

There Were Bells on the Hill

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There Were Bells on the Hill

by [rhombus](#)

Summary

The smart money is on him jumping on a freighter headed for Europe, finding an old safe house and lying low, but Steve never had much smarts or money growing up so he only knows how to trust his patched-up gut, which is telling him Bucky'll stay close to the east coast. Close to home.

Notes

This is pure self-indulgence, and I apologize in advance. But I really, really need some magical healing snuggles after being destroyed by this movie.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

The smart money is on him jumping on a freighter headed for Europe, finding an old safe house and lying low, but Steve never had much smarts or money growing up so he only knows how to trust his patched-up gut, which is telling him Bucky'll stay close to the east coast. Close to home.

Neither he nor Sam is exactly handy with the facial recognition technology "borrowed" from the remnants of S.H.I.E.L.D.—"Hey, you need a secure comsat, or a PowerPoint or something, I'm your man," Sam offers—but they manage, between the two of them, not to screw up the standard search Barton sets up for them.

"I was never here," Barton says, making a hand gesture at his forehead Steve recognizes from Star Wars.

Steve's reply—"*This is not the stolen government property you're looking for.*"—startles a laugh out of him.

"This doesn't mean I forgive you for putting me out of a job, by the way." Barton points an accusatory finger at him and mounts some sort of hybrid electric-motorbike that looks like it came out of an Erector Set. "I'm only doing this 'cause Tasha gave me *The Look*."

Steve cups his hands around his mouth and yells "You're welcome!" as Barton disappears into an actual cloud of dust and smoke.

There are security camera shots, blurred, too quick for the human and superhuman eye to see, that the program catches of a metallic wrist in western Maryland.

They travel up and down the coast, stay in motel rooms, watch terrible action movies from the early '90s, and play cards while the laptop hums from the television stand.

"Steve, I love you, man, but your poker face is the actual worst."

"Yeah, well your actual face is the poker worst." It doesn't make sense, but it doesn't have to. They've both been on enough night missions to know lack of sleep and an abundance of adrenaline tend to make everything either the most hilarious or most depressing thing they've ever heard.

Sam throws a Cheeto at his head; Steve blocks it with the two of spades.

"You call Sharon?" Sam asks, casual. The pot is spread before them on the bed, nickels and quarters and a plastic button Sam had thrown in on the last hand. Despite that, it's still the biggest pile yet.

Steve nods toward their souped-up computer. "I don't think she's got the kind of clearance we need just yet."

"*Not* what I meant." Sam looks up at him from his cards. Steve frowns down at his.

"I'm a little busy at the moment."

"Yeah, getting your ass handed to you on a cheese-dusted platter."

"Not what *I* meant."

"I'm just saying. Better to lock it down now, you know? Before someone else swoops in. Nat was telling me last night—"

"You and Natasha really need to stop texting each other about my love life and worry about your own."

Sam grins, a flash of white, confident and sure and everything else about him that's comforting. "Believe me, there is absolutely no trouble in paradise there, my man." He slaps Steve hard across the shoulder. It almost jostles him. "I guess no one told you to add the word 'sexting' to your little list, huh?"

"Stark did, actually. First thing." He knows this is a thing people do, try to shock him, as if he's never heard of sex before. As if it were only invented in the last seventy years.

"And did you?" Sam asks, popping a couple of honey roasted peanuts into his mouth.

"I forget you haven't met the guy. Let's just say that anytime Stark made a suggestion—" He can only shrug, because Tony is just that kind of unexplainable.

"Your pen conveniently went missing?" Sam finishes for him.

"Got it in one." Steve bites his lip and lets curiosity get the better of him. "So, you and Romanoff? You really...?"

"Nah," Sam says, "not yet anyway. I'll wear her down, though."

"She's made of steel. She doesn't wear down."

"Oh ye of little faith. She'll *melt* for me."

"You're just that irresistible, right?" Steve doesn't wait for an answer, just lays his cards on the bedspread and gathers the pile of winnings toward him. "Full house, twos over queens."

Sam gapes. "Why you slick, conniving—"

"Never said I was new at this." People always just assume that about him. "I'm from the '30s, not Mars. Bucky and I, we lived as kings one summer on all the hustle we got away with. More candy than could fit in our pockets. Bucky actually started keeping the overflow in his socks, until a Sugar Daddy melted through the wrapper and tore all the hair off his ankle."

It's a good memory, and it doesn't threaten to close up his throat like usual.

"It's actually comforting to know Captain America is just as big a cheat as the rest of us. Takes some of the shine off."

"I don't cheat. I pay attention. Don't get distracted."

"Uh huh. Next time you bring up sexting, I'm checking my back pocket, make sure my wallet's still there."

Steve shakes his head pityingly and starts stacking his coins into neat piles. "And somehow you think you've got a shot with Romanoff."

Another Cheeto slingshots toward his head.

He has recurring dreams, and his subconscious seems to have forgotten what the world *subtlety* means.

One of them is more memory than dream—the time he'd found a stray dog under the boardwalk, its foreleg mangled, broken. The dream follows his memory to perfection. Arm outstretched, he steps toward the whimpering creature, wanting to comfort it, heartbroken by the way it tenses, crouches even lower to the ground, shaking. It watches him with unblinking eyes, so wide he can see the white filmy edges. It's scared, and alone, and hurting, and Steve just wants to let it know that it's not alone, even if there's nothing he can do to help.

Whimpers turn to growls, and Steve's too slow as its head snaps up, its jaws clamp down.

Sometimes the dreams are so vivid he swears he wakes to the cloying wintergreen fumes of the thick Germolene ointment Bucky had slathered on his arm for a whole week, despite Steve's insistence that he was all right, that it was too expensive, that it would hurt less if only he'd been able to help that poor animal.

The other recurring dreams—they're not exactly mired in memory, seeing as how, living together in a cramped one bedroom he'd seen Bucky in the bare on more than one occasion, and not a winter went by when they hadn't shared a bed to keep warm, the actual combination of those two events... well. Only exists in his unconscious mind.

Those mornings, as he quietly takes care of himself in the bathroom, feeling like a world class creep, he wishes his dreams were full of melting clocks or psychotic clowns or whatever it is everyone else dreams about.

"Do you think you can... help him?" he asks Sam, somewhat out of the blue, as they're driving west along a two-lane byway towards Friendsville. Sam had narrowed his eyes at the first sign they'd passed and asked if this whole trip had been an elaborate metaphor.

"Gotta find him first," he says now.

"We will." There isn't an ounce of doubt in his voice, in his whole body to be frank about it. They're going to find Bucky. Bucky is going to remember him. Steve isn't lying to himself—he knows it isn't gonna be a walk in the park, but he also knows that his body's stamina for staying in the fight finally matches up with his too-stupid-to-give-in head.

Sam rests his elbow on the car window, rests his cheek on his balled fist.

"And when we do find him?"

Steve cocks an eyebrow, tries for a grin. "You're up?"

"And here I thought I was following The Man with A Plan." There's a gleam in his eye like the setting sun on the ocean and Steve groans before Sam can even get the first few notes of the damned song out.

"I was wrong," Steve says. "I regret the internet."

"Hey, but seriously. Steve. The plan?"

"Well. I mean. There's... you."

"Me."

"Yeah. The plan. For when we find him. It's kind of." Steve swallows, stares at the empty road ahead of them, shrugs with both hands still on the wheel. "It's kind of you."

"Oh. Well." Sam shoots him a pointed look. "Thanks for the heads up. I guess."

The thing is, Steve never felt too small for the world, even when he could fit in a bicycle basket. It's why he started more fights with bullies than they started with him. Why he lied on enlistment form after enlistment form instead of taking no for an answer. Why he told Erskine to keep going even when the machine was breaking every bone in his body and building him back up again.

There was nothing *too small* about him, and he took it as confirmation when the three brightest people he'd ever met—Bucky, Peggy, and Erskine—saw it too.

Now, though.

Now.

It isn't that he feels small, but the world—it's so big. It's so big and Bucky is *out there* and Steve doesn't know where.

This isn't Austria. He doesn't have coordinates and a transponder and a ride home. He has a laptop and a friend and a lot of restless nights.

"You wanna talk about it?" Sam says a lot.

"Yeah," Steve replies, and they do.

The world may be too big but he's not alone, and there's no part of him that's not big enough to meet it head-on.

And isn't that just the way it always was.

In Boonsboro, as it turns out, Bucky finds him.

Sam is out for a pre-sunrise jog—Steve still won't call it running just to piss him off, which will never not be funny—and Steve is re-reading the dossier for the hundredth time, and possibly, just possibly resting his eyes for a minute when he feels the mattress dip.

His eyes snap open and his hands move to defend, but his assailant is faster, stronger, has one armed pinned against his side with his knee and the other above his head caught in a death grip. A metal death grip.

"Oh," he breathes out, somewhat involuntarily. Then, stupidly, "Hi."

Bucky squints down at him, as if that one little word has thrown him for a loop. Steve's not surprised. He probably hasn't received such an inane greeting from any of his other targets.

"Jeez, Buck. You smell like the zoo."

He swears up and down in his head that he's smarter than this. He really is.

He expects an attack, or a plea for answers, or anything other than Bucky's dry, warm lips on his neck.

"Wha—"

"Shut up," he thinks he hears Bucky murmur as he moves up toward his jaw, sucking on his skin with his teeth, hard enough to leave bruises—which is saying something.

Steve tries to move, to shuck him off, but Bucky is *heavy* now, heavier than before, and his metal arm doesn't give.

"Bucky, stop," he says, right before Bucky shuts him up with a kiss, or whatever it's called when someone attacks one's lips with theirs. Steve's caught off guard, doesn't know how to fight back—maybe for the first time in his life—so he just tries to breathe, and finds his lips

moving, pulled into a rhythm he can't escape from. He feels like his lungs might explode, like his heart might pump out of his chest. It's overwhelming, and it's *Bucky*, and he should stop this, he should, he should. Dread and shame burn like acid all the way down to his stomach, catch on fire, make his whole body jolt. Bucky pulls up after a breathless minute, not too far, just enough to speak.

"In our other life, we did this?"

Steve is dumbstruck for a moment. *Our other life.*

"Um. No... not—not really. We never..."

"But you wanted to."

He's been lied to for seventy years. That's what Steve reminds himself right before he whispers, "Yes."

"You still want to." He jams his knee tighter against Steve's pinned arm, pitches his hips forward so his groin brushes up against Steve's. His body reacts; his body can't help but react. He's always been attuned to Bucky. It's how they matched each other blow for blow on the causeway and in the helicarrier. He's been keyed in to the shades of Bucky's body since before he can remember, his raw physicality—the breadth of his shoulders, the strength of his thighs, the heat of his breath.

"Bucky—"

"Shut *up*." Bucky presses down against him again, takes his lips like prisoners. The kiss is graceless and desperate and it makes Steve's heart clench. It's Bucky on the carrier, acting out of anger and confusion and feelings he doesn't understand, that don't fit inside of him.

Steve fights dirty. Always has. He bites down, hard, on Bucky's lower lip, hard enough to break the skin. Hard enough to make him draw back. "Bucky. Bucky stop."

Bucky grins down at him, cold, with blood-red lips. "Why should I? You want this."

"No."

"No. You don't." He lifts and slams Steve's arm harder into the mattress. "Because I'm not *him*."

"So you don't remember?" It's a challenge more than a question. Bucky feels it, too, bristles and glares and looks anywhere but into Steve's eyes.

"I said shut up."

"Why are you here? You remember something."

"Why didn't I kill you?" He says it like it hurts him. Like it physically hurts him to have to ask something so simple and yet so complicated. It's why Steve doesn't correct him. Doesn't say *You did more than that. You saved me.*

"You know me," he says instead. He remembers Bucky's reaction the last time he said it. His jaw still aches on cold mornings from the backhand he'd taken. Hopes like hell Bucky's got a different answer for him this time.

A wild fear skitters across Bucky's eyes, the fear of not knowing one's own self, of not knowing anything, and Steve just wants to grab him close, tell him everything's going to get better, that maybe he can't help him but at least he can show him he's not alone anymore—but his arms are pinned and he's helpless. For the second time in his life he feels utterly helpless.

Bucky closes his eyes and inhales, nostrils flaring, brows drawn in. There's at least a week's worth of beard on his sunken, sallow cheeks.

He cracks one eye open, whispers, "Steve?"

"Yeah." Oh God. It's like a swell of helium in his chest. It's like the doors of Stark's machine cracking open and Steve filtering air through healthy lungs for the first time in his life. "Yeah, Buck. It's Steve."

"I don't—I still don't. Remember everything." He's still got Steve pinned, but the grip on Steve's wrist begins to give, the leg along his side goes just the tiniest bit slack. Steve holds his breath, doesn't move, just takes it all in, everything about Bucky, in this moment, rediscovering himself, or whatever's happening here. His eyes are distant, not even in the same room as Steve, but at least they aren't *empty*.

"Everything was black." Bucky swallows, flicks his eyes to Steve, lightning-quick. "There was nothing; I had nothing. And then. Then there was you. You were something. You were... mine, even if I didn't know what that meant. Everything else was theirs. I only existed when they needed me to. I only had what they needed me to have. I didn't understand—why would they let me have the man on the bridge? They didn't, though; I was wrong. They took you away again."

"They tried to."

"They *did*." It seems important to him that Steve believe him.

"Well, you got me anyway. Til the end."

"You were falling. It didn't feel right." He sucks in a breath through his teeth, makes a hissing noise. Too-long hair falls in front of his face.

"You remembered?"

"I just. I didn't feel things. I don't. Feel things. Except when you weren't breathing. I had to make sure you were breathing. Couldn't trust you to take care of it yourself. You were—always terrible at breathing. These were things I felt. Things I knew. Were mine." The look he levels at Steve is all affronted accusation, and it would be funny, any other time. "How can something be terrible at breathing?"

"Don't know, pal. But you were always there, making sure I got it right at least half the time."

Maybe it's the word *pal*, maybe it's more memories and feelings flowing in now that there's no one holding them out of his reach, but his metal fingers slowly release from around Steve's wrist. He sits up and spreads his knees so Steve's no longer trapped.

Confusion, need, want—wanting to know more, to ask more, to be allowed more without punishment—pass over that expressive face. His eyes jump back and forth, the way they did right before Natasha launched a rocket at him, before finally settling on Steve.

It only lasts a second, so still and glassy-eyed the moment could be trapped in amber, before Bucky brings both hands up, covers his eyes, and lurches his whole body forward in rocking, soundless sobs.

Steve scrambles out from under him, comes up on his side, kneeling, doesn't even hesitate for a second before pulling Bucky close, rib to rib, temple to temple. He doesn't have his shield, he doesn't have body armor. Bucky could kill him right now.

Bucky won't. Maybe even *can't*.

Guts over smarts, every damn time.

Bucky sniffs, lowers his hands, starts talking even though it sounds like there's a construction site's worth of gravel in his throat. "Everything was black, but now it's red, Steve. It's all red." His expression pinches, misery outlined in every groove around his red eyes and even redder mouth. "I killed so many people."

Steve's first instinct is to deny. To tell Bucky it wasn't him. It's the truth—God help *anyone* who says otherwise—but there's no point in telling Bucky something he won't believe. Not right now, not when he's two steps away from disappearing again.

So Steve just shushes him, wraps an arm around his shoulders and pulls him close, fits him under his arm the way he always used to fit under Bucky's.

"You survived."

"Steve—"

"No. You *survived*, Buck. You survived every hellish thing the world's thrown at you and... and I couldn't be more proud of you."

It's got to be too much for him. He jams his face against Steve's neck, leaves wet, warm patches of skin like messages in a fogged up mirror.

"That's bullshit, Rogers," he mutters, but he doesn't sound like he means it, exactly. Every muscle in his body seems to give in, all the electric wires keeping him tense switch off, and he goes slack against Steve's side. Steve doesn't know if it's entirely the misery, or if it's his body finally tapping out after weeks, months, years of running on nothing but resistant obedience and other people's missions.

With Bucky slumped against him, docile, trusting, Steve doesn't actually care. Why doesn't matter. Not even how. He's got his 'who' and he can deal with everything else when the sun

rises. It's still dark out, he doesn't have to wake up and chase a ghost, he can lay Bucky down, curl his body around him, and finally, finally rest.

Bucky eventually drifts off. Steve follows after. Story of their lives. Their bodies shift—muscle memory. Steve wakes again to the sound of a door closing and he's no longer wrapped around Bucky.

"Huh," is all Sam says as he reaches slowly for the bedside table, for the gun Steve knows he slid in the middle drawer when they checked in. Steve can just make out the dark rings of sweat on Sam's sweatshirt in the early morning light.

"It's okay," Steve whispers, trying not to move his chest too much with the words, to stay as still as possible.

Bucky is behind him now, big silver arm draped over Steve's front, clutching him close. His sweaty forehead is mashed against the back of Steve's neck, and he can feel every shallow breath on his skin. It's every cold winter in Brooklyn, every rain-soaked night in France.

"Doesn't look okay," Sam says, sliding the drawer open slowly, as if disabling a bomb. "Looks a little like the world's deadliest koala, Cap."

Bucky's arm around him tightens. Steve can feel a shift in his energy. Knows he's fully awake now, if he was ever even asleep at all. There's an angry noise that Steve feels on his back more than hears. He may be wrong, but it sounds an awful lot like *Steve*.

Sam has the drawer open, reaches inside, pulls his eyebrows together. "Well, shit." Draws out a Gideon Bible instead of the gun. "He must've found it first." Sam holds up the bible like a weapon anyway.

"Gonna preach him into submission?" Steve's a lot calmer than he supposes he should be. Maybe because Bucky's arm is still around him; he's still a long line of warmth on his back, just like when they were kids sleeping over on the couch cushions.

"An exorcism wouldn't be out of the question," Sam says. There's a sharp edge to his voice. Not fear, but the promise of impending violence.

Which is enough to break Steve's calm. His spine steels; so does his voice.

"Sam. I'm all right. You trust me?"

"You shitting me?"

"I'm *all right*. Put the..." Steve frowns, because grinning seems like the wrong choice. "Put the good book down, and no one has to get hurt."

Movement—just the tiniest jolt—from behind him, and a gust of warm air on his neck.

A laugh.

Bucky just laughed.

"Christ, Rogers," Sam says, and sinks on to his bed. "Give me a freaking heart attack over here, why don't you."

"I've been told I'm good at that."

"Yeah, well, just know if it happens I'm haunting your tiny ass forever. Good luck ever getting laid again."

Another huff of air on his neck, a little burst of amusement, and hope. Steve closes his eyes. Smiles. Feels the weight of weeks finally crash over him and send him under. It's a feeling he's learned to get used to.

Two voices, low and soft, pull him out of a dreamless sleep.

"It's not gonna get better right away." Sam. Soothing, comforting, but strong, too. Resolute.

"But it will?" Bucky. Quiet. Disbelieving, maybe, with the just slightest tinge of hopefulness.

Steve blinks open his eyes, let's the room materialize around him from a soft gray haze into objects and shapes. Dark silhouettes against the bright box of light coming in through the window form into his friends—two people ready to throw down in a bible fight just a few hours before now sitting across from each other, hunched over the table, shoulders forward, a little bit conspiratorial and a little bit defensive, both. That's when Steve sees two steaming mugs of coffee and a deck of cards between them, like an offering at a peace summit.

"It won't go away. You're gonna carry it with you, probably your whole life, but it'll get lighter. You'll learn what you can let go of, what you can leave behind." Sam's eyes dart to Steve, then back again. "What loads can be shared."

"I... I couldn't. I mean, it's better, maybe, if I just deal with it myself, you know?"

"I get that. I do." The ghost of a smile twitches across Sam's lips, small and earnest and a little bit sad. "But the amazing thing is, you don't have to."

Bucky's stiffens, all the muscles in his back go taut, his whole system switched on to high alert, and Steve's heart jumps.

"You all right?" Sam remains calm, a beacon of stillness in the heart of the storm.

"Yeah. I just..." Bucky looks down at the table, at his fingers—the flesh ones—gripping the edge, slowly releasing, then lifts his head again. "I can see why he likes you so much."

"Back atcha," Sam says, casual, and lays down his cards with a noise of mild disgust. "I swear you're stacking the deck, dude, because I have never been this ass-kicked in my life."

Bucky's jaw twitches, and maybe one day—maybe soon—he'll let it turn into a grin again.

"You were right about this one, Steve." Sam turns, acknowledging him for the first time. "Kid can *hustle*."

"I never said *he* didn't cheat." Steve sits up with a yawn, stretching his arms above his head. There's a loud and satisfying crack from his upper back. "Just that I don't."

"Good morning," Bucky says quietly, all hesitant politeness. It feels strange, to Steve, like accidentally pulling on someone else's shirt.

"Morning," Steve says. "Coffee?"

Sam jerks a thumb toward the alcove across from the bathroom. "On the counter."

Steve pours himself a mug, breathes in the steam and remembers being small and asthmatic and loved.

He flicks his eyes to Bucky, who's watching him not so much like an assassin, but like a confused labrador seeing a platypus for the first time.

"You sticking around?" Steve asks, almost dreading the answer.

"Was, uh." Bucky shrugs those huge, hunched shoulders. "Was thinking about it."

"Good." He tries for a smile; it feels like throwing on an old favorite shirt and finding it still fits just right. "I'm tired of kicking this guy's ass on my own."

"Hey now," Sam warns.

They keep the room another night. Making plans was yesterday's game. They're in a holding pattern now, waiting for... for something.

Bucky showers and shaves, with little resistance. Sam gets more instant coffee packets from the front desk. Steve packs away the laptop, rearranges the pillows on the bed, picks up sandwiches.

Sam and Bucky talk. Well, they stare at each other a lot and sometimes words are involved. There's a lot of quiet. A lot of stillness. It's so unlike Bucky to be so quiet and still.

RoboCop is playing on cable, and Steve grabs for the remote.

Bucky stops him, lays a hand on Steve's arm—the metal hand—and watches the small TV screen with an intensity that would frighten small children and leaves Steve swallowing around a hard lump in his throat.

It's after midnight when Bucky's eyelids start on that rollercoaster of drifting shut and popping back up of the Too Tired but Too Stubborn to Sleep, so Steve starts throwing pillows on the floor, ready to bed down on something blessedly hard and unyielding, but Bucky just follows behind him, picks them back up, tosses them on the bed.

"You mind?" he asks, and it's that hesitance again, that tremble in his voice that makes Steve want to tear down every Hydra and S.H.I.E.L.D. facility until there's nothing left but mortar and dust.

"Not if you don't."

They settle in on opposite sides.

"You guys are cute," Sam says, eyes closed and half-asleep on his back. "Cuddle puddle."

"Shaddup," they say, in unison, and Steve barks out a laugh that shakes the whole bed.

Bucky inches just the tiniest bit closer to the center of the mattress.

He dreams of the stray dog again. It bites him. He doesn't see it again. It probably dies.

Bucky takes him home and patches him up, cups the back of his neck with a large warm hand, tells him he's like the patron saint of lost causes.

—*Must be why I put up with you*, he says, and gets cuffed on the ear for it.

—*Smartass*.

—*Dumbass*.

Bucky's front teeth are crooked and beautiful and Steve feels big enough to take on the whole world.

He wakes up with hair in his mouth and two-hundred twenty pounds of soldier curled over him. They must have shifted in the night again, like reverse-Pangaea, continents drifting back together to form one whole.

"Urph," he says, in pre-caffeinated eloquence.

Bucky snuggles—actually snuggles, like that unsettling bear in the laundry commercials—closer. The corners of his mouth tug down and he butts his forehead against Steve's chest.

"Every inch of you's like a forest on fire," he grumbles, nose curved into the dip of Steve's collarbone. "Why're your feet so damn cold?"

"Bucky." Steve stretches his neck back as far as he can, takes a long, hard look at him. "Bucky?"

"Shut up." Bucky lets out a great big yawn, puts all his weight on Steve and stretches both arms towards the headboard. He looks the most relaxed Steve's seen him since 1943. "Tryna sleep over here, you cold-footed punk."

Without even knowing why, acting on the purest of instinct, Steve flips him onto his back, sees recognition, true recognition and affection and life and laughter and kindness and *Bucky*, in his eyes—and kisses the hell out of him.

"Well," Bucky says around a sleepy smile. "This is new."

"Shut up," Steve says back, voice tight, and hides his face in Bucky's neck. He's not crying. He's not. "Jerk. Chased you across the damn country."

There's a throat-clearing from across the room. Steve peeks out from his warm cocoon.

"You want me to get another room?" Sam's sitting on the edge of his bed, has one eyebrow raised and a wry grin.

Steve almost chokes on his embarrassment.

"Nah," Bucky says. "Stick around. Welcome to join, if you want. Cuddle puddle, circle jerk, whatever's your speed."

Steve does choke, then. "Jesus—Bucky." Sam only lifts the other eyebrow, steeples his fingers in front of his mouth, a man contemplating an interesting but not unwelcome offer.

"Kidding," Bucky says, soothing Steve with a gentle flick against his nose.

"Uh huh." Steve closes his eyes in relief, then feels an excited and confused spark light up his spine like fireworks when he hears Bucky mutter: "*Kind of.*"

Bucky's not fixed, not permanently, not the same man he was before the war. Still doesn't remember everything and sometimes what he does remember sends him into alternating fits of rage or despair. But he's getting closer to okay than not-okay on the surviving-the-kind-of-horrors-we've-survived scale, and maybe it's selfish of him, but after the life they've had, Steve's calling it a fucking win.

The three of them decide to take the scenic route back to D.C., then to New York, then keep heading north to Niagara Falls, because it turns out they always wanted to.

Sam eventually takes Bucky up on the "kind of" offer.

So does Natasha, much to Sam's delight.

"Told ya, Cap. *Melting*."

"It's adorable how in charge he thinks he is," Natasha says, smacking him on the rear.

Steve always had more spine than smarts growing up, so he learned to trust his gut. More than anything, growing up, he trusted Bucky. Neither one had ever led him astray.

They still don't.

End Notes

Title from *Till There Was You* from *The Music Man* because this wasn't shmoopy enough already. Jeez.

Thanks as always to [WhiskeyTangoFoxtrot](#) for giving me all the best ideas.

I'm over on tumblr as [belligerentandnumerous](#) being a complete wreck most of time. Feel free to join me.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!