of his neck. Sleepily, Steve says, "Don't forget about your appointment tomorrow."

"I won't," Bucky replies. It's only his third time meeting with Dr. Banner, but he made a promise to himself and to Steve that he'd give this his full commitment.

"Remember, you want me to come in with you at any point, and I will," Steve murmurs.

Bucky holds Steve's hand against his chest tighter. "I know... Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"...Hey, Steve?"

"Mm?"

Bucky bites his bottom lip and then asks, "Can you tell me?"

There's a pause, and as always, Bucky bets that Steve just smiled. He can hear it in his boyfriend's voice when he replies, *just like he always does whenever Bucky asks*, "I love you, Buck. Every mornin', and every night. 'To the end of the line.'"

Bucky releases a quiet breath, one corner of his mouth turning up into a shy, relieved smile. "I love you, too," he says back.

"To the end of the line."

Bucky's really starting to let himself believe it.