

A Tale of Two Idiots (In Love)

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A Tale of Two Idiots (In Love)

by [penpenguin](#)

Summary

Bucky might be in love with Steve. He knows better than to show it, but that doesn't stop him from pining after his best friend every chance he gets. At some point, he thinks that maybe Steve feels the same way. The tension is unbearable. It only takes one moment of joyful recklessness for Bucky to show his hand.

A series of oneshots throughout Bucky and Steve's life in Brooklyn, followed by one from Steve's perspective.

Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

Bucky and Steve go on a movie date! Kinda. Sorta. Actually, not really- that's actually mostly Bucky's wishful thinking.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Bucky stood outside Miss Kinney's precalculus class, waiting for his best friend to emerge from the room. He fiddled with the zipper on his bag, running the question in his mind repeatedly.

Wanna go see a movie, Stevie?

How about dinner this weekend?

Wanna go dancing tonight?

He could ask any number of ways, and almost all of them Bucky knew Steve wouldn't see as out of the norm, no matter how desperately Bucky wanted Steve to see him as something else. But Steve didn't feel that way, because he wouldn't, he's too upstanding to like his guy best friend like that, so Bucky shouldn't pressure him into spending any extra time with him that Steve didn't outright ask for.

Steve stepped out of the room, and Bucky walked with him out of the building, matching his best friend's pace. Recounting what he'd learned, something about trigonometry, Steve complained about class but he at least got to do some drawing in the margins of his notes. The words hanging in Bucky's mind preoccupied him and he didn't hear much of Steve's excited chatter.

They made their way to Steve's place, their shoulders brushing against each other as they turned corners, and Bucky had a nearly irresistible urge to slip Steve's hand into his own. He let his fingers brush against Steve's knuckles, finding the contact thrilling. Bucky kept his eyes on the ground in front of him, afraid that if he looked at Steve his emotions would be far too clear.

"And I heard that for students, the tickets will be half price! So, wanna go see a movie with me tomorrow, Buck?"

Bucky blinked, realizing that somehow in his stupor he didn't have to ask Steve a thing for him to get his wish.

“Uh, yeah, Stevie, sounds great.” Bucky bit his lip to keep a giddy grin from blooming on his face.

Steve’s expression was a little puzzled, a bit more guarded than he was leaving class. “You feelin’ okay?” He waved his hand in front of Bucky’s face. “You seem a little out of it.”

“Yeah, I’m good. Don’t worry, I’d never make you miss out on all this.” Bucky gestured to himself and winked. He meant it playfully (mostly), and was glad to see Steve roll his eyes with a smile. When he saw Steve’s ears redden, Bucky’s stomach did a little flip. He dared to hope that maybe, just maybe, Steve might like him back.

When Bucky got home that evening, he did none of his homework. Instead, he carefully planned his every move for their movie date. Not technically a date. Their movie outing. He picked out a shirt he knew he looked good in, and set aside his prized leather jacket over his desk chair. Tomorrow would be *perfect*.

The next morning, Bucky woke up, blinked a few times, and suddenly found himself standing expectantly outside Miss Kinney’s class. The day had been a blur, bustling around with his books and paying just enough attention in class that he wouldn’t get cold called but too little to be properly aware of anything.

“Hiya, Stevie!” Bucky knew he seemed a little too excited, but he didn’t care. If nothing else, he could write it off as looking forward to the movie, but he was far more interested in the guy he’d be sitting with in the semi-darkness of the theater.

Steve emerged from the room with a girl at his side, and Bucky’s smile faltered. She was pretty, her short, dark hair in loose curls, and her deep brown eyes briefly meeting Bucky’s before going back to Steve. Bucky had never seen a girl visibly dismiss him so quickly before, without even bothering to give him a proper chance.

“Buck, this is Peggy! She’s gonna come with us to the movies tonight, if you don’t mind! You can bring a girl, too, if you want, or tag along alone.” Steve smiled at Peggy the way Bucky wished he’d smile at him. Bucky had only seen a ghost of that smile directed at him on special occasions, but for Peggy it was dialed all the way up. Bucky thought that smile was their thing. Peggy didn’t even need to work for it.

Bucky bit his lip, hard. The pain was enough to get his brain moving again to craft a reply. He swallowed thickly.

“Yeah, ‘course! Nice to meet you, Peggy, be good to my best friend here,” Bucky gave her a nod then returned his attention to Steve. He felt his hope crumble around him but put on a smile anyways. “I don’t have to come with, if you’d rather spend your night with the lady, Steve.”

Steve shook his head. “Much as I like her,” Steve’s cheeks turned pink as he spoke, and Bucky clenched his jaw, “I did ask you first, and I do want you there.”

A sinking feeling settled in Bucky’s gut, but he ignored it. “Sure, pal. I’ll meet you there at 8. Spend some time with your date ‘til then.” Bucky winked. He could hardly hear what he was

saying, could hardly believe what he was doing.

Before Steve could say anything else, Bucky turned on his heel and left. He went straight home and shut himself in his room. So much for his plans. But Bucky knew he'd be there. And probably third wheel and leave alone, but Steve would be happy for it.

He thought they'd had something. He hoped they'd had something. He let himself believe it, just a little bit, and here he was. It was bad enough when Steve had casual crushes, but this time the girl was into him, Bucky could barely handle it. He immediately regretted the thought. Of *course* someone finally saw in Steve what Bucky saw. Steve's goodness was written in his every move, clear as day, for anyone to see if they cared to look. If anything, Bucky was lucky it took a girl this long.

At fifteen minutes to 8, Bucky threw on the clothes he'd set out the night before, back when he was dreaming of romantic possibilities rather than facing his heart-wrenching reality, and headed out the door.

He arrived at the theater a few minutes early and had no trouble finding Steve and his bright blond hair standing outside, but Bucky was a bit confused when he saw that he was alone.

"Where's your girlfriend?" Bucky asked, outwardly amused and inwardly hurt when Steve blushed.

"She, uh, she said she had to do something at her place and she'd meet me here." Steve messed with the hem of his shirt. "She'll be here." He added quietly, as if trying to convince himself as much as Bucky.

"Yeah, I'm sure, pal. She sounded real into you earlier." Bucky patted Steve's shoulder in what he hoped was a reassuring manner. "Wanna wait inside? It's a bit cold out here."

Steve reluctantly agreed, and Bucky was grateful for it, since he could see the shade of blue Steve's lips were becoming. Not that he was looking at Steve's lips. Because he wasn't. And if he was, it was only because Steve had just gotten over pneumonia a few weeks back and he didn't need to get sick again. No other reason. (Bucky thinks they're probably the softest thing on the planet. Unfortunately, Steve is not his to explore.)

Minutes ticked by. Steve looked more concerned by the second. Bucky felt awful for him, and even worse that he was almost hopeful Peggy wouldn't show. It was selfish of him, but he couldn't help but think that maybe he could still take a chance tonight.

"Steve," Bucky spoke quietly, trying not to sound pitiful. Steve would hate that. "How about we wait in the movie, yeah? She knows which one we're watchin' right, so she can come in and find us."

Steve nodded dejectedly, his pride fragile but intact. "Alright."

They found a few seats in the back row and settled in. The movie had already started, but it wasn't hard to piece together what they'd missed. Bucky didn't pay much attention though, because he was carefully watching Steve from the corner of his eye.

More accurately, he was carefully watching Steve's arm on their shared armrest. Bucky was never good at algebra, but at that moment he was running calculations that would make Einstein proud as he figured out his next move. Disgust washed over him as Bucky realized his best friend was stood up by the first girl that really seemed to like him, and he was trying to capitalize on it.

So he decided against anything dramatic, and hoped his hand on Steve's wouldn't be too much. It might even be a helpful reminder that Bucky was there for him. Keeping his eyes ahead, Bucky slowly put his hand next to Steve's. A few minutes later, he shifted so his hand rested on Steve's. Finally, Bucky took the plunge and laced his fingers with his best friend's.

Bucky was grateful the theater was so dark, or the heat on his face would've given him away in a heartbeat. He wasn't one to blush, but with Steve it was different. Steve had always been different for Bucky, and he knew exactly why but he'd sooner die than put it into words. Bucky waited a bit longer before hazarding a glance Steve's way. He couldn't make out the expression on Steve's face, but took the fact that their hands remained together as a good sign. Considering it a success, Bucky tried to relax as much as he could and enjoy the film, though Steve's hand in his sent electricity tingling from his fingertips down to his toes.

Bucky was so distracted, he hardly noticed the person making their way toward them, the one who sat down on Steve's other side. He did, however, notice when Steve wrenched his hand from Bucky's and whispered an enthusiastic hello to Peggy. Bucky could just make out her explanation about her dog getting out and having to chase him down before coming. A perfectly fair reason for a perfectly fair girl.

Bucky frowned. Steve's entire body was angled towards Peggy. As if Bucky had never been there. Though it was his default state, Bucky was aware of how empty his hand felt. Perhaps he had been better off not knowing what Steve's hand felt like in his. But what was done was done, and even in the darkness Bucky could easily see Steve and Peggy exchange brilliant smiles and secretive looks.

The movie was bright in front of him, but Bucky let his vision blur, instead focusing on himself. He took slow breaths, reminding himself that this was good. For Steve, at least. Steve deserved somebody more than anyone else, and Peggy seemed a lovely girl. For Bucky, this was definitely less good. He could feel his grip on Steve slipping, as if maybe holding his hand for those few seconds that felt like hours that would never be long enough for Bucky was the most he would get. Then Steve would move out, get a house with a picket fence and have a couple of kids, all with Peggy at his side.

One date couldn't mean all that, right? Bucky's internal voice of reason caught him with a wonderfully warm safety net. No need to worry 'til they gave him something to worry about. Bucky saw the way Steve and Peggy looked at each other, but Bucky'd looked that way at girls before and he was still single.

A sigh of relief brought Bucky back to the theater and the movie in front of him. It must've been the climax, he found himself watching the protagonists kiss in the rain as the music swelled. Bucky hadn't paid enough attention to the movie to know the details, but he could see clear as day that the actors were not into it. He turned towards Steve to make a joke about the obvious lack of chemistry.

Only, Steve was most definitely not paying attention to the movie. Because where Bucky expected to meet Steve's eye, he was staring instead at the back of his head, where Peggy's hand was holding Steve close. While they kissed. And unlike the one onscreen, this couple was not acting. Bucky felt a pressure in his chest so intense he would've been surprised his ribs didn't collapse if he wasn't so busy blinking back tears. His head snapped forward, the now blurry actors taunting him with their pretend bliss. A lump in Bucky's throat threatened to expose him with a sob.

Bucky had so desperately wanted to be Steve's first.

He needed to leave. There was no way Steve would notice (*and if he did, he'd probably assume I'm doing him a favor*, Bucky thought bitterly), so he stumbled outside.

As soon as the cold air filled his lungs, Bucky ran. His feet pounded the sidewalk with every step. Bucky wasn't wearing the right shoes for this, which he realized when one wrong step sent pain shooting up through his foot and ankle. He savored it, appreciating the distraction.

He wasn't sure where he was going, just that he was getting away, and eventually found himself in a shadowy dead-end alley. Bucky sank down onto the frigid concrete and let the tears course down his cheeks.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed, and as always, comments and kudos are immensely appreciated :)

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

It's Steve's birthday! Very pleasant time spent between two best friends who are definitely nothing more.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Bucky fiddled with his shirtsleeve. He knew that Steve would love his gift; that wasn't the problem. The problem was the voice in the back of his head reminding him that he needed to be careful. That he had been pushing the line lately, and while Bucky was careful not to make Steve uncomfortable, it wouldn't take him long to put two and two together if Bucky got too bold. The location didn't help, the two of them sitting together alone on the roof of their building as the day's scorching heat gave way to a cool, starlit night. Against Bucky's every effort to ignore it, the scene was undeniably romantic.

"Happy birthday, Stevie," Bucky murmured, standing on the roof of their building and proudly presenting his gift. With his emotions, Bucky knew he was out of his depth. But giving Steve a birthday gift was something Bucky was confident in. He'd wrapped it in newspaper, as that was all he could afford after buying the gift itself. Bucky thought it gave it character.

Bucky smiled watching Steve unfold the wrapping even though he knew his best friend wanted to tear through the paper. The punk was taking his sweet time, savoring the entire experience of his gift, and he didn't even know what it was yet! He'd never admit it aloud, but it made Bucky's heart flutter.

"A new sketchbook? And watercolors? Thank you so much!" Steve threw his arms around Bucky.

Bucky felt his cheeks redden, and he silently cursed himself for no longer being able to innocently appreciate Steve's hugs. But it was okay, and Bucky would deal with it as long as it meant that his friendship with Steve was steady.

Steve pulled away, sooner than Bucky would've liked, but he knew that any longer would make it weird. Bucky would let Steve squeeze the life out of him if he wanted. After all, the closeness to Steve breathed life into him, so it would probably cancel out, and Bucky would be left a blushing mess but he would be a blushing mess with Steve at his side, which would make it alright. And a little bit terrifying.

"Hello? Bucky? You in there?" Steve tapped the side of Bucky's head, bringing him back to Earth.

“What were you saying?” Bucky rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly, suddenly worried that if he looked into Steve’s earnest blue eyes for too long that his thoughts would somehow teleport into his best friend’s mind. That was impossible though, unless Stark had developed anything new, but this year’s expo hasn’t happened yet so even if the technology existed there was no way Bucky would be a test subject and-

“Are you sure you’re here?” Steve seemed more worried than anything, but Bucky couldn’t help feeling a little bit guilty. Steve’s 18th birthday and Bucky was distracted by his stupid crush. (Though he couldn’t help but notice that this “stupid crush” had stuck around for a few years and perhaps wasn’t so little, but Bucky squashed the thought as soon as he had it and resolved never to think of it again.)

Bucky shook his head lightly to dismiss the thoughts. “Yeah, sorry. ‘M here now.”

“Was just sayin’ I really appreciate you sticking with me all these years, Buck, I know I’m not the easiest friend to have, on account of the fights and getting sick and all.” Steve smiled sheepishly.

Bucky almost slipped, almost told Steve how he wasn’t choosing him as much as Steve was simply a necessity. How Bucky hated that Steve constantly found himself inches from death but loved how he never stopped swinging, whether at bullies or the flu. But Steve was there to save Bucky from himself, his voice cutting cleanly through Bucky’s thoughts.

“And I hope it wasn’t too much money to buy these.” Steve gestured to the watercolors. “I know how expensive art supplies are. I don’t want you going hungry on my account.”

Bucky smiled. If it was anyone else, he would’ve laughed incredulously, shocked that after receiving such a gift they would so quickly be concerned for his well being. But that was his Steve. (Not *his* . Just Steve.)

“Don’t you worry your pretty little head about money, Stevie, I picked up some extra shifts and made it work. You’re worth it.” Bucky knew he was pushing it a bit, but he couldn’t resist when he saw Steve smile in the darkness, a look in his eye that Bucky couldn’t quite place. The smile that was reserved for him. (And Peggy.) A pang of jealousy shot through him. But Steve hadn’t seen Peggy in awhile, and Bucky selfishly hoped he would never see her again. Steve might be his-but-not- *his* for just a little longer.

“I...” Steve trailed off. “I don’t know what to say. How can I ever thank you?”

“That’s the thing about birthdays, Stevie. The gifts are to say thank you for being alive and being you. You don’t owe me a thing.” Bucky didn’t mean to sound so soft, but he meant every word. He bit his lip. The rational part of him was screaming danger, but suddenly, Bucky wanted to admit everything. He wanted to shout his feelings from this very rooftop, to the moon, to the stars, and to Steve.

Steve glanced at Bucky’s lips for a fraction of a second, then looked Bucky in the eye for a moment too long. Bucky was grateful for the darkness concealing his face like a safety net cloaking his thoughts. If he didn’t know any better, he’d think Steve was waiting for Bucky

to kiss him, but that couldn't be right because Steve wasn't into guys and Bucky was not going to take advantage of his friend like that.

A loud explosion brought them back to reality. Steve grabbed Bucky's hand in surprise. Bucky closed his eyes, taking in the moment before the last of it slipped away, and then tried to clear his mind.

"Oh! Fireworks!" Steve exclaimed. In the flashes of light, Bucky could see Steve's eyes bright with life, exactly as he hoped he'd always be able to see them. Steve meant nothing by holding his hand, Bucky knew, but he was intensely aware that though they were now adjusted to the fireworks, Steve had not let go.

They laid together on the roof, looking up at the dark sky, faces periodically illuminated by the explosions. Steve watched the fireworks, and Bucky did too, but he more often stole glances of Steve in the light.

Steve shifted a little, enough for their shoulders to brush, and Bucky's breath hitched. He'd been getting better about hiding his feelings, considering how they had just about overtaken his whole life. It was enough that Steve's scrawny figure screamed at bullies looking for a target; he didn't need Bucky's hopeless crush on him to be tacked on, too.

"I know how I can thank you, Buck," Steve's voice was quiet.

Bucky looked over at him, finding Steve's face alarmingly close to his.

"And what's that, Stevie?" Bucky cringed a little, hearing how breathy his voice was. Hopefully Steve didn't notice (or didn't care).

"You'll be the first thing I paint." Steve wore a huge grin, and his eyes twinkled. Nothing indicated anything other than friendliness on his face, as if the past hour had never happened. Maybe it hadn't, to him. Bucky was more distraught than he'd like to admit that Steve so clearly was friendzoning him, taunting him without even knowing.

But Bucky couldn't let Steve go from his life. He was happy to be friends. Best friends. Anything to keep Steve around.

Chapter End Notes

This one's a bit shorter, but I still thoroughly enjoyed writing it! Hope you also enjoyed reading- the next chapter will hopefully be up in a week or so.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Steve does a portrait of Bucky and oh boy it would expose some of his feelings except Bucky is an oblivious idiot.

“I wasn’t lying to ya, Buck, I meant it when I said I’d paint you.” Steve accosted Bucky when he got home from the docks one evening.

“Not right now, Steve, I’m all gross.” Bucky had been avoiding it in the weeks since Steve’s birthday. The concept was innocent enough, but he worried the intimacy of it might be too much for him to handle. They spent lots of time very close together, in situations that, if it was anyone besides the two of them, it would be weird, but putting himself into a position where Steve would be forced to look at him for hours at a time made Bucky’s stomach turn.

“You look just fine to me.” Steve fidgeted in his seat, the new sketchbook on his lap. “But if you wanna take a shower or somethin’ first, that’s okay,” he added hurriedly.

Bucky was still unsure, and it must’ve been clear on his face, because Steve’s expression faltered before his familiar stubborn look appeared.

“Look, Bucky, I wanna start using this sketchbook and I can’t until I paint you. So even if you don’t care about the art, just do it for me, will ya?” Steve knew he hit true.

“I care about your art,” *and you*, he would’ve said, but Bucky caught himself. “I just want to make sure I’m good enough for it.”

“Bullshit.” Steve rarely cursed, but he didn’t hesitate to call Bucky’s bluff. “You know you’re always good enough for me. Come on, Buck, please.”

Bucky took a deep breath, weighing his options as if he didn’t already know what he’d do. He wasn’t going to let Steve down, but he was going to ignore the tension in the room, because Bucky knew that Steve meant nothing by it. He was just an artist who wanted to practice his craft, and Bucky was a nearby and willing enough subject.

“Fine. Let me at least change first, then,” Bucky sighed. He padded into their room and put on marginally cleaner clothes. Bucky tried to fix his hair, then got frustrated and decided to tie it back in a small bun. He washed his face, hoping that would somehow help. A few strands of his dark hair fell from the bun, framing his face.

“C’mon Buck, whatcha taking so long for? Doin’ makeup in there?” Steve teased from the other room and Bucky rolled his eyes but was smiling as he returned to their living room.

Bucky took a seat on the floor in front of Steve, who was opening his sketchbook, which he'd propped up in his lap. Bucky carefully positioned himself such that the glowing ray of sunlight from the room's lone window lit his face. He told himself it was so Steve could practice his shadows. It was mostly because Bucky wanted to look good. For the painting. (For Steve.)

Steve looked up from his sketchbook, then down at Bucky and his jaw dropped for less than a second. It was almost imperceptible, and afterward Bucky was sure he imagined it. Bucky gave Steve a sheepish grin.

"Will this do?" Bucky knew the answer before it came.

"You, uh," Steve's ears turned a light pink. "You look amazing, Buck."

Girls told Bucky he looked good all the time. It was something else to hear it from Steve. It was something else for Steve to paint him when the way he looked at Bucky was laced with something beyond his usual studious expression.

"Much as I enjoy it, you gotta stop staring at me and start working, Stevie. The sun won't wait for you like I will." Bucky winked and Steve seemed to snap out of his thoughts. Immediately, Bucky cringed, worried he'd pushed too far and made Steve uncomfortable.

"I gotta look at you first, jerk, or else I wouldn't know what I was putting on the paper!" Steve defended himself, but Bucky watched as the flush spread across his face. "Now sit still while the magic happens."

Bucky froze, watching as Steve's eyes raked over his body, flitting from him to his paper. They sat in silence, save for the light scratching of Steve's pencil and their quiet breaths. Bucky felt like they were the only two souls in Brooklyn, maybe even the world.

The outside world was quick to put him in his place as sirens echoed up from the street, startling Bucky. It did little to interrupt Steve's concentration as he began to paint.

"You have very nice eyes. Your whole face actually," Steve mumbled to his sketchbook more so than Bucky, but Bucky heard him easily over their faint surroundings.

Bucky bit the inside of his cheek, saying nothing. He didn't want to ruin the ambiance, but Steve rarely ever complimented him, especially on his appearance. Bucky didn't want to bring up the disparity in their looks if he could avoid it. He knew Steve was insecure about it, even if he didn't let it show. The world saw Steve differently than Bucky did. It saw scrawniness where Bucky looked upon a slender figure. Saw his audacity to get into fights but missed the courage to help those in danger that Bucky couldn't ignore. Guilt seeped into Bucky's bones when he was almost glad he was able to keep Steve to himself.

The sun was long gone when Steve spoke again.

"I'm not sure it's quite right, but I think it is the best I can do tonight." Steve closed the sketchbook and put away the paints. He cleaned his brushes in the kitchen sink then started to head to bed.

“Uh, Steve.” Bucky stood, hearing more than a few of his joints crackle as he stretched. “Aren’t you gonna show me?”

Steve shrugged. “It’s not done. I’ll finish it tomorrow and then you can see.”

“I have to work tomorrow, I can’t just stay up again to be your muse.” Bucky spoke lightly, but he could feel his exhaustion setting in.

“There’s enough done that I won’t need you. Besides,” Steve tapped his temple with a smile, “I have a perfect image up here for reference.”

Bucky grabbed his pajamas and a towel, finally getting a chance to get clean after his long day. He dwelled on Steve’s words. Everything Steve had said sounded like he meant more, but Bucky knew how direct Steve was. Anytime he wanted something, he’d dig in his heels, make himself clear, and not budge until he got it. Steve hadn’t done that for Bucky, which didn’t mean he didn’t want him at all, but did mean Steve didn’t want him like *that*. But his words were tempting. Bucky could feel his resolve weaken, and had to pointedly remind himself that Steve was far too important to Bucky to lose him over this crush.

A pit settled in Bucky’s gut, even his subconscious aware that it would not be that simple.

Bucky ignored it. He got out of the shower, feeling refreshed and ready to sleep, and curled up in bed next to Steve. Their limbs tangled like always and Bucky knew that it was to keep Steve warm in their unheated apartment but he felt the gravity of it a thousand times more than usual. He shouldn’t have, it shouldn’t have made any difference at all because Bucky knew that Steve didn’t think twice about it but Bucky would lay awake, contemplating it all for hours.

It took a few hours for Bucky to fall asleep. Light, unsatisfying, not-much-more-than-a-nap sleep, but at least he got it. He woke before Steve and instead of inviting Steve to eat breakfast with him, Bucky got ready for work and slipped out the door without a second glance.

He needed to get himself together. Steve’s compliments the day before were just his artistic eye recognizing proportions. It was objective commentary on his appearance. Butterflies took flight in his stomach and warmth blossomed in his chest at the thought that Steve’s expression was anything but neutral when he’d said those things.

He knew it was wishful thinking. Bucky had to stop looking for something that wasn’t there. A nagging feeling in the back of his mind said he was missing something, but Bucky couldn’t figure out what so he pushed the thoughts from his mind and focused on working himself to the bone. If he was exhausted enough, Bucky wouldn’t have the energy to fret over Steve and him. Not that that had ever worked before, but Bucky was nothing if not persistent.

After work, Bucky stumbled into the apartment, hardly remembering to take off his coat and shoes at the door. Technically, he’d succeeded in distracting himself, but Bucky could barely keep his eyes open. He collapsed on the couch and proceeded to fall into a deep sleep.

Hours later, Bucky awoke to find Steve's face inches away from his. Startled, Bucky almost jumped but managed to catch himself to not ruin whatever moment he didn't know they were having. He felt like a spy in his own life; this was something he was never supposed to see. Through his half lidded eyes Bucky watched Steve stand and look away, at which point Bucky thought it safe to wake.

"Hey, sorry I fell asleep on ya, work was exhausting," Bucky spoke slowly, his voice low and gravelly.

Steve jumped. "Oh! No problem, Buck, I took the chance to finish up the portrait and double check some details."

Bucky was wide awake now. "Does that mean I can see it?"

"Yeah," Steve blushed. "I didn't even do you justice but I did my best and that's what's important, plus I got to practice some new techniques so it doesn't have to be good-"

"I'm sure it's fantastic," Bucky interrupted Steve's nervous rambling. "Lemme see the masterpiece."

Steve turned his sketchbook to display his work.

"Stevie," Bucky breathed. "Is this how you see me?"

The portrait was tender, every stroke done with care. Bucky had always seen himself as a bit rough around the edges, but looking up at him from the paper was an angel with his face. Bucky's skin was golden in the light and his eyes glittered a silvery blue. His dark hair shined in the light, looking... Well, it looked pretty despite how tired and gross he had felt. His lips were pink and plump, parted just slightly, and Bucky couldn't help but notice how affectionate he looked. If that was how smitten he looked all the time, that could be trouble.

"If you like it, then yeah," Steve looked up at Bucky with a tentative grin. "If you don't like it, well, also yeah."

"I love it." Bucky wrapped his arms around Steve in a tight hug. It was purely platonic appreciation for his best friend, and when Steve rested his head against Bucky's chest, Bucky became very aware of the way Steve's small body melted into him. Aware of Steve's warm breath on his neck. The way it all made his hair stand up and sent shivers down his spine.

Steve stepped back, bringing his attention back to the painting. Bucky smiled in awe, looking not unlike a kid on Christmas as he watched Steve admire his work. Admire Bucky.

Maybe Bucky and Steve had more of a shot than Bucky first thought.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Here's the dance, y'all! Very tense, as you might expect, and I am here for it!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“I got a double date for us, Steve!” Bucky sat next to his best friend on the old couch they'd gotten secondhand the month before. They hadn't spoken of the night Steve painted Bucky. The reverent portrait remained hidden in the pages of Steve's sketchbook, and Bucky hadn't seen it since. Although, Bucky supposed, he was probably reading too far into it, and Steve was acting like nothing had happened because there was truly nothing there. So they returned to the semi-comfortable normal Bucky had been living in for the past few years, and he didn't question it. It would be over soon anyway.

“Who's the lucky girl?” Steve asked with a half smile.

Bucky knew full well that Steve wasn't talking about his own date, but figured he'd flatter his best friend anyway.

“You might remember her from school- her name's Peggy. You went on a date or two with her back then? Anyways, she's a real looker, and got some grit, too, all grown up now and everything. You'll like her.” Bucky bit through the ache in his chest as he described the girl who would finally be good to Steve. Bucky never knew why Steve hadn't kept seeing her when they were in school. They seemed quite the couple, and with an abundance of affection, much to Bucky's chagrin.

Many of Steve's dates since have turned their backs immediately, or worse, grimaced and went through with it, spending the whole night making it clear they were disappointed. Peggy wasn't going to do that. She had approached Bucky to ask about Steve, and when Bucky offered to hook them up, she coolly accepted. He could see the excitement in her eyes. He hoped she missed the pain in his own.

“Sounds nice.” Steve's smile was genuine, though his voice seemed to fall a little flat.

“What's up? Don't wanna go dancing?” Bucky asked, thoughts flying through his mind of everything he could've done wrong. Maybe there was something else between Steve and Peggy that drove them apart and Bucky had overstepped, though when he racked his brain he came up with nothing.

“Well, Buck, I like going with these girls, I really do, and I like Peggy especially, but I still don't know how to dance.” Steve sighed, eyes downcast. “I don't have the skill you do. I've

got three left feet. You know that.”

“We can fix that, Stevie, no problem.” Bucky turned on the radio to his left and found a station they could dance to. He stood up and offered his friend his hand. “I’ll teach ya, come here.”

As soon as Steve put his small hand in Bucky’s, Bucky knew he was treading on thin ice. But he couldn’t resist the opportunity to hold Steve close again. Bucky placed Steve’s left hand on his shoulder and his own on Steve’s lower back, taking Steve’s other hand and lacing their fingers. Bucky cleared his throat, imagining Peggy, remembering why he was doing this. He didn’t notice Steve’s breath hitch.

“I’ll lead first, then you can try your hand at it,” Bucky said, leaning in closer, his lips nearly brushing Steve’s ear as he spoke. “Just step with me, and sway to the music.”

They began to move, Bucky leading them in a small circle around the room. A couple of times Steve stumbled, and apologized profusely, but Bucky could only focus on feeling the sparks Steve’s touch sent through him. Eventually, Steve rested his head against Bucky’s shoulder, and Bucky hoped against hope that Steve couldn’t feel his pulse jump.

He needed to stop it; they were getting too close. Bucky was feeling too much at once, and he could place only a few of his emotions. The rest was a muddled mass of anxieties tinged with something he recognized but couldn’t name (or wouldn’t name). Steve was gonna notice, and Bucky couldn’t stand to think what would happen then.

“Let me show you something.” Even Bucky could hear the way his voice had dropped an octave being so close to Steve.

Bucky took an abrupt step back from Steve, putting some space between them so he could take a breath. The distance allowed Bucky to really see Steve, who looked up at Bucky through his thick lashes. His pupils were dark and dilated, leaving only a thin ring of blue around them. His cheeks were flushed, his lips parted, his breaths shaky. Bucky almost couldn’t believe the sight in front of him.

“Um,” Bucky’s voice faltered, suddenly feeling a ton of rocks in his chest and a pang of heat burning the butterflies in his stomach. So much for that refreshing breath. His mind was blank save for how his best friend was looking at him, how Bucky knew he was looking back at Steve just the same. Bucky pocketed another stolen moment. God, he’d become a career criminal in an instant to feel this again. He supposed perhaps he already was.

“Just go with it.” Bucky cringed. He took all that time to think and didn’t come up with anything intelligent to say. But he knew how to dance. He’d have to let it speak for itself.

Steve nodded, glancing at Bucky’s lips for a tenth of a second before closing the distance between them.

Bucky knew Steve was imagining Peggy, seeing her dark curls and classic red lips in his mind’s eye. He saw her strength and femininity, how she was everything to Steve that Bucky

could never be. Bucky winced as he redirected Steve, bringing their hands above Steve's head and twirling his friend, then pulling him back in.

A beat later, Bucky guided Steve away from him until their arms were extended. Just their fingertips were touching, but Bucky's whole body was on fire. He felt some of the familiarity of dancing return with the distance and confidently spun Steve back toward him until Steve was wrapped in Bucky's arms. Steve's back was against Bucky's chest, and Bucky hung his head just enough that his cheek rested against the side of Steve's head as they swayed to the beat.

They stayed like that for a while, Bucky unsure of where to go from there and Steve not willing to make a sound for fear of breaking the moment. Bucky dared to dream of what it might be if he could dance with Steve whenever he wanted. No false pretenses, just dancing. To exist in the same space with Steve, to play a love song or make their own, to dance around the haven that was their apartment. Their home. Bucky hoped Steve couldn't feel his heart pound in his chest, or if he did that Steve would do him the favor of ignoring it. Steve was a gentleman; Bucky didn't need to worry.

When he couldn't stand it anymore, Bucky let Steve turn to face him.

"Your turn to lead, if you'd like." Bucky whispered.

Steve nodded, moving his hand so it rested low on Bucky's back, sending warmth tingling up Bucky's spine and causing a new flutter of butterflies to take flight within him. Bucky raised his hand to Steve's shoulder, letting Steve lead him around the room.

Steve's movements were choppy at first. He'd move without thinking, Bucky noticed, and then have to scramble to figure out what he would do next. After a few missteps and rushed apologies, Steve found his footing and the pair found their rhythm.

"Is this alright?" Steve asked, biting his lip. It was a tell of his nerves, though Bucky hadn't seen him do it in awhile. Bucky frowned at that before realizing how it must look, so he replaced it with a smile he hoped would hide how much it hurt. Steve must really want to get this right for Peggy, and here Bucky was using it to daydream about a life he'd never have.

"Just perfect, Stevie. Enjoy the music and the dancing will work itself out. The girls love it the smoother you are." Bucky advised.

Girls . The reason they were even doing this. Because Steve had a date and it was gonna go well and Bucky was going to be demoted to the backseat in Steve's life, if he still had a place in it at all. In that moment, Bucky swore he heard the saxophone on the radio morph into Taps in mourning.

They made their way around the room again as the song, its sweet melody distinctly not Taps, softened and finished.

Bucky hesitated, then broke the silence.

“One last thing,” Bucky quickly switched their hands so he held Steve’s back once again. He would never have this chance again, and if Peggy would be replacing him anyway, Bucky might as well have one memento. When he continued, he spoke slowly, intentionally. “Peggy will especially love it when you do this.”

He let Steve slip back into a low dip, then expertly lifted him up and pulled him close.

Their noses were almost touching, and technically, nothing was stopping Bucky from pressing his lips against Steve’s. He almost leaned in, nearly let his eyes drift shut, ready to leap off the cliff and drag their friendship down with him, but an upbeat trumpet cut through their moment as the next song began.

Bucky cleared his throat, almost surprised to find Steve’s eyes slowly fluttering open, a distant look in them laced with something that Bucky had never seen before.

“So, uh, there you have it. Dancing 101.” Bucky let go of Steve brusquely and crossed his arms over his chest. “Do that this weekend and you’ll be golden.”

“Thank you, Buck.” Steve spoke quietly, his voice little more than a whisper.

“Of course, you’re my best... pal.” Bucky sighed inwardly at his word choice. He knew he’d already crossed a dozen lines, leaving warning signs in the dust and ignoring blaring alarm bells. But he couldn’t keep pushing it like this. Steve was the best thing to happen to him, and if Bucky’s curtain call was coming, he was going to milk every second of this. “I’d do anything for ya.”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter might take a bit longer to post; I haven't got it prewritten so it'll take more than just editing to write. But it's coming, and I'm excited! It'll feature the double date so expect some jealousy jealousy ;)

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Time for that double date Bucky arranged, though he does end up sort of regretting it. Not because it goes poorly, necessarily- Steve has a great time.

Chapter Notes

This one's a bit longer, and it might be later than promised but it's here! The next chapter is real short and (not) sweet, and should be coming at you soon since it's mostly prewritten.

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

“How do I look?”

Bucky was afraid to look up, afraid that seeing Steve all ready for their date would light a fire within him that he wouldn't be able to douse. Bucky knew better than to get too involved, yet somehow he kept going back to finding dates for Steve and watched as his heart was slowly, achingly crushed. This date was going to go well for Steve, too, and Bucky hadn't figured out how the hell he was gonna live through it.

“Come on, Buck, is it that bad?” Steve must have taken Bucky's inaction as a sign. Not wanting to hurt Steve's confidence before what would probably be the best date of his life, Bucky hazarded a glance.

Steve's hair was shining, especially golden in the evening sun. His blue eyes were bright as always, tinged with nerves Bucky thought didn't need to be there, but he felt sympathetic anyway. His pink lips curled into a smile as Bucky looked him over. Steve wore a blue button down that matched his eyes almost perfectly, and had it tucked into a sandy brown pair of pants. In short, he looked breathtaking.

“Wow.” Bucky pretended his voice was steady, and full of only platonic admiration. Nothing else, because that would be wrong. In a split second (bad) decision, he added, “You should undo the top couple buttons, Stevie. You'll be irresistible. To Peggy.” And Bucky, but he couldn't say that part.

Steve cocked a brow, but did as he was told, revealing a tantalizing portion of his pale chest to Bucky.

Bucky took a sharp breath. “Yeah, that’ll do it.”

Steve shrugged, oblivious to the way Bucky fidgeted in his seat. Steve must not have seen Bucky’s eyes glued to Steve’s exposed chest. It was almost nauseating, but Bucky couldn’t help it. Really, he reasoned, he was just helping Steve out. Looking at him from a girl’s perspective, getting in the mind of someone who really wanted Steve. It was dangerously easy to do, but Bucky ignored that to enjoy the sight in front of him.

“Well, I think I’m ready to go when you are.”

Steve’s words shook Bucky from his reverie.

“You know I’m always ready to go dancing,” Bucky gave Steve a coy smile. He wasn’t ready this time. He’d never quite be ready, but best to get it over with. Rip off the band-aid. “Shall we?” He held out his arm goofily, not expecting Steve to actually take it.

But suddenly, Steve was holding on to Bucky’s arm, and it felt all too much like Bucky was the one lucky enough to be going dancing with Steve. A familiar knot of longing lodged itself into his stomach, laced with jealousy, which was new. Bucky had a sinking feeling that it would be much more common after that night. At least Steve had yet to let go.

Lost in his thoughts, Bucky didn’t notice how Steve’s cheeks flushed holding on to Bucky. Nor did he see Steve stealing looks at him as they walked. If he did, things might have been both easier and harder, but they would surely have been clearer.

When they arrived at the dance hall, Steve seemed reluctant to let go, but that was probably just Bucky’s wishful thinking. He spotted Peggy and directed Steve to her, saying he’d wait outside for his own date.

Thankfully, that bought Bucky a few minutes to himself. Unfortunately, that meant he had time alone, just him and his mind. Bucky had seen the way Steve’s eyes lit up when they met Peggy’s, the way Peggy’s eyes flicked down to Steve’s exposed chest for a fraction of a second (like Bucky knew she would), the way she laughed at his jokes and put her arm on his shoulder.

Bucky had never been religious, but he still sent a silent prayer of thanks that it had taken them this long to find each other. That he was lucky enough to have Steve for as long as he did. Then he realized that God was more likely orchestrating Steve and Peggy’s relationship rather than his and Steve’s. Leave it to Bucky’s crush to ruin things. He could admit it to himself, he had a crush, because it had finally become a thing of the past. Not the feelings, of course, but the potential (if it had ever existed in the first place).

“Hey, James.”

Bucky jumped from his thoughts, his eyes landing on a short blonde. Her big blue eyes were looking up at him, and Bucky couldn’t help but think that they weren’t as pretty as Steve’s. No matter. He put on his nicest smile and offered her his arm.

“Please, call me Bucky.”

Bucky was intensely aware of Steve and Peggy. Though he knew it wasn't good for him, Bucky glanced over at them regularly. He tried to convince himself that it was good for Steve. He decided Steve deserved it. And Steve clearly wasn't in pain. In fact, he was beaming at Peggy, who leaned in to whisper something in his ear before stepping away.

Steve made a beeline for Bucky, who was standing alone while waiting for his date to return from the powder room.

"Bucky!" Steve was positively glowing. Bucky's heart dropped. "It's going so well! I think she really likes me, Buck."

"That's great, Stevie." Bucky's voice was flatter than he was expecting, making him sound almost sarcastic. Steve didn't even notice.

"I know!" He looked past Bucky, his eyes lighting up further. Bucky had never seen Steve like this, and he almost hoped he never would again. Not for anyone else, at least. "There's Peg again, time to dance! Thanks for teaching me, by the way, this is gonna be great!" He spoke quickly, and before Bucky was ready to let go, Steve hurried back to his date.

Say what you will about Steve Rogers, he was one hell of an attentive date. Bucky bit his lip. He would forever be left to wonder what it was like to be on the receiving end of Steve's affections. He tried to remember how good this was for Steve, but Bucky had lost all of his reasons.

He tore his eyes away from Steve, who was grinning at Peggy like she hung each and every star in the sky, and found Annie standing next to him, watching him expectantly.

"Care to dance?" Bucky quickly recovered. She deserved a better night than Bucky would be able to give her, but he would at least put forth an effort.

Annie's face lit up as she took his hand. They made their way to the dance floor, and in no time Bucky was spinning her around to the lively tune enveloping them.

For a moment, Bucky was able to forget about Steve. He was focusing purely on the movement and life around him, perfecting the craft that was so dear to his heart. His nerves calmed, muscles loosened. He hadn't felt so carefree in as long as he could remember. Like his soul took a breath.

A whirlwind flew by him, and Bucky looked away from Annie's rosy cheeks and found himself staring at Steve. Bucky's shoulders tensed involuntarily.

Steve was spinning Peggy the same way Bucky spun him just days before. He stumbled a little, but one glance at the way Peggy looked at Steve and Bucky knew it was over for him. Steve twirled Peggy back towards him, wrapping his arms around her. She looked at him over her shoulder and pressed her lips to his cheek in the briefest of kisses. Steve looked so happy he could cry. Bucky could cry, too, but it sure as hell wouldn't be happy tears.

Bucky shook his head, blinking away the tears, and shoved his emotions into a tiny box in his mind. He locked it shut, threw it away, and vowed to never look back. He returned his attention to Annie, who Bucky impulsively decided would get the dance of her life.

He picked up his pace, and Annie must have sensed the change in energy. Her steps quickened, hips moving to the beat as Bucky began to spin her left and right. Her skirt billowed around her, and Bucky almost understood why he was meant to like girls. Holding her hand, Bucky used their momentum to pull her in close before sending her away again.

A small circle formed around them as they moved. Bucky hoped Steve could see him, hoped he felt a pang of jealousy, but then again, he didn't really. Annie swung back around toward Bucky, who artfully took her into his arms and the pair matched each other's footwork step for step. In no time, Bucky and Annie were spinning again, and as the song came to a close, Bucky dipped Annie low before lifting her back up.

The smile on her face could've outshined the sun (but not Steve). Bucky's pride wavered at his mind's unwillingness to let go of Steve, but quickly recovered when Annie looked up at him through her lashes and kissed his cheek.

"I'd love to see you again, Bucky, you're a swell dancer when you can get your head outta the clouds," Annie winked. "See you around."

Bucky breathed a sigh of relief as she walked away. He was glad to have given her a good time, though he'd never see her again. Nothing wrong with her; there never was anything wrong with the dames, just something wrong with Bucky.

He scanned the crowd, searching for a familiar head of blond hair. The moment Bucky spotted it, he wished he didn't.

Steve and Peggy were sitting in a secluded corner of the hall, or more accurately, Peggy was perched on the end of a bar stool, her legs as close to wrapped around Steve's middle as her skirt allowed. Steve was leaning down into her, and the two were in the midst of a passionate kiss.

A cocktail of emotion stirred within him. Not interested in sticking around to see what happened next, Bucky headed to the bar and ordered a couple of shots. Throwing them back in rapid succession, he paid with money he had been saving to spend on Steve.

The alcohol seemed more pressing. Not to mention, Steve wouldn't need Bucky's gifts anymore anyway. With a glance back that he knew he would regret, Bucky saw for one last time Steve's dazed smile and flushed cheeks as he looked at Peggy. Telling himself his throat burned only from the shots, Bucky stomped out of the hall and went home.

A welcome haze fell over Bucky as he flopped onto the couch. He supplemented his drinks from the bar with some whiskey from his secret stash on top of the fridge (Steve was too short to ever find it), letting his mind loosen and his nerves change shape.

What was Bucky expecting? He knew when he set Steve and Peggy up that this would happen. Anyone could see the chemistry between them. Hell, they'd even seen the chemistry

between them back in school. Bucky never learned why they stopped dating then, only hoping that maybe it would have burned out by now. But that was clearly not the case. Instead, Bucky had happily signed his death warrant.

And though the pain was dulled by his drinks, and Bucky knew it would be a hell of a lot worse in the morning and probably every day after that, Bucky would've done it all again in a heartbeat. For Steve, he'd walk through hell with a smile on his face, and the time has finally come for Bucky to do just that.

He kept drinking until the bottle was nearly empty and Bucky's head was swimming enough he could no longer form thoughts about Steve. A thought almost registers in the back of his mind that he had wasted the good whiskey; it would take a lot of saving to make up for Bucky's lapse in judgement. But that was not a problem Bucky cared to worry about. Instead, he watched the lights of the city glow into the darkness of the night. Alone.

Bucky didn't know when he was released from his thoughts into a slumber, but he was very aware of the moment he was startled awake. The apartment door slammed, and Bucky sat up with a start, but his brain lagged behind his body.

He took a moment to register that the person in front of him was not an intruder but Steve. His clothes were disheveled and hair messy. He and Peggy must've been having a great time. Bucky's head throbbed, somewhere in between unpleasantly drunk and a brutal hangover.

"Oh, Buck, I was so worried, I couldn't find you at the hall," Steve's words were rushed, almost too fast for Bucky to make sense of it. "I thought you might've left with your date but I knew you woulda told me if you had-"

"Slow down, Steve. It's fine, I'm fine." Bucky croaked out. His lie fooled neither of them.

"I just wanted to make sure you were okay." Steve frowned. "Peggy said-"

"Good to know she was able to get words in, since your tongue was so far down her throat." Bucky thought it might come off as a joke, but his usual demeanor was thrown by his discomfort. His tone was too serious, and as soon as he said it, regret seeped in.

Steve's face fell. "Bucky..."

"What, Steve? What do you want?" Bucky snapped, deciding he deserved to let some of his pain out in a safer way than admitting his feelings. Besides, he reasoned, he could blame it on being an angry drunk later and all would be well.

Steve's eyes landed on the whiskey bottle at Bucky's feet. His eyes softened, filling with concern.

"Bucky, you're drunk." Steve stated the obvious, reaching out for Bucky's hand.

"Brilliant observation," Bucky said, wincing at his tone, but he was finally fed up with thinking before he spoke. "What are ya gonna do about it?"

“Lemme get you some water and then we’re going to bed.” Steve walked to the kitchen, his steps louder than usual. Was he angry? He had no reason to be, since Bucky’s mood was his and Peggy’s fault. Bucky’s hazy mind decided that Steve had really brought this upon himself and deserved whatever was coming his way.

“Come on, Buck, drink up.” Steve pushed the glass to Bucky’s lips, watching as he slowly drank. When the glass was empty, he nodded sharply. “Good. Now, off to bed.”

Steve grabbed Bucky by the shoulders in a futile attempt to lift him. Bucky towered over Steve and had about fifty pounds on him, so when Bucky crumpled back on the couch, Steve fell with him.

When Bucky became aware of their position, he realized that Steve was laying on top of him. Their faces were close, only a few inches between their noses. Bucky hazarded a glance at Steve’s lips, before remembering better and looking away. His face was warm, probably bright red from the combination of the alcohol and closeness, and suddenly Bucky can’t stand it. Doesn’t want to deal with any of it. Not tonight.

He scrambled up, shoving Steve off of him and grumbling at nothing in particular.

“I can take care of myself.” Bucky stalks to their room. If he stumbles a bit, Steve doesn’t mention it.

Bucky yanks off his clothes, changing into pajamas and clambering into bed. He hid his face in his pillow, hoping that if he stayed there he could disappear. That he would never have to see Steve again. He wouldn’t get a wedding invite so he’d never have to know what Steve and Peggy were doing. He’d never have to hear about their happy life or happy kids. Thoughts were swirling within him, none of them truly taking any sort of shape but Bucky knew what it meant. He was checking himself out from his friendship with Steve and resigning himself to a life alone.

The mattress shifted under him. Steve must be going to bed. Funny, Bucky had expected Steve to be in bed with Peggy right about then, but for probably the last time, he had Steve to himself.

“Buck?” Steve whispered. “Bucky, you awake?”

Bucky didn’t move.

“I’m sorry for whatever I did, Bucky.” Steve spoke quietly, tentatively. “You know I love ya, pal, I don’t wanna do anything to hurt you. Ever.”

Bucky could imagine the way Steve’s expression probably hardened. His mental image was crystal clear in his pounding head, Steve’s gorgeous blue eyes going dark in thought, maybe even in anger. When Steve continued, Bucky was almost surprised at how soft his voice sounded.

“I really wish we were back to normal. We used to be so perfect, just you ‘n me, Steve and Bucky against the world.” Steve sighed. “What happened?”

Bucky wasn't expecting the sudden vulnerability, the nagging feeling that maybe there was a chance that Steve had been feeling the same as him. Not as deep or as heartwrenching, but Steve missed what they used to be, too. A glimmer of hope was born in Bucky's chest.

"I miss you." Steve shifted, tugging on the covers. "I do all the things you ask, I learned to dance and go on your dates, and I don't know what I'm doing wrong."

Bucky found himself fighting back tears as he listened to Steve say out loud all of the things Bucky had been so afraid of for so long. He was intruding on Steve baring his heart and soul into the darkness, violating what little trust remained between them. He couldn't just not say anything in return, but to move now would be exposing his eavesdropping.

Bucky was so enthralled in his thoughts that he almost missed Steve's lips brushing against his temple. Almost. Bucky must've been dreaming. Steve wouldn't have really done that, especially not after the fit Bucky threw about Peggy. For a minute, it was silent. Even the city surrounding them was sympathetic; Bucky couldn't pick out a single sound around him.

But Bucky knew he wasn't imagining the way Steve sighed, or how his warm breath felt eerily close. He wasn't imagining the husk in Steve's voice when he spoke again, or the way it felt like a cure to everything Bucky was missing.

"Goodnight, Bucky."

Chapter End Notes

As always, hope you enjoyed, and next chapter should be up in a few days. See y'all then <3

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Steve gets into art school! Emotions run high in all sorts of ways ;)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Stevie, congrats!” Bucky watched Steve’s eyes glimmer with pride.

Steve held the acceptance letter triumphantly as Bucky picked him up in a massive hug and twirled him around before putting him down. Bucky’s heart skipped when he realized exactly what he’d done, but Steve’s resulting grin rivaled the brightness of the sun. Worth it.

“And Buck, I got the scholarship, too!” Steve wiped a tear from his eye. “We don’t have to pay a dime, and we don’t have to move...” His voice trailed off for a moment. “It’s perfect.”

“I’m so, so proud of you, Stevie,” Bucky could hardly contain his excitement. Finally, someone else could see in Steve what Bucky thought was clear as day. Knew Steve deserved the world, and finally, art school could give it to him.

In the euphoria of the moment, Bucky let his joy get the best of him and he pressed his lips against his best friend’s. For a second, Bucky’s eyes fluttered shut, and he couldn’t help but indulge in his long-awaited fantasy.

One where Steve loved him back, where they could live together as more-than-friends, and Bucky could stop going on those god-awful dates with girls he didn’t really want. Images flashed through his mind, imagining what life would be if he could slip Steve’s hand in his, if he could kiss him good morning, if-

Bucky recoiled, snapping back into reality, and saw Steve staring blankly at him, eyes wide and mouth agape.

“Oh, fuck. Shit. Oh fuck.” Bucky muttered, his mind racing. He’d made it so long, without letting anything slip, just to ruin it with a moment of weakness. A stupid kiss. He had it so good, living with his best friend, seeing him every day. Bucky would live the rest of his life pining for Steve if it meant he at least got to spend it with him. That was no longer an option.

“Uh. I’ll, uh, just, I’ll just go.” Bucky’s voice sounded more like a frightened whisper than anything else, as he descended into panic.

He quickly turned away from Steve and made his way out of the apartment, taking one last glance at his best friend, who had yet to move from his place, before Bucky shut the door

behind him and took off into the frigid winter night.

Chapter End Notes

This was quite a short one, but only because I thought the abruptness that I originally wrote here worked well and I didn't want to change too much. But never fear! The next chapter will have the happy ending as promised. It might take a bit though, since that one isn't prewritten, so feel free to wallow in this little heartbreak for a moment.

Kudos and comments are very much appreciated, and thank you for reading this far!

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Steve is Captain America now! But that doesn't make him more powerful against his longing for Bucky. He hasn't seen his best friend in years, and now that they're both probably in Europe, it's time to find him. Confessions ensue.

Chapter Notes

Hello! I am so sorry this is so much later than planned! I promise I was writing it but then I was quite sick and went to the ER and had to have surgery and I've been recovering from that. So, a little distracted! But I wrote the rest today (in one sitting, so if there are any mistakes that's my bad), and while I'm not enamored by the ending, I do still like it and I am ready to be done with this fic for now. Please enjoy the final installment, featuring these two fools finally communicating a little ;)

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

Steve sprints through the woods, lungs burning with a combination of smoke and crisp air. The weight of his shield on his back is comforting, but a reminder of his new responsibilities nonetheless. Steve knows he's the same guy at heart, doing exactly what he would've done before. The serum just gave him the body to do it. He didn't want to be the center of the world, though, and now it seems everyone he passes has their eye on him. And somehow all they see is the Captain anyways, never Steve Rogers.

At least he knows what the Nazis are thinking when they see him. Steve can easily take them. The side eyes from his fellow soldiers, though? Those are a little harder to handle.

The booming explosion of a shell hitting the ground a bit too close for comfort brings him back. Slips like that can cost lives, now, and they never seem to be his own. Steve has all sorts of blood on his hands, and he ought to minimize that which blooms from the chests of his comrades.

"Cap!" A call from his left, followed by an agonizing scream. Steve's heart twists, and he looks back just in time to see Greene's body hit the ground, a pool of blood growing around his head. They were told this would be an easy op. Steve has some choice words headed Peggy's way. His men are not expendable. But there's nothing he can do for Greene. Nothing except go and win the war, so Greene's family knows he didn't die in vain.

So that's what Steve does.

Bounding over an abandoned tank, Steve slips a hand under the belly and leaves a ticking grenade behind. The shrapnel should take out the guys on his tail, and cause enough of a distraction that the rest of his men can get out.

And in a handful of seconds, that is the case, and the forest becomes eerily silent. Greene's scream echoes in Steve's mind. He was just a kid. Steve's sure it will be yet another to add to the cacophony that lulls him into fitful sleep each night.

"Status?" Steve manages, and hears a handful of groans over his radio. With a sigh of relief that he didn't manage to lose anyone else on this mission, he asks everyone to regroup near the extraction point where they can start the trek back to base.

God, they are a sight to behold. Grimy men and their gleaming guns trudging through the snow back to base. An empty spot in their line for Greene. It makes Steve's skin crawl. He prays that he never gets used to it.

The ground under their feet is frozen solid, the impact of each step sending jolts through Steve's legs. The concrete outside his and Bucky's apartment used to do the same thing, when Steve's bones were brittle and muscles weak.

He heaves a long sigh, watching his breath billow out in front of him. It would always be his and Bucky's place. Even after Bucky ran out. With every creak of the floorboards, the rustle of the summer breezes, even the incessant construction in the building next door, Steve heard Bucky's name.

When camp comes back into sight, Steve skips his usual debriefing and returns to his tent. If he's really necessary, they can come get him. He has nothing to say, anyways. Or, what he will say is nothing they want to hear. It can wait.

He sinks into his cot, able to feel the ground through his meager mattress. Steve requested no special treatment, and was blatantly ignored. The army insisted on presenting him with his own tent, but Steve took the liberty of keeping it as bare as those of his fellow soldiers. Including sleeping on the ground. The stars and stripes on his costume, and the serum in his veins, should be the only difference between himself and his men.

Steve's eyes land on his Colt pistol. He has little use for it; usually his raw strength and vibranium shield serve him well. If those fall short, a submachine gun does the rest. The small gun stays with him, though, and Steve holds it tenderly as he looks at the handle. Slotted under the clear grip is a shred of the painting he did of Bucky back in the day. The rest of the guys had their sweethearts, so Steve has his too. He just can't parade it around like them. He doesn't mind keeping Bucky to himself. No different than what he did back home.

Bucky's dreamy smile looks back at him, a stolen moment frozen in Steve's mind. He glows in the low light, and Steve thanks his past self profusely for venturing to add an extra affectionate gleam in Bucky's eyes. He has spent more time than he probably should pretending that Bucky looked at him like that for real. He supposes that maybe Bucky did.

When Bucky acted so weird that Steve brought Peggy to the movies, Steve was baffled. He thought Bucky wanted him to get a date. Bucky always told him that a dame would love him

someday, even though Steve didn't believe it himself. He never told Bucky it was because Steve was already in love with someone who would never reciprocate. Steve thought it would bring a proud smile to Bucky's face, but instead, Bucky only grimaced. He didn't even stay for the whole movie.

When Bucky gave Steve his best birthday yet on the roof of their building. Steve grabbed Bucky's hand, reveling in the way it sent sparks through him. Steve dared to think that Bucky wanted him too, in the same twisted way Steve wanted him. It took every ounce of Steve's nerve to get so close to him that night, carefully watching the emotions on Bucky's face in the colorful light of the fireworks. Steve almost kissed him, then, but backed out at the last moment. Then, Steve thought he was making the safe choice. Now, Steve wonders how things might have been different if he had just been brave enough.

The first time Steve said 'I love you,' it wasn't spoken at all. It was in each painstaking line, every arc of color. Steve had never painted a portrait before then, and he hasn't since. The painting that is now in Steve's Colt. Steve doesn't need the visual reminder to see the way Bucky looked that day in his mind's eye. Sitting on the floor in the beam of light that seemed built to illuminate just him. Smiling at Steve the way he did before all the feelings got in the way. Or maybe because all their feelings got in the way. Now, Steve will never know.

Bucky found them a double date after that. As if Steve hadn't just handed Bucky his feelings on a silver platter. But Steve sucked it up and went, because he saw the way Bucky looked at him when he thought Steve wasn't looking. At the time, he thought it was Bucky wanting the best for Steve. Steve couldn't bring himself to tell Bucky that he didn't want the best because he already had perfection in Bucky's teasing grin, his soft hair, his easy charm. Bucky taught Steve to dance that night. Steve nearly died right then and there.

But the cruel world kept turning, and Steve went on countless double dates with Bucky. He had to watch Bucky beam at some girl, watch him dance with her the way he'd danced with Steve. That hurt the most. Every time Steve tried to dance with a girl, he was thinking of Bucky. The lone time Bucky danced with him, he was thinking of some faceless dame. But one night after a date that actually went well enough for Steve, Bucky flipped. And when Steve got home to find Bucky already asleep, he told Bucky he loved him with words that time. Too bad Bucky wasn't awake to hear.

Then Bucky kissed Steve. Not the night Steve bared all his feelings, though that would have been nice. It was the day Steve got into art school. The acceptance letter was the reason Steve told everyone it was the best day of his life, but really, that had nothing to do with it. It was the way Steve's heart skipped when Bucky picked him up, the way Steve's mind went blank with joy the instant he felt Bucky's lips on his. The way his bones settled and mind relaxed into it. Steve knew he couldn't live without Bucky. Then Bucky left and he was forced to.

The flap of his tent swishes open and Peggy walks in. It had been nice to see a familiar face when he arrived at the front, even if she was another reminder of Bucky. Steve hurries to hide his gun, but not before her dark eyes spot Bucky under the grip. Her face softens, her painted lips twisting into a frown.

"You missed the briefing."

“They don’t really care. About me, or my men.” Steve looks darkly at Peggy. “Whether I’m there or not, they’ll give us another assignment, send us off to die until we finally do.”

“I care.”

“You got a strange way of showin’ it.” Steve grumbles.

“He went to war?” Peggy nods toward Steve’s gun, where he had half tucked it under his pillow. Steve winces, then shrugs. He wasn’t expecting the bitterness that bloomed in his stomach.

“He sure went somewhere. Could be dead, for all I know.”

Peggy rests a hand on Steve’s shoulder. Once, she tried that with a much different motive, but one look at Steve’s expression told her better. Now, the weight of her sympathy wraps Steve’s aching heart.

“I’ll pull some strings. If he’s able and living, he’s got to be around here somewhere.” Peggy hovers for a moment before she drops a kiss on Steve’s temple. “I’ll keep you posted.”

With that, Steve is alone again.

Steve is playing cards when Peggy finds him next. He has been granted a rare break, which is what the officials call it, but it’s really because only Steve and two others in his team have survived this long, and they can’t run missions with three men. More will ship in soon enough, they say. Bright eyed and bushy tailed, running to their demise. Steve hates it.

“Rogers.” Peggy gestures for Steve to follow, and leads him to her quarters. She spins on her heel and hands Steve a file. “James Buchanan Barnes. 107th infantry sniper. Should be in Italy right about now.”

Steve flips open the folder and Bucky’s grey eyes meet his. He’s older now. Of course he is. He holds himself more confidently than he used to; it looks less of a facade than it did back in Brooklyn. But even in his military headshot, he’s got a goofy grin on his face. His eyes are alive with stifled laughter. Seems Bucky is doing just fine without him. Steve gnaws on his lower lip, second guessing his plans. Maybe Bucky is better off, and Steve ought not to bother. After all, Steve can’t see from the photo that Bucky’s happiness is hollow, a new act to replace the old.

“Don’t be like that.” Peggy takes the file back from Steve. Before Steve can defend his worries, Peggy cuts him off with a glare. “He wrote you letters, you know. Records say he writes to his mom, sister, and you. Yours were never sent through. Mail to Captain America is thoroughly checked. And often shredded before you even hear of it.”

Steve doesn’t know what to do with that information. He and Bucky haven’t spoken since the best and worst night of Steve’s life. The infamous kiss that lights up Steve’s nights on loop when he tries to sleep. Followed by the way Bucky’s jaw dropped. The cocktail of wild fears

swirling in his eyes. The way Steve couldn't bring himself to move because Bucky clearly regretted it and Steve...

Steve did not. He got a taste of magic, and couldn't believe his luck.

But he was better off not knowing, because then Bucky left. And never came back. Steve kept Bucky's clothes folded in their closet, just in case. They're probably still there, frozen in time in the back of their forgotten apartment.

"Steve?" Peggy shakes him from his reverie, a somber smile on her bright red lips. "You should go to him. You look like a kicked puppy, and you're far too pretty to look so sad."

"I have a team here-" Steve tries, but Peggy rolls her eyes.

"There are three of you left. I'll put in to reassign them if you really want, but I doubt they'll mind being desk jockeys for a bit after what we've put them through."

She's struck a nerve and she knows it. Steve's guilt seeps back in as he recalls how many of his men have been lost, how he is the only constant on his team, how he just cannot die. She's right. Steve has nothing here; his presence only puts more men in danger. He might as well go see Bucky, even if it is to confirm his fears. If it comes to it, they are at war. Steve can find somewhere else to be.

Steve shoves his way into the camp in northern Italy, frantically searching for a sign of his best friend. A voice in the back of Steve's head asks if he can call Bucky that anymore, when it's been so long since they've even laid eyes on each other. Steve shoves it away and continues his search. If the radio frequency he'd tapped into over his journey was correct, they'd taken heavy losses the week before. Steve had driven his fist into a tree, relishing the scratches on his knuckles, even if they only took minutes to heal.

If he was there, that wouldn't have happened. If he was there, he'd know Bucky was safe instead of having to stare at the star-studded sky and beg the darkness to protect him.

And now Steve is there, and if Bucky isn't, because he's hurt or captured or worse, Steve- Well, he hasn't thought that far. If he thinks it into being, he won't be able to forgive himself. He's already not sure he can forgive himself. The serum might save Steve from the bullets, but not the horrors of war. He's at the mercy of the malevolent powers that be, just like everyone else.

Ducking his head into one of the last tents in the row, laying on one of the cots is-

"Bucky." Steve breathes. He doesn't look seriously hurt, not physically, but his face is pale. Bucky is a shadow of the man he once was, where Steve is now more than he'd ever been.

"Stevie?" Bucky's voice is dazed, his eyes unfocused. "You're big."

Steve sits next to Bucky, unsure quite what to say. He tried not to have expectations going into this, and now that he's here, the priority is taking care of Bucky. Whatever happens after

that is outside his control.

“Are you okay? Can I help you?” Steve asks, hesitant to reach out and comfort him. He wants to feel Bucky under his hands again, needs to feel Bucky breathe under him and know that Bucky is here, and Bucky is alive.

“No, no,” Bucky shakes his head slowly, as if the world is spinning around him. “I’m ‘sposed to be takin’ care of you.”

Steve wrings his fingers. He takes a breath to steady himself, but it comes out a shaky sigh. He doesn’t know what to do first.

When he looks back to Bucky, his eyes are closed and his breaths even. Steve isn’t going to wake him, and instead sits next to his bed and waits. He feels strangely nostalgic for the days when Bucky would sit next to his bed waiting for Steve’s fever to break. Life was simpler then.

Hours later, Steve is sitting cross legged on the ground when he hears Bucky shake him from his thoughts.

“You never wrote me back.” Bucky’s voice is icy cold. Steve has never heard it like this before.

“You left me.” Steve retorts, then winces. “And I never got your letters. Apparently Captain America’s mail doesn’t actually reach Captain America.”

“What was I gonna do, stay? After what I did?” Bucky’s voice rises. “I couldn’t live with it, and I definitely couldn’t live with you. So, yeah, I left. You’re welcome.”

“Bucky.” Steve glances around, and sees that they are alone in the tent. “I couldn’t live without you.”

“You clearly did alright for yourself.” Bucky says bitterly, gesturing at Steve’s broad shoulders and the white star on his chest.

“I didn’t come here for this. I wasn’t coming to war as much as I was running away from New York.” Steve’s voice drops to a whisper. “If I couldn’t go home to you, I didn’t want to go home at all.”

Bucky falters. Steve watches a thousand expressions flash across his face. Some he recognizes, many he doesn’t. Another reminder that he doesn’t know Bucky anymore, not really.

Bucky stares at the ground. He mutters something under his breath. Bucky sits up on his cot, his shoulders pressed back and chin held high.

“So, give it to me straight. Do you hate me?”

Steve’s jaw drops. Bucky’s eyes are earnest, and he is fidgeting where he sits. Steve’s heart breaks a bit to see that Bucky means what he said.

“Of course not, Buck.” Steve’s voice breaks. A lump scratches at his throat. “I could never.”

A tear slips down Bucky’s cheek as he nods. Steve resists the urge to wipe it away. He’s not sure where they stand on contact, especially since whatever Bucky has been through here has clearly shaken him up.

“I need...” Bucky swallows thickly. “I need some space. To process.”

Steve frowns, but he’s going to. He’d give Bucky the world if he asked. “Sure. I can disappear. We have a war to win, after all.” He pretends the words don’t burn him to his core.

“No!” Bucky grabs Steve’s arm. His grip is soft, like he’s more willing Steve to stay than forcing him to. “Don’t go far. Please.”

Steve only nods. He doesn’t trust his voice, and he is not going to sob over Bucky. Not here, not now. He cried his river back in Brooklyn, and dove into it and wept some more. In that river, he learned to swim, and he’s not going to let it overtake him again.

So Steve reports to the camp’s commanding officer and makes himself useful. When he’s ready, Bucky will come to him.

Days later, after uncomfortably avoiding eye contact at briefings and making too much effort not to cross each other’s paths, Steve is sketching on a scrap of paper when someone slips into his tent.

Steve looks up from his work, doing a double take when he realizes that it’s Bucky. His drawing is forgotten in favor of anticipation as Steve waits for Bucky to speak.

“Hi.”

Steve tries a friendly smile to break the tension. “Hey, Bucky.”

Bucky makes eye contact for a second, then inspects the ground like it’s the most interesting thing he’s ever seen. Steve watches silently as Bucky’s eyes crawl around the room, lingering on his Colt sitting on a small table. Bucky’s cheeks are pink, and Steve doubts it’s from the cold.

“You, uh, you kept that?” Bucky juts his chin towards Steve’s gun.

“What did you expect?”

Bucky shrugs. “Dunno, maybe you burned it or something.”

“Nah, I keep all my art. Besides, that’s some of my best work.” Steve pauses, then decides he might as well take a chance. “And it’s my best guy.”

Bucky blinks rapidly, and Steve looks away.

“I’d really like to know you again, Bucky.” Steve talks to the ground, but his voice doesn’t waver. “I want,” he hesitates, meeting Bucky’s grey eyes. “I want everything with you, if you’ll still have me.”

Bucky crosses his arms over his chest. “Why didn’t you say anything? Why didn’t you do anything? You could’ve had me then; we would’ve taken over the world. We were already Steve and Bucky, and you let it go. You let me leave.”

“You didn’t give me any time to think, let alone react. By the time my head was back on straight, you were out the door and it’s not like you gave me a forwarding address.” Steve defends himself, and Bucky chuckles lightly with a shake of his head.

“Smartass punk. You might be all big now but you’re the same Steve Rogers through and through.”

Steve is happy enough to cry. He might actually be; he isn’t sure. And he knows that this isn’t them being normal, this doesn’t erase their years of pain and change, but God, it feels good to hear Bucky tease him like he used to. Steve tries to collect himself and dry his face, with minimal success. He doesn’t mind.

“Knock, knock.” Peggy pokes her head into the tent and meets Steve’s eyes with a smile. “I’m proud of you.”

Steve grins and gives her a thumbs up.

“I’ll be out of your hair shortly, but I wanted to let you know I’ve got myself reassigned here, and Morita and Dugan came too, so you’ve got your whole band back together. Turns out none of us are built for desk work, and may or may not be attached to you.” Peggy winks. “When you’re done here, you come and find us. They’ll be happy to see you too.” She ducks out.

Steve is beaming at the space where Peggy was when he realizes Bucky’s eyes on him. They are piercing through his armor, and Steve can feel it in his bones.

“Her.” Steve can’t tell what is in Bucky’s voice, but the hurt is written on his face. His brow is furrowed, lips pursed, jaw clenched. “You’ll have cute kids someday. Didn’t mean to intrude. I’ll request reassignment so you don’t have to see me.”

The words hit Steve harder than any enemy weapons could. Friendly fire always does. He snaps up, looking at Bucky.

“Did you miss our *entire* conversation?”

“No?” Bucky shakes his head. “You said you’re ready to be friends again, you can forgive me for everything I did, and I’m grateful, I really am, but if you’re still together with Peggy I’m not sure I can do that to myself again.”

Steve laughs, and Bucky recoils at the harsh sound. “Me and Pegs aren’t dating,” he explains. “Good friends is all.”

“What happened? Last I knew you two were necking any chance you got.” Bucky attempts to joke, but Steve hears the pain in his voice.

“You happened.” Steve tells the truth. “All those dates I did for you. I thought it was what you wanted for me. And I didn’t want to disappoint you.”

Bucky’s expression melts and he sits next to Steve, draping an arm around his shoulder. “You could never disappoint me, Stevie. I always thought the world of you. Still do. You have to know that.”

Steve leans into Bucky’s touch, his face suddenly only inches away from Bucky’s.

“And then you kissed me,” Steve breathes, glancing down at Bucky’s lips, “and then you left, and then I didn’t have to pretend anymore, so I broke it off with her.”

The room is heavy, all the wintry air around them warmed by the intensity of the pair. Bucky takes Steve’s hand and brings it to his lips.

“Well, you know how I feel.” Bucky says lowly.

“I know how you felt.” Steve corrects. “I know you regretted it, I know you ran away. Do I know you anymore?” It sounds harsh, but Steve has never been one to sugarcoat things.

“I only regretted it because I thought I’d lost you. And from what I knew, I had.”

Steve can’t stop the sob from racking through him. His ribs don’t hurt at the sensation like they did in his old body.

“And you don’t know the new stuff. But you know more than enough. I haven’t changed that much.” Bucky’s old demeanor returns for a moment. He gives Steve a goofy grin and winks. “I still love movies, fireworks, paintings, and dancing.”

Steve smiles fondly at the memories.

“I still love you.” Bucky is quiet, but Steve hears him loud and clear.

Steve’s jaw drops. The tears spill over again, and Steve is sure he looks like a mess, but Bucky is looking at Steve like he’s the center of his world anyway. He pulls Steve into a hug until the tears subside.

“I told myself I wasn’t going to do that anymore, you know.”

Bucky arches a brow in question.

“Cry over you.” Steve lets out a shaky breath.

“This will be the last time.” Bucky’s voice is soft and Steve feels him place a kiss on the top of his head. Even though Steve is taller than Bucky now, he curls up in his friend’s lap like he did when they were young. Bucky holds him close and swears to never let go.

Chapter End Notes

But he lets go on the train, Steve thinks bitterly. And Steve sobbed over Bucky Barnes until every muscle in his body broke yet again.

Sorry about that line; I didn't want to end the fic on an unhappy note but I also couldn't resist putting Steve through the ringer just a little bit more as I was writing so I'm just gonna leave that there. I might come back to this to add perhaps a chapter or two later on, to give these boys a purely happy ending! For now, though, this is where I'm leaving this

As always, thank you so much for reading, and if you feel so inclined, kudos and comments give me life <3

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