Summary

“I think Parker has a crush on you,” Flash said in a sing-song voice as he watched Peter head back to Ned.

“Shut it, Eugene.” But MJ’s heart wasn’t in it and Flash could tell.

“Which is odd because I could have sworn that he and Ned had the bromance of the century going--”

“The next thing out of your mouth had better not be homophobic, or else, so help me, I will find a way to gut you with a plastic cake server,” MJ warned him.

“I was going to say that bisexuals and pansexuals exist,” Flash said, holding up his hands in
mock surrender. The pink plastic cake server was within range of her grasp after all. “It’s the twenty-first century after all. You’re a little too cool for Parker though.”
There were times, MJ reflected, when being bisexual sucked because it meant that she liked boys too.

Specifically, it was one particular boy. A complete flake and doofus that kept standing people up and quitting his extracurriculars. And he had a thing for Liz, so she could see that they were alike in certain respects and that was just wrong.

It totally blew when her two crushes wound up going to the Homecoming Dance with each other. She was happy for them because she had to show solidarity—biracial black girls for the win. And AcaDec nerds for the win, probably.

She was also a hot mess that kept staring at Liz covertly from behind a book and followed Peter into detention to sketch him. Luckily for her, Peter Parker was oblivious to everything else when he was obviously drowning in his own personal drama and Liz had developed filters after years of being one of the most popular and pretty students at Hogwarts School of Science and Nerdery (that was what her brother Mike called her school and it had stuck).

MJ blamed it on being a teenager. Liz’s legs and that glimpse of Peter’s ridiculous abs during gym—ugh, it was enough to make her want to start composing bad poetry.

Okay, maybe it was not all about how much they appealed to her visually. Liz had huge, soulful dark brown eyes and Peter had the soft, meltingly wet gaze of a concussed puppy most of the time. Along with their obvious smarts, it was a combination that made her stomach flip and her supposedly stone-cold heart go all gooey.

Before Homecoming, MJ allowed herself the luxury of crushing on them both. Liz was not dating anyone and Peter did not seem to be able to work up the nerve to ask anyone (the hypocrisy of it all—but MJ was the champion of ignoring her own bullshit). It made her feel better that Liz—the accomplished and popular senior—was above all the dating drama. In hindsight, MJ supposed that a part of her was hoping that Liz might like girls.

Though it was more likely that Liz was too busy maintaining her perfect grades, her extracurriculars (Homecoming Committee, AcaDec captain, editor of the school newspaper, volunteering at soup kitchens and animal shelters—even her extracurriculars were perfect) and her inner circle of friends to give any guys or girls the time of the day.

It made being a feminist very difficult because she was supposed to support her sisters and encourage non-toxic forms of masculinity. Not imagining herself cuddled up in between them in a big bisexual pile. Bad MJ, no cookie.

So MJ dealt with it the only way she knew how. Quash all feelings, bury them under a rock and attend Homecoming solo. After all, she kinda liked hanging out with the others from the decathlon team. The threat of wild horses ripping her from limb to limb would not get her to admit it though. MJ liked people way too easily and middle school had taught her that not everyone felt the same way.

Hogwarts—her current school—was pretty cool and all that, but MJ was slow to trust people. Yet she had not said no when Sally suggested that they should do a group date instead of subscribing to the
stereotypical one-guy-one-girl-thing. Maybe it was the residual euphoria from winning Nationals. Maybe MJ just wanted a reason to watch Liz and Peter in an exercise steeped in masochism. Whatever it was, she tagged along when they went dress shopping and let them talk her into trying dresses on. She picked the first one that was not too strappy, not too exposed and not offensive to her overall aesthetic.

On the evening of the dance, Kendra had hollered for the rest of the family to come see because Michelle’s wearing a dress and make-up—should we check if she’s an alien? MJ had flicked her younger sister gently on the side of her head and told her to mind her own business so that she could get on with the tradition of being on the fringes of everything.

But not before her parents had taken a series of compromising pictures featuring MJ bracketed between Mike and Kendra, both wearing shit-eating grins and doing their best Will Smith impressions. Sometimes she wished that her family did not always see through her bullshit.

Mike sort of made it up to her by driving her over and giving her all kinds of advice about avoiding the spiked punch and getting home safe. He was back for the weekend from Columbia and MJ was discreetly trying to soak in the feeling of being a younger sibling again. Mike did the protective older brother thing very well.

“Relax, I’m just going to fade into the background and count how many people try to spike the punch under the chaperones’ noses and ditch their dates.” Which was partly true--MJ had always wanted to write a report on human behaviour at school events. “No-one’ll even notice that I’m there. And what’s the worst that can happen at Hogwarts?”

MJ realised the irony of her joke the second after it left her mouth. Death by basilisk was becoming increasingly more real these days. Fortunately, Principal Morita was not Dumbledore and had a Sobriety Squad on hand to stop tipsy kids from trying to drive because someone was bound to try to sneak alcohol in, nerd school or not. There was also the unsubtle “Get Home Safe” campaign that the Student Council had been running for a month prior to the dance.

“That’s bullshit and you know it,” Mike said to her as they pulled up to the front of the school. His dark eyes stared a bit too knowingly at the brightly lit doors and the student hordes. “Hogwarts is still a school and smart kids are still kids. No matter how tough you try to look, some asshole senior might try something.”

As it turned out, Mike was partly right. Liz and Peter had turned up, Peter had bailed after two minutes and MJ found herself nodding along in the circle of girls that were comforting Liz. Yeah, what a douche. Majorly uncool. And their combined glares had the effect of driving off the asshole seniors that were thinking of making a pass at Liz.

Liz coped because she had to stay until the end for the clean-up. MJ admired her composure in the face of overwhelming and unwanted sympathy. And asshole seniors that kept saying that was what she got for taking a sophomore to Homecoming. Not that they dared to say it to her face when Liz’s squad was on high alert.

The whole group of them—Cindy, Betty, Liz, Sally, MJ and the others involved with the clean-up—stuck around for carbs and sympathy. Betty’s mom had supplied the Homecoming organising committee with doughnuts and they supplemented it with a massive fast food delivery. For the first time in a long while, MJ felt like one of the girls as they sat around the discards of Homecoming and bolted down greasy food. It was generally agreed that boys were not to be trusted and fries were better than guys.

Then Liz got a call from her mother and MJ realised what most writers meant when they wrote it
looked as though all the blood had drained from her face. It was unclear what had happened to Liz’s dad, but MJ thought she heard something about a plane crash. Mrs Toomes had driven over to pick up an ashen-faced Liz and no-one really knew anything until the next morning when the news linked the plane that had crashed on Coney Island to Adrian Toomes, aka Liz’s dad.

The rumour mill at school went into overdrive before the news outlets could confirm that Spider-Man had helped to take down Mr Toomes and that Liz’s dad’s real job involved illegal weapons manufacturing and distribution. MJ could only watch and listen along with Ned and a very subdued Peter, who refused to answer any questions about the rumour that Liz’s dad had threatened him with grievous bodily harm after driving them to the dance. Then the parents started to call in, all anxiously demanding explanations and wondering how a criminal had been able to come within fifty metres of their children.

(Mike shook his head at that while he was home for the weekend. “This is New York. We’ve had aliens dropping in recently but crime was--”

“Not funny,” their mom had cautioned while passing the salad. “I feel bad for his wife--and their daughter.”)

In the ensuing media circus, Principal Morita had to call security on reporters hiding in the bushes outside classrooms. Liz had to move away to Oregon, leaving MJ’s laser focus with only one target. Which was bad because her mind had time to join up the dots and connect the chain of events that had happened in the past year.

Fact one: Peter Parker got ripped practically overnight.

Fact two: No obvious signs of steroid usage, despite being distracted a lot and flaky as hell.

Fact three: Spider-Man appeared around the same time Peter Parker got ripped.

Fact four: Spider-Man did not always have that snazzy suit. Early videos showed that Spider-Man used to swing around Queens in not very snazzy sweatpants and a hoodie.

Fact five: Spider-Man appeared in that snazzy suit shortly after Peter Parker got the Stark Internship.

Fact six: Spider-Man only operated in Queens and other parts of New York. (See Staten Island Ferry Incident.) Except for that one time when he rescued the decathlon team in DC.

Fact seven: Peter Parker had been absent that morning before the incident at the Washington Monument.

Fact eight: The Staten Island Ferry Incident, which happened on the same afternoon Peter had ditched detention.

Fact nine: Spider-Man was actually shorter than MJ.

She had it all written down in her secret notebook. In her special self-devised code. MJ managed to conclude fact nine after carefully reviewing the events of the incident. She had been too afraid and worried out of her mind at the time to notice it, but afterwards, when she had the space to think about it, everything became crystal clear. MJ had some knowledge of proportion and scale after learning how to draw out of books borrowed from the library. Spider-Man had been standing a few feet away from her in DC--definitely shorter, with a physique that was startlingly similar to one Peter Parker.

MJ blamed her addled teenage brain again. When she was not swimming in denial, she could look
objectively at her (many) sketches and draw the obvious conclusion.

*Peter Parker is Spider-Man. And whoa but did that suit have to be so tight?*

Which meant that Peter was also partly responsible for Liz moving away and messing up his own love life. MJ could almost feel sorry for him.

Almost.

Then she received a text form an unknown number right out of the blue a month after Homecoming.

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*Unknown number: Michelle, it’s Liz. I had to change my number*

MJ stared at the message for roughly about an eternity. What was she supposed to say? *Sorry about your Dad? How is Oregon? I had the biggest crush on you? By the way, Peter Parker is Spider-Man?*

* MJ: Hi

*Wow, that was brilliant.* MJ scowled, pissed off at her inability to not sound inane over a typed conversation. She recalled what her mother had said and started on another message.

* MJ: How are you doing? Is your mom ok?

MJ used the time in between messages to save Liz’s new contact and ponder why Liz had reached out to her of all people. They seldom mingled outside AcaDec, though MJ had one serious conversation with Liz once when she submitted her essay on gentrification for the school newspaper. She half-expected Liz to tell her to tone it down, but was pleasantly surprised to find that Liz was impressed by her convictions.

Her phone buzzed gently as a new message came in.

*Liz: Mom has some savings, but they froze my parents’ joint accounts and most of their assets. Mom still has her car tho*

MJ read between the lines and waited. People like Liz did not reach out to people like her out of the blue.

*Liz: Going to school also kinda sucks.*

*Liz: Someone found out and spread this rumour that my dad was part of some NY organised crime family*

*MJ: Shit, that blows*

*Liz: Yeah, but enough about my teenage angst*

*Liz: I’m going back to visit my dad so I thought we should catch up soon*

MJ did not have the skills to deal with this--one of her two crushes actually wanting to meet up--over a messenger app. So she word-vomited.

*MJ: Um sure*
MJ: Just so you know, Harrington put me in charge of AcaDec.

MJ: Full disclosure--I’m not trying to take your place or anything

Liz: I know

Liz: I still have access to the decathlon team cloud drive

Ah, so Mr Harrington was to blame for this.

Liz: You were the best choice.

Liz: Thought you should know

Liz: Life goes on. Not bitter, btw

MJ stared at the screen and found herself shaking her head.

MJ: Trying to be sensitive here, but I can smell the bullshit all the way from Queens

She hit the send icon and clutched her phone tightly to her chest. Had she overstepped?

The next message took a bit longer to show up.

Liz: Yeah you got me

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It was . . . weird. But oddly okay at the same time.

They met at a quiet coffee place in Flushing a week later. Liz looked tired, but still gorgeous despite the worry lines on her brow. As it was getting colder, beanie hats and scarves were not out of place and Liz actually looked good in her subdued outfit.

“Rough flight?”

“TSA.” Liz’s mouth pursed up and her eyes narrowed. “Who knew that being related to someone accused of causing a plane crash would land you on their special blacklist? My bags only got scanned like six times. But what can you do?”

Oh. That would definitely account for the tiredness and stress. But MJ was oddly touched by how Liz had decided to meet her before seeing the rest of her friends.

The beverages did not cost an arm and a leg and the cakes were decent. Small mercies. They got a corner table and hunched over their chai lattes and scones in the approved style.

It was weird because MJ had to start the conversation. But once Liz got going, she really got going. About how her Mom’s side of the family were all so smug about being right about her Dad being no good. About how the city she was living in was really white. About how her new school did not even have an AcaDec team (not that she could do any last minute extracurricular coaching anyway with all the shuttling back and forth from New York and the whole trial thing). About how the guys at school needed to remember what personal space was.

“Sorry if I’m unloading on you,” Liz muttered as she jabbed her scone viciously with the butter knife. “But I guess I wanted to talk to someone I knew who isn’t going to gush all over me. You always gave people space.”
I was making space around myself—a total no-go zone! MJ wanted to scream. But she took a sip of her chai instead.

“It’s . . . fine, I guess,” she said after a moment of staring at Liz’s nails and the eviscerated scone. “Sorry that school sucks and you have to deal with fake alpha males. I can recommend a good brand of mace. And YouTube has some great self-defence videos—you have to practice frequently though. Especially if you want to break their fingers.”

Liz just stared at her before bursting into a fit of giggles. Very lady-like giggles hidden behind her hand, but still giggles. “Oh wow, that was what I needed. No-nonsense, practical advice. Everyone else is probably going to give me all the sympathy I don’t need right now.”

MJ swallowed a buttery mouthful of scone and willed herself not to say anything stupid. “Maybe that’s just my way of showing sympathy.”

“You don’t give yourself enough credit.” Liz shook her head ruefully. “You pretend to be all cool, but you took the time to listen to me vent.”

“Sisterhood,” MJ managed to croak out before succumbing to a stray crumb that went down the wrong way. Her coughing masked how red her face was becoming. Especially when Liz reached over to slap her back.

“Death by baked goods would be really sad,” she said after a few calming sips of her chai. She sincerely hoped that Liz had not noticed her internal flailing under all that external flailing.

“But worth it though,” Liz said, biting into her scone. “Mmm, this is good.”

“Watch out for the crumbs,” MJ warned her.

“I’m not going to choke on a scone and let those scummy reporters blow it up on the front page.” There was a steely light in Liz’s eyes as she looked up from her plate. “I’m coming for the trial. Even if my Dad doesn’t want me to. Even if I have to defer going to college. Even if I have to take the train and wear a disguise to the trial.”

“You can crash at my place,” MJ offered, her mouth outpacing her brain by two seconds. She doubted that Liz would lack any offers from her inner circle.

“Would your parents approve of you having sleepovers with a criminal’s daughter?” Liz looked amused and a little sad all at once. She looked so grown-up at that moment that MJ could not help but succumb to her crush just a little more. “I can find a hostel—”

“I’ll convince my parents.” MJ swore to herself that she would. And she reminded her hindbrain that she was not going to mack on Liz. This would be totally platonic. She was just looking out for another girl.

Sure thing, that pesky voice at the back of her head jeered at her. It was annoying enough when she called herself out, but dammit, her inner voice was snarky.

They drifted off into less heavy topics like the books they were currently reading and the state of the decathlon team. Less heavy for Liz—MJ was currently dealing with a team that had Flash Thompson and Spider-Man on it.

Liz gave her a few other strategies to deal with personalities like Flash (other than glaring at him until he wets himself or using biting sarcasm to reduce him to a whiny five year old—MJ had that shit nailed down).
“I don’t know what’s really going on with Peter though, but I think he’s scared enough of you to listen,” Liz mused. “Be firm with him.”

“Aye, aye.” MJ snapped out a probably inaccurate salute and tried to sound more in-charge than she really was. In a crisis, how will you choose between letting Spider-Man’s dorky alter-ego go off to save people and pretending not to know in order to keep the decathlon team together? The civilian side of superhero ethics was a sorely underreported topic.

And that was what she was now, MJ realised. A civilian in a bigger universe that included artificial intelligence and aliens.

Looking at Liz over the rim of her cup, MJ imagined herself punching the inner voice that cheerfully informed her that she was the Unrequited Love trope personified. And she was the Stalker With A Crush in both Peter and Liz’s narratives.

. . . Eff bloody em fucking el.

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MJ gave herself the weekend to mope. She turned up for school on Monday with her armour on and a copy of Binti to pass the time at lunch. She managed to tune out most of the inane chatter around her and noted that everyone had forgotten about the events surrounding Homecoming in record time. Thanksgiving recess was almost upon them and everyone wanted to know their friends’ plans. Some students were involved in the petition to rename the holiday, but that was about it.

It pissed her off sometimes--people were so jaded and the news cycle was super depressing as a whole as it churned out scandal after scandal. She marched off after class to the auditorium, armed with a gut full of righteous indignation and extra tea in a flask.

Only to find everyone at AcaDec practice on time, with all their flashcards and notes prepared.

Glares suspiciously at the assembled students, MJ grunted and told them to start rotation drills. This involved one group of “expert” question givers and the other group’s members rotating around to answer ten questions at each station. It allowed everyone to join in and forced even people like Flash to do the work.

With one eye on the rest of the team, MJ segued smoothly into firing questions about literature and the arts. Everything was going so well that she barely even noticed when Peter Parker plopped into the seat in front of her after Abe.

Plopped was about right. He had never been Mr Preppy, but after Homecoming, he had been more than just subdued. Dispirited with an extra helping of distracted. Oh he was answering questions and doing his bit, but anyone that knew him could tell that his mind was drifting someplace else.

Meaning that MJ just had to look over at Ned to see him eyeing his bestie in a worried way. Now MJ knew that Ned sometimes looked at Peter the way she looked at Liz, but this was pure unadulterated concern. MJ heard that Peter had been grounded when his aunt found out about him running around as Way-Too-Tight-Spandex-Man because they sucked at whispering and secret-keeping in general. So she had been deliberately eavesdropping at that time, but it was not as though she did not already know the Big Secret.

Fortunately or unfortunately for her, Peter fumbled three post-modern Lit questions in a row, giving her an opportunity to haul him aside for A Talk. She figured that it would keep any talk of favouritism down if she was hard on everyone equally.
“Your head’s not in the game,” MJ began, feeling her resolve slipping as Peter’s bottom lip started to protrude in what she privately termed the Parker Pout. “Are you actually serious about rejoining the team?”

“I--I am! I’m just not caught up on post-colonial writers!” he blabbed in a way that should not have been attractive, but was. “But I’ll get there! We’ve got winter br--”

“Do you have an actual plan, Parker?” MJ demanded. “Because we’ve all heard that before.”

“Hear, hear,” Flash called out. MJ turned and gave him a Look that caused him to startle and fall off his chair. Eavesdropping was super unattractive when Flash did it.

“As I was saying--do you have a real plan to get your shit together?” She turned back to Peter to find him staring at her in a way that made her slightly uncomfortable. How did this pasty dweeb with the large ears affect her the same way Liz did even before she found out he was Spider-Man?

“Um, Ned’s helping me. Since I--uh--”

“You’re grounded, right? So do I have to get the plan from Leeds?”

The Parker Pout was back in full force. “It’s not permanent. And Ned can come over--”

“So that you can both build the Lego Hoth set he got for his birthday? Oh I know your weaknesses,” MJ said, feeling slightly vindicated by the panicked look Peter was throwing Ned. Ned could only shrug as he kept quizzing Abe. “You need supervision. And someone who actually gives a shit about literature.”

“Uh--what?” Peter spluttered.

“I’m supervising your revision practices. And you still need to pull up your literature grade.” A part of MJ knew that she should not get too close to Peter Parker and his Spandex-Clad Adventures, but she could not help herself. How long would Leeds and Parker keep whispering in front of her before they realised that she had figured it out on her own?

“Thank, I guess?” Peter was doing that awkward half-smiling thing and MJ knew that spending the winter break with this boy would be the end of her.

Watching Peter head back to the others, MJ felt weirdly disloyal to Liz. She gave herself a shake before following and tried not to look like she was focusing on Peter’s shoulders. She was not anything to either Peter or Liz, so she totally should not feel guilty for crushing on them both at the same time.

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MJ wound up spending more time with Ned and Peter than she anticipated due to the Thanksgiving recess.

Liz: What’re your plans for the long weekend?

Their principal had agreed that the students did not have to celebrate if they did not want to three years back. They still got the school holiday, but there were calls from various student groups to do something more meaningful over the recess.

MJ: Going to see an exhibition by Indigenous artists and writers
MJ: There’s also the petition to rename it
MJ: Don’t think the mayor’s going to change his mind any day soon tho
MJ: But I don’t mind doing more
Liz: I know some places that might need extra hands. Let me poke Betty and she’ll get back to you
MJ: Cool

Betty Brant had a contact at one of the soup kitchens that were providing meals over the holiday. She and a few friends from Midtown Tech were planning to volunteer. And they did not find it odd that MJ wanted to join in. As it turned out, Peter’s aunt had the same contacts. Which was why MJ found herself staring at the dynamic duo of Leeds and Parker over the bread station before May Parker bustled over and told them that the hot food was ready to be carried out.

In spite of herself, MJ watched as Peter hefted a massive stainless steel soup container with little effort before remembering to act as though it was heavy.

*Get your eyes back into your skull* she berated herself as another part of her brain threatened to disconnect at the sight of Peter’s back muscles flexing. *And get a grip--today is not about you.*

As it turned out, it was genuinely one of the best days MJ had spent in the company of her fellow students. Everyone looked engaged and her faith in humanity was temporarily restored. Maybe it was the glow of actually doing something to help or that she was wrong about some of her peers, but MJ felt at more at home when they were dishing out turkey in disposable hairnets and aprons than she usually did at school.

She even managed to mostly ignore how Peter’s biceps bulged whenever he had to do any lifting. Her resolve buckled towards the end of dinner service when they had to pack the extra chairs and tables back in. But Peter was oblivious to it, looking tired but cheerful as he and Ned swapped quips while stacking chairs.

Her kryptonite was apparently do-gooders with a goofy sense of humour.

She resolved to be more objective over the break. Coaching other students would probably look good on her transcript, she told herself. Even if it consisted of mainly of scaring them into doing what she wanted.

MJ was honest enough to admit that she was not a natural leader--or rather, not a good motivator-cum-manager like Liz was. If being bossy and determined was all there was to it, MJ might have run for a position in one of the extracurriculars already. But there was the whole being likable aspect that she was not cut out for. She would probably have more luck doing service projects that did not require too much human interaction. *Note to self: ask Liz about more volunteering.*

In the meantime, she just had to get through the winter break and pretend that she was not crushing on Peter or Liz.

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MJ: So I got my parents to let you stay over for a few nights
Liz: OMG! You’re the best Michelle!
MJ: You can call me MJ
She had chosen to spring the question after dinner on a weekend when they were fairly saturated with carbohydrates and feeling mostly content. It helped that her mom was firmly on Mrs Toomes’ side and was following the case closely. (Her earlier years as a reporter sometimes showed through.)

“After all, the poor woman had no idea what her husband was up to,” Gayle Connor-Jones said over the pie she was passing over to Mike. Her mom had also been easier to win over because she was all for MJ having more friends.

“Oh I don’t doubt that,” Martin Jones grumbled from the other side of the table. Her dad and brother were a bit harder to convince. “But I don’t like the idea of any reporters following his daughter all the way to us.”

“We’ll keep a low profile,” MJ promised. She was good at blending into the background--maybe Liz might take a few suggestions from her.

“Set a bear trap in the bushes for nosy reporters--or just traps like in the Home Alone movie,” Kendra chipped in. She was all for having Liz as a guest once she got over the fact that MJ actually had friends and had invited Liz Toomes over for winter break. Kendra also had a bloodthirsty streak that MJ was growing to appreciate. Their dad seemed to appreciate it more than their mom if his guffaw were anything to go by.

“You’ve been meaning to get a camera over the door for months anyway,” her mom reminded him while giving Kendra a warning look.

And that was how MJ secured Liz Toomes an invitation to stay in Queens with her when she returned to New York during winter break. Her dad’s actual trial was scheduled for the second of January.

Liz said that she had discussed it with her mother and they had compromised. MJ read between the lines again and understood that there might have been a long argument involved somewhere along the way before Mrs Toomes was okay with Liz going to New York but not actually turning up at the trial in person.

MJ had plenty of time to regret it when Liz was present, in the flesh, in her bedroom two days before Christmas. Her bedroom had a super-single bed with a rollaway underneath, so it was logical that they would room together.

But nothing in the world had prepared MJ for the sight of Liz in an oversized t-shirt and fleecy sweat pants, perched on the edge of the rollaway bed as she sifted through college pamphlets and forms on the first night.

Schooling her face to the appropriate degree of seriousness that the situation warranted, MJ cleared her throat and said, “You should apply for college now rather than deferring.”

“That what my Dad says too. I mailed off a bunch of them before coming back here.” Running a hand through her hair, Liz gestured at the pamphlets with her other hand. “I mean, I probably will get offers if I keep my grades up, but that might be because no-one connected Elizabeth Allan-Toomes to that whole fiasco. And the fees . . .

“Scholarships. Financial aid,” MJ suggested, despite knowing that Liz had probably made a list of options somewhere. College fees were the devil’s own handiwork, but it was probably not a good idea for Liz to miss out on what she had been working most of her life for.

“Will they think I’m thick-skinned or just desperate if I apply for a scholarship?” Liz asked. “Being
the daughter of a convicted criminal is not a plus. And before you say anything—yes, he’s guilty of
everything they charged him with after the preliminary hearing, so I’m not holding my breath for a
reprieve.”

It honestly wasn’t fair. Liz Toomes was in her room, on her bed and being ridiculously beautiful
while expounding on her future in the most cynical way possible. And MJ was picturing herself
punching her inner voice repeatedly while trying to be the supportive friend in flannel pyjamas.

“Brazen it out. What have you got to lose?”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right—it’s all or nothing now, I guess.” Liz gripped the roll of paper more
tightly. “Betty’s made a list of options for my top three choices. She even said she’ll help me look
over my essays.”

“That’s nice of her,” MJ said, suppressing the tiny spike of disappointment that other girls were
closer to Liz than she was. That they would always be closer to Liz than she could be.

Liz was going to stay with Betty for two nights after Christmas anyhow, so MJ should have been
mentally prepared for this. Except her plans never turned out the way she wanted them to.

Her mistake, MJ realised in retrospect, was proximity. Liz had always been the safer crush because
she represented the unattainable. MJ had never imagined that she would even wind up as a friend,
much less a close friend.

It did not stop Christmas from being a schmaltzy, sentimental day of presents, pancakes for breakfast
and their family’s traditional visit to Manhattan to see the lights before dinner at Grandma Jones’.

Mrs Toomes met them for lunch before she and Liz left to join their relatives in Queens for their own
celebration. No-one mentioned Mr Toomes and MJ was just a little bit too relieved when lunch was
over. She supposed that Kendra had earned her Christmas present this year by not asking awkward
questions. And she definitely owed her parents big time for this.

It was going all too well. Which was probably why MJ received a text from Peter while she was
cuddling Hairball (originally named Harvey), Grandma Jones’ huge fluffy cat that evening.

Dork#1: Hey MJ I’m un-grounded for Boxing Day

Dork#1: But May says I can only hang out with my school friends so I was wondering if you’re free?

Hairball batted at her phone as MJ stared at it (she seemed to be doing that a lot lately).

MJ: Who said we’re friends and why are you assuming that I’m free?

Dork#1: You did? But it’s totally fine if you’ve got something better to do!

Dammit. Condemned out of her own mouth.

MJ: Of course I have better things to do

MJ: I’m volunteering at an animal shelter

Dork#1: That does sound awesome

Dork#1: Can Ned and I join you?

Shit. But her fingers had taken a life of their own as she typed a response.
MJ: The shelter people said that they always need more hands during the holiday period

Which was one hundred percent true. Liz had recommended the shelter to her. However, Cindy and Sally were not able to go on Boxing Day due to family commitments. MJ had been prepared to fly solo on this one, but they were two volunteers short. The shelter animals did not need to suffer late meals and delayed playtime because she could not deal with her own shit. (And not having Peter’s actual name on her phone was a clear sign of that.)

Dork#1: Cool! (smiley face and thumbs up emoji)

MJ groaned and buried her face into Hairball’s dense coat. The cat purred obligingly, obviously not giving a crap about her inner turmoil as long as there was a warm lap to sit on.

This boy was going to be the death of her.
Chapter Summary

Ned Leeds and the Peter Parker Effect: Or you keep trying to not fall for your best friend, then boom.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Ned liked Legos for very specific reasons. His sisters told him it was a bit weird, but he liked how everything clicked into place eventually.

And it wasn't static or anything--you could use Legos to build just about anything.

So when Lego and Star Wars teamed up, it was like a dream come true. And who better to share it with than his best friend?

Or the only friend that was into Legos and building stuff for hours on end. (It was a very specific type of nerdom, his eldest sister Darlene was fond of saying.)

Ned had more friends back in grade school. But they had separated after the move to middle school. Or rather by the scramble to get into the very popular middle schools. Keeping in touch had not been an issue, but it was difficult to do the stuff they liked over group chat or emails. Coding was one thing, but building their own drones was out of the question. There was also the issue of diverging nerdoms: Franklin was now into music and virtual reality design, Howie was mad for aeronautics and Star Trek while Javier had gravitated towards RPGs and mechanical engineering.

Getting back together in high school was pretty much impossible, so no one mentioned it again after that one time at a Christmas party at Javier's place when they were in the eighth grade. Drifting apart was inevitable. Their next reunion was most likely when the Pacific Rim sequel hit the theatres because they all agreed that Michael Bay's Transformers had ruined their collective childhoods.

In the end, Howie had gone to Bronx Science (they made Midtown look nerd-lite), Franklin to Stuyvesant High (true fax: his parents cried when he got the acceptance letter) and Javier to Brooklyn Tech (where he was now friends with Kevin, Ned's cousin on his mother's side). Midtown Tech had been a shorter transit for Ned and they had a great robotics programme. So off Ned went to start high school alone, reasoning that it wouldn't be that bad in a school that prioritised science and math.

In his optimistic way, Ned forgot that a) the average student was still more inclined to stick with their friends from middle school, b) he was way more into nerd lore than most and c) the social hierarchy still existed. He was not rich, not a member of a winning sports team and not conventionally attractive (according to Eurocentric beauty standards as MJ would say). Being a smart kid in a school full of mostly smart kids meant that Ned could not even trade homework answers for social capital.

It was not as though people actively shunned him because everyone was busy trying to study and
find time for extracurriculars that would look good on college applications. He got along fine with most of his classmates (because he had learned a long time ago that being chill with everything was its own passport to lukewarm acceptance), but there was no-one to talk about the new Star Wars movies or build the latest Lego model with.

There were some Star Wars fans in Midtown's resident geek population, but the chances that they were interested in his old Extended Universe comics collection and fan speculations were slim. Ditto the Legos. Ned had taken to carrying around a different minifig keychain every week on the offside chance that someone would say "Ooo, that's a _____ minifig!"

Then he met Peter Parker in Advanced Chemistry class when Ms Jordan paired them up for the organic chem project. Peter was not exactly a stranger because they had attended the same middle school and even shared a class once in the seventh grade. Ned remembered him as the quiet kid--skinny, shy and really awkward. They had moved in separate circles back then.

Peter Parker as a freshman was still mostly skinny and awkward. But Ned found the punny t-shirts kind of charming. And the first thing he said to Ned when they were paired up for their project was, "Whoa, is that a Yoda minifig?"

Click.

Needless to say, the rest was history. (Thank you, Master Yoda.)

Peter was like, ultra-good at chemistry. He enjoyed recycling old computer parts in his spare time and was thinking of joining the robotics lab. He loved Pacific Rim and agreed that the only reason for 3D movies was so that they could see giant robots duke it out on screen with giant monsters--just not the Michael Bay version. And he could play the incorrect Star Wars quote game and liked marathoning fantasy movies.

What Ned had felt at that moment was probably something akin to falling in love.

And they had been joined at the hip from that moment on. United by their lack of social capital and generally geekiness at the bottom strata of high school, they had managed to get by. Freshmen year had almost been perfect.

Peter had his flaws--Ned was honest enough to admit that. He was awkward in front of everyone except his closest friends and family--that was when he went into quip-overdrive. Ned understood that some people might be turned off by that sort of thing. And he could be really intense when he was interested in something. Made him look a little creepy to girls and guys alike. Which was unfortunate because Peter was very likeable once he got comfortable enough around people to shed the awkwardness.

Then there was the ambition with very little planning involved. Yeah, they were fourteen and their school had classes for that sort of thing (thankfully without a cheerful PSA featuring Captain America opening with, "So you don't know what to do with your future . . ."), but Peter had been sort of impatient to prove himself back then. He had the determination and boy, did he have the grit . . . but no solid plans. Which was all right with Ned because they could think more about their future in the next academic year.

Disaster struck midway through their freshmen year. The unthinkable had happened.

Peter did not speak to anyone for a week after his uncle's death.

There had been a point when Peter had been so distant and Ned feared that he was dangerously
depressed. And he got the distinct impression that Peter was blaming himself for everything that happened.

Add trying to shoulder the weight of the world on his own to the list.

After all that happened, with May grieving and Peter not opening up to anyone, Ned had never felt so helpless since the time his grandfather lost the fight against throat cancer. (But he had been eight years old at the time, so there had been nothing he could do except fetch endless rounds of tea and coffee for the adults.)

"Give him time--he probably needs the space," Diane had said. Of all his siblings, Diane was the probably the most empathetic. She had also been the quiet, moody atypical Leeds sibling, so he figured that she knew what she was talking about.

Ned practiced patience (I am one with the Force and the Force is with me) and was rewarded by the gradual return of non-zombie Peter Parker--almost. Peter still seemed to require a lot of space, especially after school. Then things started looking up for Peter. Out of the blue, he had been selected for an internship! At Stark Industries! (The exclamation points were totally warranted.)

If he was honest (and Ned was more honest with himself than with others a lot of the time), Ned had been simultaneously excited for his friend and slightly envious too. After all, an internship with one of the top tech firms in the country was nothing to sneeze at. That envy morphed into concern as they started their sophomore year. Peter looked tired a lot of the time and he kept checking his phone (more than he usually used to). They hardly hung out anymore and Peter seemed to lose interest in school, rushing off every day for his internship. Even on some weekends too.

All that effort for an unpaid internship. Ned half-suspected that someone at Stark Industries was making Peter do a lot more work than an intern was normally supposed to do. Darlene knew a lot of intern horror stories and she had made Ned promise that he would not sign up as free labour for people that might not even give him even a good reference at the end of the day. May did not seem to like the internship any more than Ned did, but she had always trusted Peter to make his own choices.

But she still worried about him. The same way Ned was both worried and a little sore that his friend did not seem to have time for him anymore. But it was good that Peter had a direction in mind now. Ned supposed that Stark Industries was aiming pretty high if you were talking about a future in chemical engineering or material science.

Ned knew that his own family was in a relatively comfortable place financially at the moment. They weren't super rich in the way that Flash Thompson's family was rich, but they managed to visit their relatives at least once a year, rotating between the family outposts in Hawaii, California and Illinois. Darlene had started working three years ago and bought them presents quite often. Diane had won a scholarship for college, so their parents had one less debt to pay off. Ned had plans to do something tech-related in the long term and by the time he hit thirty, his parents would be ready for retirement, so he would probably have to be financially stable enough to ensure that his youngest brother Ernie could have multiple options after high school.

The Parkers were also not super rich. Prior to the internship, Peter's long-term plans used to consist of something high school something college maybe part-time job during college then actual job. Ned knew that Peter had the smarts to get a full ride scholarship so that his aunt would not need to get a loan and all that, but that was the general goal of most students at Midtown Tech after they read the pamphlets about how much college would cost. It was definitely going to be a competition at some point. However, Peter's life seemed to be getting increasingly complicated . . .
Of late, Peter had been dropping out of his extracurriculars. Ned was normally not fussed about such things because people were allowed to change their minds, but when Peter quit robotics lab, he had felt a twinge of unease. And it was not just because they used to have the best time at robotics lab in their freshmen year.

That internship had better come with sterling references or an actual job offer because Peter only had AcaDec left.

Maybe Peter was stressed out by the long hours of the internship. Maybe he was stressing out over the price of public transport and the shunting to-and-from downtown Manhattan. Maybe he was trying too hard to impress someone who might not even be his future employer . . .

Or maybe Ned was worrying too much. He resolved to be a good friend despite how spaced out Peter was sometimes. Which meant being a good bro whenever Peter stared dreamily at Liz (that had not changed for the past few months at least) and offering to share the torta and fried rice his mom had packed for him during break. (In the Leeds household, feeding people was caring.)

Then Darlene had gifted him with the Classic Star Wars Lego Death Star for his birthday, an extravagance that made his youngest brother declare that the only way to top that would be to bring Ernie to Disneyland the next time they were in California. ("You opportunistic little shit," Darlene had said while ruffling Ernie's hair affectionately.) It was perfect. Ned had not even unboxed it yet. So he saved it until he could tell Peter about it and invite him to build the Death Star together.

Peter actually perked up that morning and Ned thought that everything was going to be all right after all. Then Peter had proceeded to spend the rest of the day staring at the clock when he was not crushing on Liz in a slightly creepy way. MJ was usually right about that sort of thing but Ned also noticed that she had been spending an inordinate amount of time sitting at their table at lunch.

And it turned out that she had been monitoring Peter's extracurriculars too. (Like wasn't that also on the slightly stalker-ish side?)

The bombshell Peter dropped at AcaDec practice surprised everyone including Ned. Not going to Nationals after they had fought so hard to reach the finals? That epic round against Stuy (no offense Franklin, but Midtown totally blew your team out of the water) and the near thing with Townsend Harris?

Mr Harrington had offered sensible alternatives but Peter seemed to be pretty set on not going to Washington. Not even Liz standing right there was enough to change his mind. (Later, Ned would understand that this was completely in-character for Peter.) Which meant that they would be stuck with Flash on the main team. Ned resolved to talk to Peter about it over the Lego Death Star building later that evening.

After all, he reasoned, there might not be another chance to be on the team that actually made it to Nationals. They had been so excited about the overnight school trip to Washington DC a few months back too. Why had Peter changed his mind so suddenly?

Armed with his three thousand eight hundred and three pieces of fun in a box, Ned had set out that evening to be a good bro.

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"You're the Spider-Man . . . from YouTube."

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The Big Reveal answered most questions that had been plaguing Ned about his best friend. He had been too excited to do anything other than fanboy for the next twenty-four hours or so, but it figured that Peter would put patrolling Queens over AcaDec Nationals.

But it was wicked cool that his best friend was Spider-Man. Quite possibly the coolest thing that would ever happen to him too.

Ned knew that he was . . . a Filipino American of size. He knew how it looked—he was good at math, more than good with computers and helped his grandmother reprogramme her TiVo. Heck, he even attended a science and tech school with a noticeably higher than average Asian population. (At least at Midtown, he wasn't going to be singled out as the Nerdy Asian in a sea of nerds. Or mistaken for Chinese.)

It did not mean that he had to be the Asian Sidekick. Which was why he had pumped for being the Guy in the Chair. He also knew that Spider-Man was one of those lone hero types because unless said sidekick had the ability to fly or jump from building to building, it was never going to work out. And it was the twenty-first century--someone had to provide online support and real-time communications.

Peter had not agreed with him at first. And there had been the overprotectiveness that might have come off as overbearing if Ned had not known that Peter was being Peter no-one-can-know-about-this Parker, trying his darnedest to keep Ned and his aunt out of his nightly shenanigans.

But Ned was still pragmatic enough to point out that Peter was trying to protect a fully grown adult woman and someone two months older than he was. Fifteen-year olds should not be chasing armed bank robbers. He knew that that thought probably sounded like an annoyingly naggy combination of his Grandma Celia and Auntie Roberta, but surveying the ruins of Mr Delmar's store, Ned realised that death was totally an option for superheroes. Especially those that just dived headfirst into whatever came their way. Peter would be better off trying to impress Liz. Probably safer too.

Knowing his friend, Ned should not have been surprised when Peter decided not to drop in as Spider-Man for Liz's party and hared off to chase illegal weapons dealers instead of chasing the girl he had a major crush on.

I take it all back, Ned thought after he found out what had happened. It's okay to be just Peter Parker. It's okay not to go out and almost get killed by being dragged through suburbia and dunked into a lake.

But he could tell that Peter was not going to let it go. He seemed to be consumed by that need to prove himself and before Ned knew it, he had talked his way back onto the AcaDec trip to DC (okay, so it was mainly because everyone preferred him to Flash).

Ned's misgivings did not cease after hacking into the suit. He was pretty sure that he was doing something not quite legal, especially after he got through the layers of security and discovered the tracker plus all the other features Peter had not unlocked yet. Oh, and this Property of Stark Industries stamped throughout the code . . .

He was too young to go to prison, Ned was fairly certain of that. His mom would kill him before they could get him into juvie anyway. And then he'd be resurrected so that all the Aunties could chew him out. They'd totally make room for May Parker to join in too.

These cheerful thoughts kept him awake most of the night before Nationals. After all, it was his fault for not being strong enough to say no to his best friend. Who was now in possession of a suit with unlocked functions. The full list of which made Ned slightly antsy all over again. (Instant Kill
function? Really? Peter was so not a killer . . .)

As it turned out, they had carried the real danger with them all the way from Queens. The AcaDec team had almost died. And then Spider-Man had saved them before falling down the elevator shaft. His immediate thought was oh-shit-oh-shit-my-best-friend-just-died.

Oh god what will I tell May?

When they pull the body from the bottom of the shaft, would they unmask him right there?

Everyone else read his reaction as shock from the traumatic experience. Ned was so dazed that even MJ hugging him at the foot of the Monument failed to register as completely out of the ordinary.

He did register Peter's unusually solid for a fifteen-year old's grip as he was pulled into a tight embrace.

"I'm glad you're okay," Peter whispered into his ear. His hair was all sweaty and flattened. Ned knew that he had probably changed in a hurry after not-dying in the elevator shaft.

I thought you died for a moment there. Forgot that you're sort of indestructible, dude.

But the words never left his mouth.

You're not indestructible, Peter. No-one is.

Near-death experiences were very sobering.

Peter had snuck him guilty looks on the bus all the way back home, no doubt blaming himself for the whole mess.

Amidst the multiple text messages that Ned discovered on his phone after the incident, the latest one was from Peter.

Peter: I'm sorry

Ned was just glad to be alive. That his friends were all still alive.

The guilt reasserted itself when his parents flung themselves at him the moment he stepped off the bus. Everyone's relatives had been waiting at the school in one giant knot of anxiety. Being indirectly responsible for everything that had gone wrong that day was awful. Juvie was probably not enough.

His parents bought takeout from Jollibee afterwards because no one had time to think about dinner and they had spent the evening at home, shaken but so very relieved. Ned had picked at his food for the first time in years and no-one commented on it. He did not even object when Ernie spent most the night clinging to his side.

On Sunday, Ned regained most of his equilibrium. Peter had saved them all in the end. No-one had died, so there was that. Tony Stark ought to be impressed by now. And Ned had done actual Guy in the Chair stuff. Kind of. So score one for both of them!

Ned: Thank you for being there

When school started again on Monday, Ned thought that Peter might cut back on chasing dangerous illegal weapons dealers after the incident at the Washington Monument, but apparently, it had only served to make things worse.
Ned had been frozen in place when Peter announced that he did not want to continue going to high school. Mostly out of shock. He thought that the simplified three-year plan was graduate high school and go to college. But it was apparent that this was Ned's plan and not Peter's after all.

When they made the documentary about Spider-Man for the edification of future generations, Ned wondered if the Very Special Lesson at the end of Episode Two would be about saying no to your best friend and getting him to go for the Spanish quiz. Because he was doing such an excellent job at being a good influence that Principal Morita had to step in and give Peter detention for going AWOL on a school trip.

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Ned sometimes wondered if he was worrying just a skoosh too much. It was hard to balance the worrywart mentality of his Auntie Roberta and the one-day-at-a-time chill teenager in his fifteen-year old body.

But looking at the evidence so far, he might be justified in his worrying. If anything happened to Peter, New York would be down one hero and Ned would be beyond crushed. Utterly destroyed. He would never be able to look at his Lego Death Star again.

So he was secretly glad that the adults were there to do what he could not. But keeping one super-powered teenager out of trouble was virtually impossible, as proven by the coverage of the Staten Island Ferry incident that blared out from the tv screen in Ned's living room.

Case in point, as Darlene would say. They might as well have used one-ply toilet paper to build a dam.

Ned was not proud of the fact that he freaked out for the second time in two days. He forgot that phones existed for a full five minutes until the buzzing from all the text messages alerted him to the fact that his phone was charging on his desk. The various chat groups were all blowing up about the latest news but Ned had eyes only for one contact.

Peter: (last seen at 10.45am)

The worst part were the texts from May Parker, asking about Peter's whereabouts. She knew that Peter had been AWOL from both the decathlon and detention. Ned could not bring himself to call her and lie to her face. (Well, lie to her in his own voice.)

Ned: I last saw him at school this morning

A partial truth. He was damned now.

Ned: When he gets back, could you ask him to msg me please?

Because he was worried and cheesed off at the same time, Ned resolved that he was going to put his foot down this time.

But Peter did not call him until nine that night and Ned could tell from the stuffiness in his tone that Peter had been crying.

Tony Stark had put his iron-clad foot down first and Ned could not be angry at Peter when he was so utterly despondent. At least he was still alive and in one piece.

You'll always be Spider-Man to me Ned almost said before freezing up at the warm tide of affection that he was experiencing.
When had he crossed the line from wanting to be Peter's best friend to wanting more?

It had been at Jenny Linderman's birthday party when they were in the eighth grade. Ned didn't know her at all--he had got the invitation along with Franklin and Javier because Howie had been asked to bring friends from other schools to the party. It made for a more interesting party, allegedly.

That was certainly true--from Ned's point of view anyway.

Ned realised that he was not one hundred percent straight when he suddenly wanted to be in Jenny's shoes when they were playing Truth or Dare and Jenny had been dared to kiss Javier.

The fact that he had a thing for his friend had been a revelation and a half for Ned. His family was pretty liberal (they were the New York branch after all), but he was uncertain about his extended family until they had been invited for Aunt Janice's wedding to Emily Vargas. There had been some grumbling from the older members and some had been noticeably absent from the celebrations, but in the end, they all agreed that family was still family.

But Ned was still probably eighty percent into girls and twenty percent into guys he knew well enough to be comfortable around. So he did not feel any pressing need to tell anyone about it yet. Ned was not in a hurry, though dating someone in the next year or so would be really nice.

He was resolved not to cross the line with his latest best friend. Because Peter was so Ned's type when it came to guys--quirky, stubborn and armed with a nerdy sense of humour.

He was also terrible boyfriend material. Ned could not stop Peter from risking his neck as Spider-Man. Heck, Ned probably could not stop Peter from risking his neck even if he wasn't Spider-Man.

Which made it mostly Ned's problem that he was way too fond of his bestie and forgave him every time. And he was probably enabling Peter's risk-taking behaviour by keeping his secrets.

Ratting him out was not an option. And he wasn't ready to make friendship more awkward than it had to be by falling for his best friend. His oblivious, ridiculous best friend. Who was also Spider-Man, even without the super suit.

Once he had calmed himself with a liberal application of ice-cream, Ned selected the most sensible option. He could still be his best friend. Continue on as though nothing had changed.

As though he had not been slightly smitten since "Whoa, is that a Yoda minifig?"

Okay, so maybe it had been more than just slightly smitten.

Ned winced inwardly. He had to remain calm. Peter did not know about this. Peter did not need to know about this at all. And now he had to turn in an Oscar-worthy performance as Ned Leeds, Guy in the Chair and best bud of Peter Parker.

Good thing he had been in the drama club in grade school. (His Boy Who Cried Wolf had brought down the house. According to his parents. Ned knew that he was a terrible actor when it came to real life.)

It helped that Peter was trying to get his life back to some semblance of what it used to be. He was focusing more in class and getting his grades back up. They finally completed the Lego Death Star together and Ned was content with the click of the final pieces fitting into place.
He went along with Sally Avril's idea of doing the group date after Peter finally stumped up the courage to ask Liz to Homecoming. He would totally rock the 80's theme and they would have some fun to take their minds off things. Like normal teenagers for once.

It was good. This was better than good. Ned was happy for his friend now that he had other things on his mind other than risking his neck. Maybe now they could go through high school the way he imagined. He would cultivate his inner cool and ask Rachel Chiang from robotics lab or Betty Brant out for Junior Prom. Nothing ventured, nothing gained and the worse they could do was say no, right? Go big or go home . . .

(Ned liked girls that were intimidating and really smart. He and Peter were alike in that respect as well. Probably had something to do with the strong women in their lives, but Ned was no expert in psychology.)

In retrospect, Ned really should have seen it coming. He should also coin his own addendum to Murphy's Law and call it the Peter Parker Effect. Also known as just when you think everything has settled down--boom. So when Peter bailed on Liz, he had chased after him with the unsettling feeling that whatever had caused this change was going to be the big one.

Ned had stumbled out on the parking lot and the sound of metal screeching against metal. Everything went into slo-mo like the way it did in the movies. Boom.

Of course Peter would be that guy. That guy that would give up his first date with a senior to chase after bad guys because it was the right thing to do. Peter was never one to leave something unfinished.

Even if he had to do it in his sweatpants and self-modified googles.

There was this guy with a glowing weapon on his arm and Peter was getting a beat-down because his web-shooters were scattered on the ground. School buses were literally flying through the air.

Ned was probably not thinking when he picked up the nearest web-shooter. That was definitely why he was not afraid when he took aim. It was like he was floating through space as everything swam into focus and he depressed the trigger--

He was really really glad that he had geeked out over Peter's original designs for the web-shooters when the webbing flew straight and true to snag the guy's weaponised arm. Fortunately for the state of Ned's bladder, Peter took over before that guy could do anything else.

The adrenaline was still coursing through him when Peter explained that the chief bad guy was Liz's dad and that he needed Ned's help before running off, trusting that Ned had his back.

But of course. It was totally Guy in the Chair stuff. It was what Ned had wanted to do from the beginning.

I'm hopeless Ned thought as he ran for the library. But there he was, caught up in Peter's intense need to be responsible for everything during Homecoming.

He would be lying if he said that he did not want to be the Guy in the Chair that night. Especially when Peter had stolen Flash's car. It was less amusing when he discovered that Peter did not know how to drive.

Oh Peter, Ned thought as he frantically hit the search engine. It would be so uncool if you got into a fender bender before you catch up with the bad guys. And your aunt will kill us both if my mom doesn't get to me first . . . Go Team Spider-Man!
Doing three things at once on the not-that-fast library computers was hardly the state-of-the-art tech wizardry of his dreams but Ned would deal. He was a part of something bigger now.

And what was up with this Happy guy anyway? Would it have hurt him to listen for ten seconds? Peter was actually trying to help too. Stark Industries seemed like a very stressful place to work at.

*Maybe strike off Stark Industries from the future employment list . . . in addition to not letting them find out that he had hacked the Spidey suit.*

But Ned had his own problems to deal with afterwards when he took one for the team and lied about watching porn.

The irony of it all was that Ned had barely looked at porn online after discovering that it did not do much for him at all. No matter what genre of porn it was too. His libido was pretty random that way.

At least he had plenty of time to reflect on his actions and read the text messages from Peter, who was not dead despite the plane crash on Coney Island and getting body slammed repeatedly by Liz's dad in a mechanised wing suit.

Despite dodgy internet connections and way too much danger for Ned to process properly, they both had not failed in the end. Ned breathed a sigh of relief and basked in the fact that they had stopped the bad guys against all odds. Plus no casualties--that was important. And they were still best friends with an added side of super-heroism.

Until the next day, when Peter said to him, "You saved me."

*Uh-oh . . .* Ned felt the warmth bloom in his chest and spread through him like that time when he had taken a sip of his Uncle Vincent's special punch on a dare. *I am in too deep . . .*

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Chapter End Notes

The 3803 piece Classic Star Wars Lego Death Star:  
http://lego.wikia.com/wiki/10188_Death_Star

That Lego set is approximately equal to a trip to Disneyland.

In the next part, two worlds collide.
Ned would have been happy to frame that moment and never talk about it again. Really. He had saved Spider-Man. All in a day’s work.

Except for that voice that insisted that he had saved Peter, actually. And the feelings would not quit. Ned would have gone to the grave with his secret except he was genre-savvy enough to know that the more he tried to hide something, the more likely it would come to light.

Big secrets always found their way out. There was also the Peter Parker Effect--Ned's own addendum to Murphy's Law--to factor in. They were living on borrowed time considering the number of secrets they were keeping.

Even though Peter was taking a short hiatus from swinging around Queens after getting seven kinds of snot pounded out of him on Coney Island Beach, Ned had a feeling that trouble was not too far behind. (Trouble other than adults trying to murder Spider-Man.)

It started out innocently enough after Peter had vanished from an AcaDec meeting. MJ had been organising their practice schedules and Ned was wondering what Peter's call had been about when he got the first message.

Peter: Sorry I had to skip out

Ned: What's up?

Peter: Going upstate with Happy to the new Avengers facility

Oh. So this was how superheroes operated. Ned wondered if that Happy guy was more chill now.

Ned: Cool

Maybe this was it. Maybe this would be Spider-Man joining the Avengers for real. Funny how that might mean that--

[AcaDec] Peter: Sorry guys I have something on at home

[AcaDec] Michelle: Don't start flaking on us now, Parker

[AcaDec] Peter: I'll make up for it!

He’d better--Michelle, I mean MJ--looks like she means business. And I bet she's not going to be as nice as Liz. Ned thought to himself as he checked over the practice timings in the shared document.
There was a lull in which Ned supposed that they were travelling to the groovy new headquarters and going for a meeting with Iron Man himself. He only got new messages after AcaDec practice was over.

*Peter:* Mr Stark offered me a place as an Avenger but I said no

*Peter:* They wanted me to move in with them today

*Peter:* I knew it was a test right then

*Peter:* And I totally passed

*Peter:* Not that I could leave May and all of you

*Peter:* Being the friendly neighbour Spider-Man is more my style

*Peter:* I still need to make sure those weapons aren’t on the market anymore

Ned was not a billionaire, playboy, philanthropist etcetera, but he was pretty sure that the Tony Starks of the world did things differently from the rest of them. So who knew if Tony Stark had been serious or not? All Ned could trust in was Peter Parker to make the right choices.

Privately, Ned thought that Tony Stark did not know Peter that well. (A kill mode--paranoid much?) And Tony Stark definitely did not know May Parker at all.

*Ned:* Proud of you, my dude

Peter would never know about how relieved Ned really was. Or how much his words were making Ned's heart clench right at that moment. Of course Peter wouldn’t run off with unfinished business in Queens. Or leave his widowed aunt alone.

Ned needed a burger and maybe two hours of not thinking about Peter Parker.

He knew that the webbing had really hit the fan when he received a barrage of text messages from Peter later that evening, each one more frantic and containing more typos than the last.

*Peter:* May found out

*Peter:* MrStark left me the suit an she sawit

*Peter:* What do I do???

*Peter:* Shes calling Mr Stark

*Peter:* Shes yelling at them toput Mr Stak on the phone

*Peter:* Ned!!!

For moment, Ned forgot to breathe. Peter had been so scared about his aunt finding out so Ned could not blame him for freaking out (but he could not fault May if she freaked out after that reveal either). Then he exhaled and set down his phone for a moment.

Ned was actually relieved that someone else knew. He doubted his ability to keep up the pretence in front of authority figures. May, who was sort of an auntie figure to him, fitted that category. (Ned had not worked up the courage to ask if he could call her auntie yet--and he didn't know if Peter would be okay with that.) On top of that, May was someone who could say no to Peter. As in No,
it's not a good idea to go after guys with guns and No, it's not a good idea to drive a car really fast when you don't know how to drive.

At least May was still letting Peter text him, so it wasn't that bad. Ned picked up his phone and started to type out a message. Knowing Peter, he was going to put it all on himself.

Ned: Uh let Mr Stark handle it?

Adults could hash certain things out amongst themselves. Though he would not like to be in Tony Stark’s shoes when May got through to him.

Ned: He can explain about your internship

Peter: But then shell find out about Germanandberlinand

Peter: I dont want May toworry

Peter: Imessed up

That was the first time Ned had seen Peter consider the fact that he might be causing his aunt grief in his efforts to keep the truth from her so that she would not worry. How to express the sentiment hey, she's your aunt and she's taken care of you since you were six--of course she's gonna worry about you and I've been worried about you while trying to be supportive and a total fanboy--which isn't going to help your aunt not worry in a text message?

Ned: (C3PO head emoji) Deep breaths

Ned: Repeat after me--I am one with the Force and the Force is with me

Peter: I am one with the floor and the floor is me

Okay, that was still something.

Ned: I'm sure May is just concerned for you (BB8 head emoji)

Peter: I knw

Peter: She grounded me

Peter: Maybe not forever but someone from Stark Industries finally put her through to Ms Pepper Potts

That was . . . relatively mild. If Ned's parents ever found out what he had been up to, he would have been shipped off to California straight away, forbidden to speak to his friends in New York ever again and subjected to Grandma Celia's scrutiny for the rest of his life. (The joys of having a large, super-extended family that spanned four states and both coasts.)

Ned: That's a good sign? She's the CEO of SI, right?

Peter: Maybe she can talk to both May and Mr Stark

Peter: Still no spider-manning tho

Well, at least Peter appeared to have calmed down somewhat.

Ned: Can I visit you in your Fortress of Solitude?
May: *Only if you're going to be honest about this whole thing, Edward*

On Saturday, Ned was allowed to visit sometime after *The Wrath of May Part 2* had descended and all civilian casualties had been evacuated.

Meaning that Tony Stark and then Pepper Potts had come over earlier that morning. May Parker had given them what for and threatened to expose the fact that her underaged nephew had been shanghaied by Iron Man and shipped overseas to fight the other half of the former Avengers. There had been mention of child endangerment and possibly a restraining order, but it was mostly about how to keep Peter's identity a secret.

That had been the Cliff Notes Super Pared Down Edition by Peter over a series of messages. Ned supposed that the real encounter had involved a lot more swearing by May and Tony Stark leaving with his nose in a sling (Ms Potts had dragged him out before things could escalate). There was talk of further negotiations. Ned was just glad to be able to go over.

Ned was greeted at the door by a very frosty May Parker. She looked extra stern with her hair up in a tight bun and work trousers.

"So you knew about it too." She folded her arms and gave him the *Et tu, Edward?* look.

"Msorry, Mrs Parker," Ned mumbled. Lying gave him indigestion and he really wanted to clear the air with May. He was not likely to ask if he could call her auntie anytime soon.

"Pleasdon'ttellmymom!"

She rolled her eyes at him and let him pass through the doorway.

"Ned knew about it for how long again?" This was directed at a very quiet Peter at the dining table. He was dressed in indoor clothes--meaning ratty sweatpants and a slightly overstretched shirt--and looked terribly young.

"Uh, I found out by accident," Ned confessed. "Before Washington DC."

"I made him promise not to tell--it's not his fault." Peter looked really contrite under his mop of brown curls--he had been mussing it up with his hands which was a nervous habit, Ned knew. Which gave him the look of a puppy in need of adoption. May was obviously made of stronger stuff than Ned or maybe she was immune to it after all this time because she just directed Ned to take a chair.

Interrogations were not Ned's forte and he did not want to throw his friend under the bus. But May Parker did not need thumbscrews to get the truth out from a pair of fifteen-year olds.

Three glasses of juice later, she managed to get Ned's side of the story--how he had found out, the trip to Washington and the night of the Homecoming dance.

"And throughout all of this, none of you thought to tell anyone?" May stared at them both. She looked older, more careworn under the fluorescent lights above the table. "And I don't mean that guy that never took Peter's calls seriously--there are other adults in your life."

There was a heavy pause as May's gaze refused to waiver.

"Not that you seem to want us old fogies involved in your lives--"
Peter tried to reason with her—not for the first time, Ned suspected. "May, I didn't want you to worry-
"

Ned could have told him that that was the wrong track to take—with three other siblings, he had
plenty of experience with family arguments.

"We went through all that last night," May said sharply. "I trusted you and you kept lying to me. You even got Ned to lie to me--"

"I was a willing accomplice--not that I wanted to lie to you," Ned said meekly.

"All these good intentions . . . and for what?" May threw her hands up in exasperation. "You're a pair of fifteen-year olds! Ned, if anything happened to you, I wouldn't know what to say to your parents! It was bad enough after that mess in Washington!"

The look on her face spoke volumes as she glared at them. *I am so disappointed in you. Also, you could have died.*

Ned was super weak to that sort of thing. Peter was not doing much better. He appeared to be shrinking inwards.

On the other side of the table, May took a deep breath to calm herself. "So Peter's grounded at the moment. I don't have any right to ground you, Ned, but you're not going to help him sneak around again, all right?"

Ned nodded, shooting an apologetic look at his friend. "Can I still come over?"

"So long as you don't give him any ideas." May folded her arms and pinned them both with her stare. "So this is how it goes. Peter's not to talk to Stark or any one that works for him on his own. If Stark wants to speak to you, he'll have to do it with me in the room or another adult that I deputise as my stand-in. If anyone does try to speak to you, you call me first. Do not sign anything—even though you're underaged and it's not legally binding. That goes for Ned too."

Startled, Ned sat up straight in his chair. "Me?"

"Yes, you, Ned—we're not going to tell Stark and his cronies that you were involved in any way. If anyone approaches you about this--"

"Act like I know nothing, got it," Ned agreed fervently. Yes, absolutely—it was for the best. No-one had to know about his involvement. The less people that knew, the less likely it would ever get back to his parents. "I can cover my tracks online too."

"Does anyone else at your school know about this?"

"No-one else," Peter reassured her.

"Thank goodness for that—now the closest threat is conscription or some criminal with serious beef against Spider-Man hunting you down."

"Most of those guys are in jail now," Peter pointed out.

"Peter, did you even read the news? Some of those men on that ferry have convictions for multiple homicides!" May pushed her glasses back up, consternation and worry clear on her face. "And they're gang-affiliated--so they definitely have people outside of prison to do their dirty work for them."
Whoa, May was showing some serious street smarts. She must have seen Ned's expression because she pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes at them.

"I've lived here for over fifty years and the only thing cleaning up the streets of New York did was to drive all the serious crime underground. It's not about bicycle thieves or pickpockets--these people are bad news. And unless they're really dumb or have no internet access at all, they already know that you're based here in Queens."

Yikes. Ned looked sideways at Peter and saw that he was coming to the same conclusion.

It would be so easy, Ned realised as a queasy feeling took over his guts--maybe it was one glass of juice too many. Or the thought that all the bad guys had to do was threaten to blow up or shoot up a street in Queens to draw out Spider-Man. Because Peter was Peter, it would totally work.

"That's why I demanded that Stark do something about it. But it was Ms Potts that promised to have the Rescue Corps on standby."

Oh. Ned remember that announcement on the evening news (on the same day that Peter had gone upstate--gee, what a coincidence). Pepper Potts, CEO of Stark Industries, had announced that she was funding a special fleet of Rescue bots (with no offensive capabilities) as a part of SI's disaster prevention and management initiative. Because New York and other hot spots obviously needed that sort of thing after everything that had happened.

The secondary story had been "Tony Stark proposes to Pepper Potts at press conference".

Pepper Potts definitely fell under the "intimidating and very smart" category. Tony Stark was a very lucky man. Pepper Potts was ultra-accomplished and competent to boot. Totally the type of lady Ned would go for.

"Whoa, that's badass." May was probably more badass because she had stood up to Tony Stark (Iron Man, squee), Pepper Pots (CEO of Stark Industries--Ned's inner fanboy went squee again) and presumably however many lawyers Stark Industries could afford to hire.

"It was the least they could do, according to that CEO lady. I don't doubt that Stark has one of those flying armour thingies stationed someplace too. Now, is Ned staying for dinner?"

Ned would like to stay for dinner very much. And to speak to Peter alone even though he was trying not to have any feelings other than the platonic, appropriate bro feelings.

So May got on the phone to order Chinese food while Peter and Ned beat a strategic retreat into Peter's bedroom. The door remained open with a foot-wide gap and Ned almost blurted out something about not needing precautions like that, but realised just in time that it was so that May could still see her currently grounded nephew.

"So," Ned began hesitantly. "How's it going? Asides from being grounded?"

Peter shrugged wearily and started pulling out his homework. "I'm keeping a low profile because May doesn't want any criminals targeting our neighbourhood. And I'm supposed to catch up on my schoolwork before May will even consider un-grounding me. Plus I have to read up on recent news and compile a list of known criminals associated with Mr Toomes or that Gargan guy from the Ferry."

Ned whistled through his teeth. "Your aunt's taking this very seriously."

"Yep. It's the see-and-flee list." Peter hauled out the folder of their political science readings. "You
might have to look at it just in case. I think I'll read up on the Sokovia Accords too."

Ah, some serious shit had gone down earlier that day. No wonder Peter was looking subdued and extra thoughtful.

"Yeah, that's--that's probably a good place to start," said Ned, who had read the notes and remembered most of the salient points. "We had a debate on that too, remember?"

"Um . . ."

"MJ was the proponent for a complete overhaul of the Accords? Even after the Fifth Revision?"

"Whoops . . ."

"You should ask her--she's supposed to help you with your Lit too, right?"

Peter stared at him incredulously. "I'd have to speak to her in order to ask a question, Ned."

It looked like the return of Awkward!Parker again. But it was cute now? How did that happen? "She's on the AcaDec team, you know her from lunch and most of your classes."

"Yeah but she'll give me that look--"

"That look?" Ned prodded.

"That I cannot believe I have to tell you this basic stuff look," Peter whined, sounding much more like himself now.

"That's just because you didn't do the preliminary readings and she can tell that you didn't do the preliminary readings," Ned pointed out helpfully.

"That's why she's scary," Peter grumbled as he set out a pad of paper on his desk.

"If being scared of MJ is enough to get your grades back up, it might be worth it." Ned settled down on his usual perch on the bottom bunk of Peter's bed. "Anyway, what happened earlier?"

As it turned out, Tony Stark had not taken the suit back. Pepper Potts had to reason with May, pointing out that it might be good to have some defences close at hand in case of emergencies. After all, she had brought up the issue of potential reprisals from local crime cartels. May had grudgingly agreed so long as the suit did not come with any strings attached.

"I have to translate the suit's user's manual into something with less tech jargon for May too," Peter sighed, highlighter in hand and midway through the first reading.

"Can't you get the A.I.--Karen--to do it?"

"Great idea, Ned!"

Which meant that they all wound up clustered at the dining table with cartons of fried noodles and wontons plus the Spidey suit. Karen did have a speaker mode and Peter got the A.I. to answer most of May's queries.

"No, the suit is not currently transmitting any data to Stark Industries servers."

"Yes, the suit is equipped with a privacy function. Shall I turn on the Cone of Silence protocol?"
"Did Stark name all these protocols himself?"

"The tracker function is currently offline. Do you wish to turn it on?"

"Latest upgrades include bullet-proofing increased by thirty percent, one hundred percent flame retardation, cut-resistance increased by forty percent, new and improved enhanced surveillance mode, improved parachute deployment system, Super Instant Kill Mode--"

Ned almost spat out his shrimp wonton. Okay, maybe it was not such a good idea to let the suit's A.I. answer all the time. Karen was cool and all that, but having that pleasant voice cheerfully ask you if you wanted to turn on Instant Kill Mode was a serious case of cognitive dissonance.

White-lipped and tense, May had Karen explain what Instant Kill Mode was. It turned out that there were several different functions, suited to a range of threat levels. EMP blasts to take out any mechanical threats, electric shocks for any live adversaries at close range and Drony could be deployed to blow up a distant target. Then there was the attack guidance system in the HUD that would show Spider-Man the best places to strike to take out a target as quickly as possible. Oh, and the electric shocks could be calibrated to act as a defibrillator or give a shock equivalent to a stun gun.

By the end of that recitation, even Peter was looking unsettled.

"Karen, is there any way to disable Instant Kill mode? Permanently?" Peter croaked.

"Instant Kill Mode can be turned off but not permanently disabled. It is a contingency measure under the emergency protocols."

"Oh for the love of--" May had to clamp her hands over her mouth and turn away as she swore.

"Disabling Instant Kill Mode is definitely on the list of modifications we're going to have to make," Peter said with a sigh. "But keep the defibrillator."

There was a list of things that May wanted taken out of or put into the suit if Peter was to hang onto it. Trackers were here to stay, but they had to send notifications if Peter's heart-rate spiked or flatlined. Monitoring had to be optional, because recording every moment of Peter in the suit was kinda creepy--everyone agreed on that. Peter wanted most of the offensive protocols out, but having a function for shocking would-be-thieves might be handy. The EMP emitter might be there to stay because the hypothetical robot army attacking Queens was not so hypothetical after all.

By the end of dinner, Ned was sort of impressed (because he was still a tech nerd) and slightly disturbed by the sheer amount of dangerous and extra stuff in the Spidey suit. May had taken a level up in technical jargon without any discernible change in attitude towards Tony Stark and Peter was muttering over his notes about how to make an EMP emitter safer for use in an urban environment.

May shooed Peter off to bed when he started to yawn. It had been a very long day for them both.

"See you at school, man." Ned shouldered his backpack and they did the abbreviated version of their special handshake (shorter by three moves to account for times when they were tired).

"Night, Ned," Peter said, stifling another huge yawn and shuffling off to the bathroom.

May remained in the dining area, shoving paper food cartons into a garbage bag and pointedly not looking at The Case containing the Spidey suit that was now perched on a chair.

Ned cleared his throat noisily. He had lingered in the doorway, unable to go until he could ask the
question that was plaguing him for the entire day.

"Ned?" May tilted her head questioningly at him.

"I sorta noticed . . . that you didn't ask Peter to promise not to use the suit. You also didn't say he had to stop being Spider-Man forever."

For one very long moment, Ned thought that he had overstepped. Then May closed her eyes for a moment before she stepped out into the corridor with the garbage bag and shut the door behind her.

"He would have run out with or without the suit if something happened right in front of him," May said quietly, her knuckles white around the plastic bag. "I can't exactly say that that's not what we raised him to do, can I?"

Yup, that was Peter all right.

"I'm so proud of him--but scared for him at the same time." May looked like she was about to burst into tears. Ned was not equipped to deal with this. Fortunately, she did not break down right in front of him.

Or, Ned's instincts yelled at him, maybe she had already broken down yesterday and was putting on a front for visitors today.

"I can't even tell him that now . . . Because something will happen and he'll just jump in to help no matter what I say. He's not indestructible even with that stupid suit . . . Whatever that spider did to him, he's not immortal. I just want him to come back from that in one piece."

That was uncomfortably close to the thoughts Ned had had at the Washington Monument.

"Me too," Ned whispered, reaching out to touch her elbow clumsily before fleeing. This was getting too serious too fast.

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Maybe he should have thought a little more about the ramifications of being a secret-keeper and the Guy in the Chair plus the best friend, but Ned knew that if he had the chance to do it again, he would have done the same thing.

He was over wanting to blurt out the big secret--there was something about seeing your best friend tumbling over the asphalt of the school parking lot that brought home the fact that some bad guys had got too close to Spider-Man's other life. It helped that other people knew about it and were working to keep said secret identity a secret.

It was not helping Ned on the not-falling-for-your-bestie-front. In the weeks that followed, he was dropping by almost every evening at the Parker's, ostensibly for homework and general nerdery. It was not that uncommon for Midtown students to sequester themselves (or be grounded) in order to work on their academics, so hardly anyone commented on the fact that Peter was grounded for less than ideal behaviour and grades.

Flash tried to make a dig at Peter once at AcaDec practice and MJ had shut him up with a blistering take-down about how he might actually improve if someone jammed his nose to the grindstone for once. (Seriously, Flash almost looked like he was about to cry.)

When they weren't checking off the known associates list of Mr Toomes and that Gargan guy or playing video games, they had to act completely normal in front of MJ when she came by to grill
them--ahem, help them with literature, post-modernist history and political science.

May was obviously glad that Peter had other friends, but she was also a bit stressed out by having to act as though her life had not taken the wildest turn recently and she was not actively negotiating for her nephew's autonomy in addition to working and being an aunt.

It manifested in cooking attempts that generally flopped and MJ always tactfully withdrew before dinner or accepted whatever was on the delivery menu provided it was not too meat-heavy.

If Ned had not been super sensitive to the issue, he would have missed the look that MJ gave Peter when he was agonising over the theme of whichever reading they were doing. It was A Look that was so loaded with meaning that Ned blinked, refocused and confirmed the fact that it was a I-cannot-believe-I-am-crushing-on-this-loser-dammit-he's-cute look. And it was not just Ned projecting his feelings either.

MJ wiped that emotion off her face before Peter looked back up and continued to expound on why she was not a fan of Hemingway / Fitzgerald / Salinger's works because their themes were too simplistic / sexist / old-fashioned / unrelatable. If Ned had not seen that look with his own two eyes, he might not have believed it.

Or related to it the way he did. MJ was repressing her thing for Peter and acting like an academic drill sergeant to hide her feelings.

Ned mentally kicked himself for not realising it in the first place. Girls did not follow guys into detention just to "sketch people in crisis". Or pay close attention to their participation in extracurriculars if they weren't actually interested. It was so obvious now!

It also dawned upon him that MJ was, in fact, a very smart and extremely intimidating girl. And Peter paid a lot more attention to her than their Lit teacher. Given some time, Peter might actually realise that there was a very smart and intimidating girl sitting right in front of him. (But this was Peter Parker--they might be graduating high school before he noticed.)

Given the current situation, Ned could not simply push MJ into Peter's lap (or Peter into MJ's lap--they were not constrained by gender conventions here). Peter might not even want to get involved after that thing with Liz and MJ might be happy to mope her way through high school in the guise of a human porcupine.

But if they wound up actually having a connection, Ned would not stand in the way. Concentrating on the potential of his best friend and his other sort of friend and AcaDec captain maybe having a thing was also a good distraction from all the other issues.

That thought resurfaced again during Thanksgiving recess. A rather frazzled-looking May had announced that her friends were helping out at a soup kitchen and that it would be a good idea to get out and focus on doing other things for once. Ned had been around the Parkers long enough to know that May was part of a loosely-knit group of community organisers based in Queens and he had been roped into the odd fundraiser or event before.

It certainly did them all good to take their minds off the Spidey situation. Ned realised just how effective it was when he noticed Peter sneaking glimpses at where some of their classmates were dishing out mashed potatoes and turkey. Ned recognised them instantly--MJ was sandwiched between Cindy and Sally, her frizzy hair held back with a disposable hairnet. Somehow or other, Cindy and Sally's smiles seemed to have infected MJ, because she was smiling--a closed mouth smile, but still a smile.
If Ned's instincts were correct, Peter was suddenly realising how a smile could change everything. Oh, and MJ was actually more than just a little attractive with that smile.

Then MJ looked their way and Peter almost ducked back down behind the tray return station they were manning. Ned said nothing like the good bro he was and handed over another tray. Well, at least Peter was able to think about girls again.

The weeks before winter break sped past. There were more meetings with Ms Potts and one with Tony Stark that Ned knew about via Peter. The suit had its Instant Kill mode disabled and there was something about scrubbing all record of Spider-Man in Berlin (at least on the official records). It was all very heavy stuff and what with the Sokovia Accords being challenged internationally and all that, it seemed like a good idea to keep Spider-Man away from the various agencies with clumsy acronyms like SHIELD for the time being.

Keeping track of that sort of stuff was harder than keeping track of which parts of the Extended Universe were now retconned by the new series. Which was why it was a relief when they had school, AcaDec, projects and Christmas to distract them. Ned even had a minor invasion of cousins from California and Illinois, which required him to play tour guide (and sitter while the adults kicked back).

If Ned was not so easy-going, he might have been a little jaded by the Christmas markets and the lights at the Rockerfeller Centre. But he liked his younger cousins and there was usually a lot of their favourite foods waiting for them at home afterwards.

Stuffed full of mechado and seasonal desserts, Ned was not quite expecting the Skype request towards the end of Christmas evening. Hoisting his laptop through the cheerful chaos that filled his home, Ned found a quiet corner (in his sister Darlene’s closet) and accepted the request.

“Hey, Feliz Navidad,” he said to Peter, who looked to be in his bedroom.

“You too, Ned.” Peter had that slightly semi-excited and semi-nervous look that Ned was familiar with. “I’m not cutting in on family party time now, am I?”

“Nope--but karaoke is always on the cards,” Ned quipped—but seriously, things could get loud later. “What’s up?”

“May says I’m un-grounded tomorrow . . . But I can only go out with my friends from school.”

Which was followed by a hopeful smile that was no less endearing despite the grainy video quality. “Unless you already have plans?”

Everyone else Peter knew was bound to have plans. Especially this late into winter recess.

“I don’t have to play host tomorrow,” Ned said, “but what do you wanna do?”

“Um, that’s the thing . . .”

If MJ was here, she would totally call them losers. Speaking of which . . . when in doubt, get someone else to suggest something.

“Ask MJ? She’s a friend from school.”

“What?” Peter's voice went up an octave because he obviously cannot believe what Ned was proposing.

"Ask MJ if she can hang out with us. She might have better ideas."
"But what if she wants to go through the readings from Lit class and other school stuff?"

Ned sincerely doubted that MJ was that work-focused over winter break. But he was good bro and if MJ’s crush on Peter finally registered on his radar, it might give him something else to think about.

"She's more likely to drag us to some protest for extra overtime wages during the festive period. But it can't hurt to try. FYI, I draw the line at visiting some abstract art exhibition."

A bit more cajoling had Peter reaching for his phone.

"MJ says she’s volunteering at an animal shelter," Peter said after a brief spell of texting and facial contortions that made it look like this whole endeavour was taking a lot of effort. "That sounds really nice."

That was definitely better than some art exhibition. "Great--you up for it?"

Like Peter wouldn’t like to hang out with puppies and kittens. But with MJ in the mix--obviously, this was an excellent idea.

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It was cold outside on the day after Christmas. (Also Liz-less. But that was another thing altogether.) MJ honestly did not know what she was expecting as she exited the subway station and walked two blocks to the Thirty-First Street Animal Shelter and Clinic. A winter miracle?

No, an actual miracle would involve her not meeting up with Peter Parker for a day of shovelling kitty litter and feeding poor abandoned animals.

At the junction in front of the shelter, MJ shoved her hands into the pockets of her coat and blew out a frost-tinged breath. Those two losers had better not be late--

"Hey MJ!"

She supposed that seeing Peter Parker’s goofy face under his equally dorky beanie hat warmed her up a little bit. Ned was a pair of eyes peering out from the high collar and hood of an orange parka.

“Glad you could make it--hope you like cat poop,” she deadpanned before pushing open the door to the shelter. It was warm inside, though the smell of pet-friendly disinfectant barely covered the sour, acrid note of cat urine and the overpowering scent of overexcited dogs.

They were met by Thuy, one of the employees at the shelter. She was obviously glad that they were there, because they were really short-handed during this period. And they were bracing for the incoming rush of rejected holiday gifts, aka pets that people gifted to people that were not ready to have pets.

It was sad, really, MJ thought as she peered into a holding cage in the room of socialised cats (meaning the ones that had a higher chance of adoption because they were okay with humans). And it made her so mad. How could anyone dump such a cute cat?

Then her logical side took over--there were plenty of reasons: they couldn’t afford a pet anymore because someone got laid off, they didn’t expect a well-meaning idiot to give them one, they were violently allergic to dander . . . At least they tried to give the animals to a no-kill shelter?

MJ was not given much time to fume because Thuy handed them gloves and face masks for cleaning time. The cats were released into their communal area so that they could have playtime and the
volunteers could police the litter boxes.

Now MJ knew from experience that litterboxes stank, but multiply that by a factor of twenty and her nose shut down after the first two cages. It helped that she had to concentrate on the task at hand, because otherwise, she would be so distracted by the sound of Leeds and Parker complaining in the background.

“Oh jeez--I thought cats didn’t drink a lot of water?”

“They don’t, but the size of this clump says otherwise--hey I’m trying to clean your room here, kitty.”

The cats, obviously sensing the weakest link amongst the volunteers, were cozying up to Peter first. It was actually hilarious, watching Queen’s own costumed vigilante trying to move from cage to cage while various cats tried to rub up against his legs. Or trip him up--you could never tell with cats.

To her dismay, MJ realised that she was grinning and hurriedly straightened her face. She also noticed that Ned was glancing at Peter’s careful tiptoe-through-the-felines act with a degree of fondness that was just a shade too warm for bros.

Ha! Leeds was fooling no-one.

Pot, kettle . . .

Gritting her teeth, MJ got on with changing the water, replacing newspaper linings and dishing out kitty kibble. Thuy was obviously happy that they were competent enough to handle simple tasks because she let them clean the room where they kept cats that were nursing litters of kittens. (“They need to get used to humans and they’re really hyperactive sometimes.”)

Kitten playtime was the most adorable thing in the universe. Especially when the older kittens jumped on their shoes and attacked their shoe laces. Peter even had adventurous ones trying to climb his jeans.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa--sharp tiny claws!” Peter yelped as a lanky ginger kitten managed to reach his thigh. A tabby one was hanging off his sleeve and he carefully disentangled it before grinning and setting it on Ned’s shoulder.

“Sharp! Claws!” Ned seemed to be totally okay with a kitten climbing his shoulder. “But cute though . . .”

MJ was so engrossed with the balancing tabby kitten act that she did not notice Peter detaching the ginger kitten and--

“Here, MJ, your turn--” Peter handed her the squirming ball of ginger fur and her arms came up automatically so that she could cradle the kitten. Startled, MJ felt her face heat up immediately as her hands closed around Peter’s in the process of cat transfer.

“Are you go--she’s taller, climb her,” Peter cooed at the kitten before he realised how that sounded. “N-not that I meant--in a completely in--”

His flailing meant that he probably did not notice that she was blushing after their hands had disengaged.

“Don’t dig yourself into a deeper hole, Parker,” MJ managed to growl. Fortunately, another kitten showed up to distract him and his stupid face was no longer right in front of her. MJ still had to
pretend she was engrossed in petting the ginger kitten so that he would not notice how badly her equilibrium had been shaken--

And she saw that Ned was giving her the most knowing look over the head of the tabby kitten perched on his shoulder.

*Shitshitshit.* Which was a terrible thing to think when you were cuddling a ginger kitten.

Chapter End Notes

So I don’t know what May Parker works as. I don’t actually know if MJ’s parents are absent or negligent or just Mr and Mrs Not Appearing In This Show. Hence I just Made Everything Up because you know they’re not going to focus on stuff like that. That’s what fanfic is for.

May works in Admin at a hospital until the DVD or the next movie retcons everything.

(There was a deleted scene showing May helping a little girl that shows where Peter gets his values from. There is apparently another deleted scene of MJ and the Parkers after the AcaDec kids get back to school from Washington. I so need all this to be on the DVD.)
It had been a terrible idea.

*What could go wrong? Well.*

Ned had gone to bed the previous night to the strains of his extended family belting out Greatest Hits (mostly in English, with a smattering of Tagalog and Spanish thrown in) and woken up to a very quiet morning. The relatives that were bunking at his place were still asleep, so he had got himself breakfast, washed up (the residual guilt over keeping secrets was making him a lot more conscientious these days) and left before anyone could rope him into a spontaneous ice-skating excursion or similar. He loved his relatives, but they were sometimes a bit too enthusiastic about holiday fun.

An animal shelter sounded like an ideal place to spend some time and earn some community service hours on Boxing Day. It was a bit hard on the nose, but Ned was okay with most animals. His parents never let him or his siblings have any pets after that incident with Darlene’s hamster (poor Bobo), so he had to be content with looking at other people’s cats and dogs.

But the problem was . . . Peter also liked pets. Which was not the *real* issue here. It was Peter Parker in a room full of affectionate cats. Or Peter Parker in close proximity to kittens.

Firstly, Peter with kittens climbing over him was too cute. MJ definitely thought so. Ned had given her *A Look* and she froze for a full five seconds before mouthing *pot, kettle* right back at him.

*Yowch.* And he was reminded that MJ was really *that* observant. So they now had mutual blackmail material on each other.

Then Marcus, the other shelter staff on duty that day, had come in and asked if they wanted to see the puppies as well.

Now Marcus was gorgeous and if he had not been obviously over twenty-five, there would have been more high school girls and some guys falling over themselves to volunteer (according to Thuy--they usually had more volunteers whenever Marcus was on duty). As the college-age volunteers were mostly not present due to post-Christmas hangovers, they had all followed Marcus and his velvety deep voice to the room where two litters of puppies were vibrating out of their skins with pent-up excitement because *there were new humans to play with* or something.

Peter with an armful of puppies should be *illegal.* Weapons grade illegal. MJ was trying not to look at Peter rolling around on the floor with them, but her eyes kept being drawn back to him. Ned was not much better. He was just throwing this little rubber ball for the puppies to chase after, getting distracted by Peter giggling at the other puppies’ antics, the puppies would return the ball to him clumsily--rinse and repeat until the image of Peter Parker was beginning to merge with the image of cute puppies.

At one point, MJ shared a look with him that he did not need any context to interpret. *Too much--this dweeb is too much.*

It was simultaneously both the best and the worst community service project he had done with his
The puppies had come back with the ball, their tongues and ears flapping about enthusiastically. Ned’s arm moved automatically. The hyperactive squad romped off after the ball. Across the room, MJ was playing tug-of-war with a pair of puppies using one of those thick cloth rope toys. Her head was bent, so she did not see Peter look up at her like he was seeing the new Star Wars movie trailer for the first time.

*Oh finally.* Yeah, Peter was finally Getting A Clue.

Ned threw the ball again. Now all Peter had to do was figure himself out, figure Spider-Man out and get it together before he could pluck up the nerve to admit that he had feelings for a girl again. And they might be seniors before Peter asked MJ out on anything other than a study date.

It was a start, at least? The puppies brought the ball back and stared up at him hopefully with their soft, liquid eyes and wagging tails. He threw the ball. Ned wished that his life was that uncomplicated.

By the time they had cleaned up after the puppies and Thuy told them that the next bunch of volunteers had straggled in, almost four hours had passed.

“We should go for lunch--May said I could get lunch with you,” Peter said as they scrubbed their hands at the long metal sink in the clean-up room. “Pizza?”

Ned was all for food because it was almost two in the afternoon and he had spent a lot of time huffing after hyperactive puppies and cleaning litter boxes while trying not to watch Peter. MJ muttered that she just wanted something to eat. Not that she wanted to hang out with them any more than she had to.

*Oh MJ.* Ned was seeing all her interactions with them in a new light. She was a loner, sure, but she was also semi-stalking Peter at school (being in the same class did not count). She always said she thought they were losers--but she was spending a lot of her time coaching them for academics and AcaDec.

She certainly had no problems with heading out with them to the nearest open pizza place for a slice or three.

The tension between them was not enough to stop him from enjoying his pepperoni supreme and MJ managed to down her spinach special with something approaching relatability. Though he suspected that she was probably trying to avoid talking directly to Peter.

It was obvious that Peter was Making An Effort to be a good friend. He asked Ned and MJ about their holiday plans and what their ideal pet would be. Ned was perfectly fine with chatting away about his slightly frenetic holiday featuring a cast of cousins plus karaoke-singing uncles and aunties. Also, his cousins from Chicago were *heathens* because they preferred deep dish pizza.

MJ was curiously reticent about what she had been doing across the festive period. She was definitely more of a cat-person than a dog-person, had got some book vouchers that she wanted to use soon and basically intended to hibernate and read through winter recess. After that, she basically clammed up, leaving Peter and Ned to carry the conversation on their own.

Which inevitably circled back to Star Wars because Peter had not seen *Rogue One* yet and Ned was exercising near-heroic amounts of restraint because he was not going to watch it without Peter.

It caused MJ to resurface for a moment from the contemplation of her pizza crumbs. “You two are
bigger nerds that I imagined. The only reason I would watch that show is because it has the most
diversity in the franchise. Could do with more women characters too.”

Ned and Peter were hard-pressed to get any more out of her after that. Family commitments
beckoned and they all wound up taking the subway back. Peter’s stop was the earliest because he
had to change trains to get back home.

“This is my stop. Thanks for letting us come along,” Peter said to MJ, who shrugged and muttered
something that sounded like *they-needed-replacements-for-Cindy-and-Sally-anyway.*

“Catch you later,” Ned said and they managed to get in a fist-bump before the doors opened.

Ned and MJ eyed each other warily after the doors closed. They were at the end of one carriage and
it was mostly empty after the last stop.

“So . . . not obsessed, just observant?” Ned asked, raising his brows.

MJ flipped a purple-streaked tendril of hair back from her face and stared back at him. "Well, I guess
it takes one to know one."

“I’m his friend. You’re actually into him.”

“Uh-huh--well so are you.”

Uh-oh. She was not going to let it go.

He should not have underestimated Michelle Jones. She was definitely too smart and way too
observant. But it did not mean that Ned was going down without a fight.

"I’m his bro and--"

"And you’ve already figured out that your bromance has become more of a romance. At least on
your side?” MJ could be very blunt when she was riled.

"Like you’re any better?” Ned was not proud of himself at that moment. Especially when MJ opened
her mouth for a rebuttal, then closed it and looked at her boot tips.

"Nah, guess not.” Her shoulders slumped forwards. "Not when I’m having a crush on Liz at the
same time. She stayed over at my place just before this."

Oh. *Oh.*

Ned recognised the bisexual blues when he saw it.

"Understandable--Liz is a total babe." They shared a look of mutual comprehension and mingled
self-pity--*welcome to the club.*

"And too good for this earth--no wonder Peter likes her," Michelle muttered as she leaned her head
back. Further down the carriage, the only other passenger--an elderly Asian lady--disembarked.

Ned took a deep breath and made a decision as the train moved off again. His conscience would not
let him do anything less.

"He’s probably not *that* into Liz anymore."

"Huh?” MJ looked surprised. But now that Ned had context, he could tell that it was more of a *I*
have it bad for Liz, why wouldn't anyone else have a crush on her she's perfect thing.

"I think," Ned said carefully, "he's noticed that other girls exist."

"Well . . . that's kinda shitty of him." MJ looked outraged on behalf of Liz. "Homecoming was barely even three months ago."

"It's called a crush for a reason, MJ." Seriously, for a smart girl, MJ could be a little dense sometimes. Ned cleared his throat again. "I think he kinda likes you."

MJ actually squinted and frowned at him. With the hand gesture that basically said you're kidding me, right?

"What?"

Ned was so done. "Do I have to spell it out? He likes you! After all the time you spent helping him with AcaDec and Lit?"

"Peter looks like he's constipated most of the time when I tell him of my deep and undying hatred of Hemingway," MJ said. "No, seriously, I wanted to ask him if he needed to go to the bathroom sometimes."

"That's because he's Peter," Ned explained. "He gets that look if he really likes a person."

"I thought that was just him being a flaky dork and spacing out on me," MJ said with a shrug as the next stop approached. "Anyway, I cannot take someone that bad at maintaining his secret identity and not knowing about the Sokovia Accords before jumping into superheroing seriously."

Definitely too smart, Ned thought faintly as his brain scrambled for a response. Houston, we've had a problem . . .

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"What the fuck--"

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It was not how Peter had wanted it to happen. Not that he had ever thought about the day that he would tell his aunt.

Peter was usually preoccupied with the here and now. Also known as reacting to everything from the spider bite, to the sudden family tragedy and his sudden elevation from vigilante to superhero. It had been his ground state for the past year--just an endless loop of him reacting to things happening to him.

He had not gone out as Spider-Man since Homecoming ostensibly because he had wanted to keep a low profile and take a short break from getting whaled on repeatedly. But he really was more than a little worn out and sore after everything that had happened. And he was feeling more than just a little guilty about Liz and her mom needing to move to Oregon because he had stopped Mr Toomes.

Then there was that persistent feeling that he could not shake after Mr Toomes had tried to make him one with the sands of Coney Island Beach.

You're out of your depth here.

That subconscious, insidious feeling had manifested after Mr Toomes had almost buried him under
Peter had stopped that train of thought right there—thinking about that always turned his stomach and made his hands tremble. While he had felt like one giant bruise after staggering back home that night, he had healed. *At least his body had healed.*

It had been . . . different from the burglars and the small-time crooks. Mr Toomes was a regular human but he had a suit capable of throwing Spider-Man around. The only time Peter had felt close to fighting someone on equal terms had been in Berlin. Previously, he had avoided hitting anyone directly because he knew he could just break their bones with one punch. Webbing them up was safer for everyone involved.

But he was beginning to understand where Mr Stark was coming from when he had said that Captain America had not been aiming to damage him. The fight in Berlin, rough and scarily exciting as it was, did not have that cold, ruthless feeling of people actively trying to kill him. Oh, he knew what it was like when someone wanted to end him now. Nothing personal. They wouldn't waste time trying to punch him—they would just shoot alien lasers at him or bury him—

*Not helping.* This was not helping him get out there to do what he promised. Look out for the little guy (Mr Toomes was right about certain things). Keep those wacky overpowered weapons out of his neighbourhood plus maybe the rest of New York so that kids (like Aaron Davies' nephew) and people in general would be safer on the streets.

According to the news, while Mr Toomes' operation had been busted, not all his henchmen had been apprehended. And who knew how much weaponry they had taken with them when they had hastily disbanded?

It did not even require a smart or ruthless criminal to misuse those things. A stupid one could pull the trigger just as easily (or just one clueless kid). And people would get hurt or worst. He had to do *something.*

But Peter saw the alien glow of those weapons in his dreams, usually accompanied by several tonnes of concrete falling on him and he could not move--

The nightmares kept him up at night and he had very narrowly avoided waking his aunt with his screams. And he could not bring himself to put on his homemade mask because it smelt like jet fuel and concrete dust.

It was good that crime was down due to the increased police presence in Queens during the search for the rest of Mr Toome’s gang, but it would not last forever.

The op ed sections of the news sites were not helping. These were not the sensationalist tabloids (even though there were plenty of those). They were not frothing, ranting screeds about how dangerous vigilantes could be—which only made it worse because they made a lot of sense. *What would have happened if the plane had crashed right into Queens? Surely human lives were a lot more important than odds and ends belonging to a billionaire? The physical damages alone would have been responsible for a number of deaths if people had been in the way (like in the Battle of New York).*

There was no hard reset for death. His own or that of bystanders. (May should not have to go through that sort of thing again.)

So he was pleasantly surprised by the outpouring of support in the comments section that offset the bulk of the naysayers (and those comments about how tight the suit was that made him feel
uncomfortable). People remembered him for what he had done in the beginning. A few days later, #whereareyouspidey was trending and there were more posts that were more along the lines of “You might not recall this but you found my dog” or “You saved my mom when her car brake failed”.

Then Mr Stark had offered him a place with Avengers. Which had to be a test, right? He still had school to attend and the idea of college did not seem too bad now. He couldn’t leave May and his friends at school. And he knew that he had made a difference for some people as a local crime-fighter.

So he had gone back that evening, determined to put on his homemade costume and self-modified goggles so that he could go on patrol again. Only to find that Mr Stark had dropped the upgraded suit off in his room. It was nice to know that the people of Queens wanted him back, but it was something else to receive a vote of confidence from Iron Man.

As it turned out, he should really learn to shut his room door while changing.

“I--I--May--I can explain!”

“Oh yeah? This!” Her hands gestured jerkily at his suit. “This! Explains all those times you snuck out! It explains what happened in Washington! Oh god . . .”

And to his horror, May started to cry. “You could have died . . .”

Peter instinctively knew that this was not the time to explain that he was tougher than most regular humans now. “I’m--I’m still here,” he said, feeling his throat tightening up and a lump the size of New York growing inside him. “I won’t leave you--”

He tried to get closer to her because she always liked to physically reassure herself that he was safe, but she jumped at his touch, eyes widening.

“It’s that Stark Internship thing, isn’t it? What did that (unprintable word) do to you?”

“No--it’s not like that! The mutation happened before that!” Peter protested. “It was an accident--when that spider bit me! Before--before Ben . . .”

“Oh Peter!” May surged forward and Peter felt his breath being squeezed out of him as she hugged him tightly. “You could have told us!”

“I didn’t want you to worry so much,” he mumbled, swallowing hard around the lump in his throat. It was probably not the right thing to say because May glared at him through her tears.

“Peter, did you think we wouldn’t have tried to help you? Or tried to understand this . . . mutation that happened to you?”

“No, it’s just . . .” How to explain that he had been thrilled beyond belief once he had discovered that he could stick to walls and bench-press a car? How to explain that he had been less than mature about his newfound powers? “I . . . I’m so sorry.”

“I know it’s been hard since Ben died, but that doesn’t mean that you should carry the weight of everything alone,” May said, repeating what she had told him right after the Ferry Incident. Only she mentioned his uncle this time and Peter was suddenly hit by a freight train of emotion.

“I’m really sorry,” he managed to get out before succumbing to the tide of mingled regret and grief. May hugged him tighter and he burrowed into her shoulder because it was as though he was six all over again and he was crying over his parents . . . They were both tearing up and May was patting
his back like the way she used to when he came home frustrated and upset during grade school.

“I’m sorry if anything I said made you feel that you couldn’t tell me things,” May said into his hair after a few minutes of him just sniffling into her shoulder.

“No--I just . . . I thought you had a lot on your plate,” Peter muttered, blinking through the tears.

“We both love him and you have every right to miss him too,” May whispered fiercely and that undid his composure again because everything had been too much lately.

They wound up sliding down to the floor, huddled up together in a teary heap. Slowly, gradually, he managed to tell May about the bite, that awful night when he had almost thought he was going to die as the mutation took hold and the next day when he had bent all the cutlery he touched and broke most of his pens and pencils because he could not control his strength yet.

He started to hiccup halfway through how he had decided to start being a vigilante. But May did not stop him as he rambled on about that night, the dreadful night when then police had come to their door and told them about Uncle Ben.

“I should--hicc--have used my powers for good--”

“Ben didn’t mean that you had to do it alone. Peter, you’re carrying too much weight for a fifteen year old. And I don’t mean physically,” his aunt said, her fingers tightening on his shoulder briefly. “You must have been under so much stress . . . and that slimy Stark guy took advantage of it--”

“Mr Stark wanted to make me an Avenger, but I said no and he let me have the suit,” Peter croaked hastily. “I’m not going--hicc--anywhere!”

“He didn’t have any right offering that to you.” May’s jaw tightened and Peter knew that look on her face. Someone was going to get a vigorous verbal kicking from her. But not before she got the rest of the story from him.

(“And that so-called retreat? You started acting even more secretive after that--was then when he fitted you with that suit?”)

By the end of it all, May was no longer crying but still red-eyed and Peter was no longer hiccupping but feeling more wrung out than he had been after the fight with Mr Toomes. He wanted nothing more than just to curl up in his bed under a pile of blankets and his aunt could tell that he was wiped because she prodded him up and told him to go wash up while she made a phone call.

“I’m going to give that Tony Stark a piece of my mind . . .” May whirled back around again swiftly to face him. “And you’re grounded starting from now!”

Peter fled for the comparative safety of his room. He could still hear most of what his aunt was saying over the phone though.

She wasn’t the type to be rude to receptionists and frontline service personnel, but her tone grew harder as she encountered what seemed to be a whole chain of people that were not Tony Stark over the phone. Which was not surprising as Mr Stark had people to screen his calls. Peter knew that that sort of thing would only make May madder.

“Tell him that May Parker called. And I want answers.” You could bend steel bars around the firmness in her voice.

At a loss for what to do next, Peter texted Ned frantically.
His friend told him to let the adults handle it. Realistically speaking, Peter knew that Ned was right—there was little he could do right now as his aunt finally sounded like she was getting through to someone other than a barrage of secretaries.

*Pepper Potts?* Peter buried his head in his hands and groaned.

*I am one with the floor and the floor is with me . . .*

At least May’s voice stopped rising and became less shrill. But the bits of the muted conversation he caught were mainly about “child endangerment” and “he’s not a soldier”. Peter’s heart was somewhere in the vicinity of his ankles as he crept out to the bathroom.

“Uh-huh, that would be the least he could do,” May was saying into the receiver of the phone when he emerged from his room. “An explanation for everything? Oh, I hope that you can actually get him to meet me. Tomorrow? Yes, the sooner we get this settled, the better.”

Peter knew that tone despite how rarely she used it—the scarily polite one with the razor sharp edge.

He froze on the threshold of the bathroom when May disconnected the call and set the phone down with a pronounced *thump*.

“Um, May?” he asked after a long moment of staring at her just standing there glaring at the phone.

“Oh, Peter--you go wash up, I’ll warm up the leftover curry and rice,” she said, only a slight tremor in her voice betraying the strain of the past hour or so.

It was everything he had been dreading. May would demand answers and very little of what he had done in the past year was not a) worrying, b) appropriate for a fifteen year old and c) legal.

But she was still trying to protect him.

Standing under the warm spray of the shower, Peter felt the lump in his throat loosen a little. There was nothing in her reaction that indicated that she hated him for being a terrible nephew. And she was apparently willing to take on all of Stark Industries for him.

Clean and feeling a little less wrecked, he shuffled out of the bathroom and sat at the table where May had set out the warmed-up food.

“We’re going to have a talk about this with Mister Tony Stark tomorrow,” she said, picking up her spoon. “In the meantime, you’re going to try to be a regular fifteen year old student again. Your last report card and attendance record was enough for your principal to call me about it and I said that I’d keep an eye on you. I guess I could have been more on the ball about that.”

“'s not your fault,” Peter said to his plate of pilaf rice. “I’ll do better.”

“It’s totally my fault for letting you sneak out and letting that Tony Stark waltz in here and snatch you overseas for fights you have no business getting into.” May stabbed at a curried chicken thigh with undue force.

“Whatever happened to not taking on everything by yourself?” As jokes went, that one fell spectacularly flat because his aunt just stared at him for almost a full minute before sighing.

“I promised that I would take care of you, Peter,” she said at last. “But after a while, you simply became a part of our lives. So much that I cannot imagine you out there fighting criminals and getting into plane crashes. But you apparently are that guy my co-workers are making inappropriate
comments about. Your problems are my problems now.”

It was difficult to describe what Peter felt at that moment. Young--definitely. Terribly naïve, perhaps, but safer because his aunt knew about Spider-Man and while she had freaked out about it, she was still in his corner.

That feeling meant that he went to bed that night and actually fell asleep quickly for once.

But Peter woke again, fighting his way out of a nightmare that involved falling elevators (only his aunt and uncle were on the elevator--now that was an image that was going to keep him up at night).

Stumbling out of bed, he went to get some water to drink, only to realise that his aunt was still awake in her room.

“May?” He tapped at her door because it was past one in the morning and while she did not have to work on Saturdays, it was uncommon for her to be up so late.

The door was not locked and it swung open a little to reveal his aunt lowering her small tablet to look up at him from where she was sitting on the floor at the end of her bed.

From where he was standing, Peter could see that she had been watching that video of him (in his homemade suit) stopping that car before it hit the bus. Oh no, he thought faintly as he took in how haggard she looked.

Being Spider-Man in the age of the internet had its drawbacks. There were far too many of his exploits posted online in video format. She had probably watched most of them. Including the greatest hits compilations put together by the more tech savvy members of YouTube.

“Peter . . .”

“I . . . I just wanted to help,” he said, approaching her carefully. He did not know how to fix this, but he was damned if he was not going to try.

“I know . . . but it’s so dangerous and now that I realised it’s you in those videos--”

“I--I never meant to make you worry . . .” Peter helped her up and steered her towards the bed. “It’s late and if you’re going to meet Pepper Potts or Mr Stark tomorrow--”

“At least I know enough to throw the book at them,” May quipped dryly before clutching at his hand. “It’s a miracle that you’re not hurt--it’s a damn miracle that you’re still here--”

“I’m here--still here,” Peter reassured her as he sat down next to her on the comforter. He cleared his throat. “Remember when I was six? And you and Ben let me sleep on your bed because--”

“You missed your mom and dad so much. Oh sweetie, you cried yourself to sleep for weeks!” May reached up to cup his cheek.

“A-and when Ben passed . . . I wanted to do something to help, but all I managed to do was mess things up. But you let me sleep on his side of the bed and--”

“Peter--”

“--And I wish I could help you like you helped me--”

“Peter, you’re a sweet kid and I know you’re doing your best. So believe me when I say this . . .” May looked over the side of the bed that had been empty for almost a year and nudged him over.
“We’re in this together.”

The sheets did not smell like Ben anymore, but when Peter curled up beside his aunt and felt her cool hand stroking his brow, he could believe that things might turn out all right after all. It was enough for now.

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The nightmares did not return to haunt him that night, but Peter still felt a little gritty-eyed and worn out when he woke up the next morning under two pillows and his aunt’s comforter. May was already pottering around in the kitchen and he felt obliged to get up to save the toast. May’s cooking was erratic at best, but stress tended to make it worse.

It was still something he could do to help. So he shooed her away from the toaster and grabbed the bread.

She managed to smile at him when he brought her toast and coffee. So he, Peter Parker, was not a complete failure at being a nephew. Breakfast was a peaceful interval that they both needed before the phone rang and Happy Hogun told them that Mr Stark would be there at ten (no flashy cars this time).

They scrambled to get changed and presentable, but May drew the line at doing the dishes and tidying up.

“It’s not like we’re trying to impress him or anything.”

So Peter was in his jeans and May in her work trousers with her hair up when someone knocked on their door at ten. It was actually Mr Stark, minus Happy, who was downstairs with the car.

“Peter, could you give us a moment,” May asked when Tony Stark (in sunglasses and looking slightly uncomfortable) walked in. She was actually ignoring him--holy crap. “Why don’t you take the garbage out and come back after a few minutes?”

She had That Look in her eyes and Peter sprinted down the hall with the garbage bag, wondering if he should cut his losses and go hide downstairs in the car with Happy.

May rarely swore in front of him, but she was a native of Queens and when she let rip, even the most hardened of souls would know that they were being shredded.

He disposed of the bag in the correct bin and sprinted back to the apartment. In the time that had elapsed, his aunt had not murdered Tony Stark--which was a relief, but the slightly wide-eyed look Mr Stark had at the moment hinted that strong words had been exchanged.

Now Mr Stark was sitting on the couch and May was sitting on the chair furthest away from him with her arms folded and her lips pursed up.

“Peter, close the door and come sit down. I believe we have things to discuss with Mr Stark.” Winter had nothing on the ice in May’s tone--it sounded like instant frostbite.

“Yeah, I got your aunt’s call--or rather Pepper did,” Mr Stark began in his usual brisk way. Peter was just glad that he was not being inappropriate or hitting on May--Mr Stark’s chances of survival might decrease substantially if that happened. “I love Pepper--she makes me do the right thing even though it’s hard.”

There was an awkward pause as Mr Stark looked at anywhere but Peter and May before clearing his
throat. “The right thing is to apologise to your aunt for making you go to Berlin and giving you that suit—that was aiding in the delinquency of a minor and enabling risk-taking behaviour—”

“I was already Spider-Man,” Peter was obliged to point out. Mr Stark did sound like someone had chewed him out even before he had come over.

“Yes, but I also have to apologise to you for not being the best role model and causing all this trouble between you and your aunt.” Mr Stark took a deep breath. “I have no idea what a normal childhood is like, but Pepper set straight me about that. It wouldn’t be right if the Avengers took you away from school, your friends and your family.”

“For one thing, you’d look like those people that you’re supposed to be fighting that make child soldiers,” May said sharply.

“Fair point,” Mr Stark said with a wince. “So what I said earlier still stands . . . before the whole Toomes thing, I mean. Stay in school, go to college if you want, don’t do what I would do.”

“And what about the whole deal with the Sokovia Accords?” May demanded and Mr Stark looked even more uncomfortable.

“We’re keeping Peter’s involvement as quiet as we can,” he told them. “That’s why I needed you to stay in Queens as a street-level vigilante. I’ll get someone . . . more qualified and reliable to get back to you about this. The Accords are being opposed on multiple levels, so things will change. For the better.”

Peter was not sure about what that meant. Was he supposed to sign the Accords? He was an enhanced human but he wasn’t an Avenger—where did he fall in the spectrum of superheroes? Probably somewhere around the range of the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen and the bulletproof man, Luke Cage? Did they have to sign the Accords too?

But before Peter or May could ask more questions, Mr Stark’s phone buzzed. “Ah, excuse me, I have to take this—it’s Pepper.”

Getting up quickly, Mr Stark did one round of the dining room table before looking back at Peter and May. “Pepper would like to meet you and speak with you—if that’s all right with both of you?”

“Er . . .”

“It’s the secret identity thing, kid—it’s a sensitive issue to some in the community,” Mr Stark supplied. Peter looked at May.

“Only if Peter’s comfortable with it,” May said at last. “I’m not that comfortable with so many people knowing about him.”

Peter thought hard and nodded. “Maybe she should know . . . Since the suit is actually property of Stark Industries and she’s the CEO.”

Mr Stark actually blinked at that. “I never regretted letting Pepper know stuff—except that one time when . . .” Then he remembered himself and got back on the phone to speak to Ms Potts. “The Parkers are go.”

Two minutes later, Pepper Potts walked in with a tablet and a folder. “Mrs Parker, I am so sorry to intrude on you like this. This must be Peter—thank you for letting me sit in on this.”
Ms Potts was also in work trousers and discreet heels. But she was polished in the way that very few people managed on a daily basis. Mr Star’s eyes really did light up when she walked into the room. She was also probably the grown-up version of Ned’s dream girl--competent, smart and beautiful. Even her smile was apologetic as she sat down gracefully and opened the folder.

“I am so sorry for what happened under my watch. Rest assured that Peter is not being drafted into anything without his consent or yours. I also understand that he was supposed to have been interning at Stark Industries, so here’s a reference letter to cover him.”

It was a real letter with the Stark Industries logo that stated that one Peter B. Parker had served a three-month internship in the Research and Development Department and that he was a pleasant and polite individual with “potential” and “a bright future”. They wished him all the best in his future endeavours and for extra veracity, there was a printed signature at the bottom from the head of HR who did not personally sign off on references for high school aged interns.

“That’s . . . um, thanks for the alibi,” Peter said, marvelling at the letter that basically told the world “low-level intern--gets the coffee break order wrong a lot of the time but is generally a good kid”.

“So he’s done at Stark Industries? Okay, but what about the men from those gangs on the ferry? The police haven’t got all of them yet.” May was understandably concerned about those guys--Peter knew from experience that they really did not like people poking their noses in their business.

“The FBI are definitely on that,” Ms Potts said, shooting a glare at Mr Stark.

“Yeah, more than one agency is looking into that. The DODC are definitely interested in figuring out how much alien tech they took,” Mr Stark said quickly. “It’s very important that we track them all down.”

“Can I help? Just in Queens?” Peter asked before he remembered that he was grounded. “With May’s permission, of course.”

“We’ll talk about that later, Peter,” May said with a frown. “In the meantime, Mr Stark should take that suit back.”

“Um, it’s his--I gave it to him,” Mr Stark said, holding up his hands. “No charge. It’s not a bribe, okay? I really believe in Spider-Man.”

“And you really thought a skin-tight onesie in red and blue was the best choice for him?” May was starting to sound shrill again. Peter supposed that it was not the time to mention that he had picked those colours first.

“Mrs Parker,” Ms Potts cut in smoothly. “I believe in Spider-Man too. And you’re understandably worried about reprisals from the gangs involved in the weapons trafficking. Having the suit will give him some protection—”

“Or make him a target!”

In the end, it took all of Ms Pott’s persuasive skill and Mr Stark not saying anything for May to let him keep the suit. Also, May (or a trusted adult) had to be present whenever Mr Stark or Mr Stark’s people wanted to speak to him. (He was still grounded though.)

But Peter had also come to certain conclusions about the suit on his own.

“Yeah, um about the suit--it’s still property of Stark Industries,” Peter said, feeling out of his depth as all three adults turned to look at him. “And I’m really glad of that, but I’m going to return it one day.
When I’ve designed my own suit and all that—"

“You don’t have to, kid,” Mr Stark said gruffly. “I’m not fussed about that.”

“But I want to. I guess I’ll miss Karen . . .”

“Take her programme with you whenever you’re ready.” Mr Stark looked back at Ms Pott. “See? He’s an awesome vigilante-kid.”

“Yes, indeed.” Ms Potts beamed at May. “Tony’s right—for once. Mrs Parker, I’m sure you have a lot to discuss with Peter now, so we’d best not overstay our welcome. I’m going to leave you with this Starkphone so that we can communicate later on a secure channel—thank you for everything.”

And she hustled Mr Stark out before he could start protesting. (“What do you mean for once?” “Tony, she would have got a restraining order if you had—”) Leaving behind one small box containing a very thin and obviously super-advanced Starkphone.

After their visitors left, they both flopped down heavily on the couch and stared at the box.

“Well, I never,” May muttered.

That had not gone too badly, Peter supposed, but then he caught his aunt’s eye. Uh-oh . . . guess I spoke too soon.

“We do have a lot to talk about, don’t we?”

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I’ve got my troubles (and you’ve got yours)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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It could have been worst. May and Ben had not been into grounding him when he was younger. They had assigned him plenty of chores, sure, but they had always made sure that he knew what he had done wrong and directed him towards doing things to make amends or clean up his own messes.

But Peter was now grounded as Spider-Man. Peter Parker still had to take out the garbage, clean his room, do his homework and attend school faithfully to make up for his shoddy attendance and slipping grades. Such was life.

After meeting with Mr Stark and Ms Potts, they had an extended Parker family conference in which he demonstrated that he could walk up the wall and stand on the ceiling. May squinted at him and told him to come back down before she asked a question that even Ned had not thought to ask.

“So . . . that web stuff? You produce it? Secrete it?”

“What? No--I made the web fluid in the Chemistry lab!” Peter squawked once he realised what she was talking about. “It’s my own formula!”

“Oh, so I don’t have to expect anything funny in the laundry or buy a different detergent?” May pushed up her glasses with a sigh. “You’re still doing the laundry this week, okay?”

“About that . . .” Peter sheepishly produced his rather battered original homemade suit. It had definitely seen better days.

“So that’s where those sweatpants of yours went--I thought about giving them away but I never found them,” May said, wrinkling her nose at the smell that permeated his suit--keeping it in a plastic bag for over a week had not helped. “What happened?”

Over the whirring of the washing machine, he haltingly told her about Homecoming night. About realising who Mr Toomes really was and how he had been found out. Mr Toomes threatening him with a gun--

“Hell, I was feeling a little sorry for him until that point!”

Adrian Toomes had been very candid about his reasons for trafficking in alien technology at his preliminary hearing and the subsequent interviews. Usually with a side of DODC and Stark-bashing. He definitely had some supporters online.

“But to pull a gun on you!” May shook her head. Despite living in New York all her life, she was not a big fan of guns. Working in a hospital probably contributed a lot to that.

Any residual sympathy she had went out the window when Peter told her about Mr Toomes dropping the ceiling on him. May did not start on another rant because she noticed that he was gripping his own forearms with white-knuckled hands in an effort not to start shaking again. They wound up with Peter curled up on the couch, wide-eyed and trembling for roughly the duration of the spin cycle while May tried to provide a comforting presence and warm tea. (She was still worried about the fact that Mr Toomes knew who Spider-Man was--he could tell by the way she was trying
not to freak out in front of him.)

At least the smell of the herbal tea assured him that he was not on Coney Island Beach amidst the burning wreckage of the plane.

May did not press him for the rest of the story and the remainder of the morning was spent washing the dishes and doing a separate load of laundry while his homemade suit was hung up to dry in the living room. It was mundane enough to calm him down and Peter helped his aunt make mac and cheese for lunch. He also found out that May was making a list of the criminals that had been arrested at the Ferry--which was both touching and a little alarming because she had already figured out which gang they belonged to.

The Starkphone chimed once with a request for a conference call around two in the afternoon. It was Pepper Potts--just Ms Potts, they discovered as they put the speaker mode on.

“I apologise for the rushed meeting this morning. Tony means well, but it takes him a while to get around to doing the right thing because he’ll try to invent his way to a solution,” Ms Potts said, her voice sounding crystal clear over the speaker--the tech in the Starkphone alone was probably more advanced than the newest phone model on the market by two years. “You might have heard about the Rescue Corps that Stark Industries is implementing to supplement New York’s emergency response personnel?”

“Um, yeah, it was big news yesterday.” The announcement had been all over the evening news and internet newsfeeds.

“You’re anticipating more trouble?” May was still looking concerned.

“With that kind of weaponry still out there, it’s better to be safe than sorry.” There was a brief pause. “The bots are programmed to give aid--even medical aid if required. But Tony and I would like to ask permission to send Peter to the facility upstate if it’s necessary--we hope that it’ll never come to pass, of course, but we have surgeons, medical specialists and even therapists on call.”

“That’s a lot of assumptions, but I guess it’s for the best,” May said carefully. She of all people knew about what the average hospital in New York was capable of dealing with in a crisis. It probably did not involve injured or unwell meta-humans even after improvements had been made to deal with situations like a Hulk or the Battle of New York. “Peter, you’ve never been sick or seen a doctor since--”

“Since the spider bit me, yeah.” He crossed his arms self-consciously. “It could have given my immune system a boost?”

“Doesn’t mean you might not want to have it checked out one day.” May patted him on his shoulder and mouthed in case you want to. Peter supposed that he might like to see what his DNA currently looked like compared to the average non-mutated human . . . someday later. The idea of people poking at him was still creepy. “You said you have therapists?”

“The most discreet ones I could get to sign an NDA.” Ms Potts sounded both determined and exasperated as she continued. “They’re there if you need them.”

Peter wondered if she meant that for both himself and his aunt. “Thank you, Ms Potts. Uh, we’ll definitely think about it.”

May squeezed his shoulder as he looked down at his now no-longer trembling-hands and listened as Ms Potts filled them in on how a biometric record of Peter Parker, low-level intern, now existed in
the HR files of Stark Industries.

“Ms Potts . . . I haven’t told Mr Stark this yet,” Peter began. All this talk about his faux internship reminded him about how his secret identity was not all that secret after all. Ms Potts listened gravely as he told her about Mr Toomes knowing who Spider-Man was.

“We will have to monitor that angle.” There was a noise that sounded like a computer notification in the background as Ms Potts presumably recorded all of this someplace. “On the surface, it does not appear that he has exposed you yet. At least not to the press or the police. And he has had ample opportunity to do so.”

Stark Industries would have plenty of reason to follow the proceedings and the media circus around the Adrian Toomes case.

“Maybe he’s not going to because I got him out of the wreckage?”

“Or maybe he’s just waiting to deal with you in his own time?” May looked closed to freaking out again and Peter gripped her hand in what he hoped was a reassuring if slightly clammy manner.

“Both scenarios are possible. Tony and I will update you whenever we have any new developments on that front.”

“It never stops, does it?” May asked after the call ended. She might have been asking a rhetorical question.

“I guess it doesn’t.” Peter’s feeling of relief that someone else was looking at the Toomes case was short-lived as other issues came crowding to the fore. “Uh, how long am I being grounded for?”

May frowned. “I don’t know . . . you’re obviously traumatised by that guy trying to kill you and I can’t stop thinking about how he or someone else might try again . . .” She sighed when she saw his hangdog expression. “I know you want to help and grounding you won’t exactly stop you, but you’re not exactly in a good place now.”

And a complete mess as a vigilante too. Of course his aunt was not thinking about how he had not really stopped Mr Toomes--his wing suit had malfunctioned in the end. At least May was not dragging him over the coals for the Ferry incident.

“I’m not going to say no if you want to take Ms Potts up on her offer for a therapist,” May continued, “I really do think you should lie low for a while and try to be a fifteen year old again . . . A fifteen year old that doesn’t chase trouble every day after school, I mean. Pick your battles--that’s what I’m trying to say, Peter.”

Peter knew that it was better to drop it for now and try again later. He did not want his aunt to get too worked up after all the reassurances Ms Potts had given. And then he remembered the messaging session from the previous day.

“Um, May--Ned wants to come over . . .”

May looked sharply into his face and Peter guessed that she could read his guilty expression like a book. In large-print font, probably.

“Ned knows, doesn’t he?”
Peter was very glad that May was keen on keeping Ned’s involvement off the record. Ned did not deserve to have anything awful happen to him just because he had accidentally found out about Spider-Man. He did not have to get into trouble because he had hacked a million-dollar suit at Peter’s request. Which was now technically Peter’s, but still.

And May was not *that* mad at Ned, which was good because Peter knew that his friend thought of her as another aunt (despite not having a shortage of aunts or women he called Auntie). He honestly did not know how he would have coped without his best friend.

He felt slightly ashamed at how quickly Ned had replied to his text messages and came over later that day to face the music when he did not actually *have* to. Ned had been there for him all this time in spite of everything. Five lost backpacks meant almost a whole semester’s worth of missing homework and Peter knew that he would have been on every teacher’s sh*t list if not for Ned lending him stuff to photocopy.

Schoolwork aside, Ned had saved him from one of Toome’s henchmen. Weirdly enough, it had opened his eyes to the fact that Ned might be more than just a bro. Because Peter had gone from thinking about their dynamic in the *we’re losers but we’ll still have each other* way to *he’s my Guy in the Chair--please don’t take him away even though I might not deserve him*.

Peter was coming to the conclusion that in addition to being a mess as a vigilante, he was probably a horrible friend to be around. If Ned had been blown up by that alien energy core along with the rest of the decathlon team, Peter would have--well, he certainly would never have felt able to wear the mantle of Spider-Man ever again. The newspapers would not even need to print a scathing editorial if that plane had crashed into an inhabited area--if he survived, it would have been good bye Peter Parker, hello Spider-hobo that lived in the sewers because he could never look anyone in the eye after that.

(That plane crash had been too much of a close call.)

This was his life now--trying to fix whatever he had screwed up. He doubted that Ben and May had all this in mind when they had taught him to be responsible for cleaning up after his own science experiments in grade school, but he had to do better.

Which probably included being a better friend. Ned had stuck by him through all the explosions and drama with Liz, but there had been a little tension around the time when he had been busy with his "internship". Ned was the most easy-going bro a guy could have, but Peter sensed that he was just a tad frustrated by the number of times he had not been available. Until the day Ned discovered the truth behind the internship.

Peter had been . . . *disappointed* that Ned found Spider-Man more fascinating. He knew that he should not have been surprised that Spider-Man was a lot more interesting than plain old Peter Parker, but it rankled more than just a little because Ned was supposed to be his best friend.

(Wait, that sounded *possessive*--which was not cool.)

He worried about Ned almost as much as he worried about May. Especially after the debacle at the Washington Monument. Ned should not be involved in dangerous things like that--because Peter knew that his sweet, good-natured friend would go along with anything he--or Spider-Man--proposed after trying to warn him off.

 Seriously, Ned could do with being a little less nice--people took advantage of his niceness all the time. Peter did not want to be one of those people. But Ned was still there, trying to help him catch up with a semester’s worth of revision and facing MJ whenever she grilled them for AcaDec.
That was the *other* thing--somehow, MJ was just suddenly there. Logically speaking, she had always been there--perched at the end of their lunch table and lurking at the fringes of their classes with a book. But now that she was actually speaking to them regularly, Peter wondered how in the world he had not noticed her before.

MJ’s personality, up close, was like one of those high-powered search lights--brilliant, intense and unfiltered. Maybe that was why she kept to herself most of the time. Peter left each session with her feeling like he narrowly escaped with his life and oddly grateful that she bothered to explain everything.

Or maybe it was just *him* . . .

He was certainly thrown off balance a lot whenever MJ was around. Perhaps he was regressing back to his middle school persona--that Peter Parker could barely even look at a girl or guy he liked without stammering.

Peter realised that he liked having MJ around the third time she had come over to his place after school to quiz him on post-colonial literature and made clear her feelings about people who romanticised Nabokov’s seminal work (he had just asked *one* innocent question about the book she was reading). It was like being hit in the face with a bucket of cold water--rather shocking, but refreshing.

May was . . . sort of happy that he had friends other than Ned despite the stressfulness of that particular time. There was no point in lying to her about that because Ned was the only friend from school he had ever brought back home since Scotty Carson in the seventh grade.

She did give him the raised eyebrows that asked the question “Is this a friend friend or the *other type* of friend?” when a very polite MJ first dropped in with an armload of files and flashcards.

"No, she's just a friend from school," Peter had told her after Ned and MJ had left after revising biological molecules, checking their inorganic chemistry homework and dissecting *Fahrenheit 451*. Granted, May had asked him the same question when Ned started to become a frequent visitor at Chez Parker, but that was because Peter had bashfully admitted to having crushes on both Keith Simms and Ana Hernandez in seventh grade.

Adolescence was really confusing, but May (and Ben) kept reassuring him that his feelings, fleeting as they were sometimes, were all a part of growing up and there was nothing wrong with liking certain people a bit more.

Liz--his feelings for Liz had lasted a lot longer. Sure, she was the prettiest senior girl in the school, but Liz was also smart, competent and kind. She was his first Serious Crush That Actually Went Somewhere and First Real Date . . . and he had blown it. (He had also sent her dad to jail, but Mr Toomes *had* been trying to kill him at the time.)

So Peter was feeling more than just a little bit guilty when he realised that while he was really, sincerely sorry about Homecoming, he was definitely getting over his crush on Liz.

And developing really intense feelings for other people apparently. Like he did not have enough to deal with at the moment, right?

So. Was this a crush like his thing for Liz? MJ was so *different* . . . asides from them both being super-smart, tall, pretty girls?

His brain backed up and re-evaluated his thoughts. *Pretty?* When did that happen?
Somewhere between the time when MJ had registered on his radar as A Girl At His Lunch Table and gradually became A Friend apparently. She made no effort at enhancing her features and dressed as casually as she could while still being in line with the school dress code. Though Peter’s suddenly helpful brain recalled that she put her hair up and wore a dress for Liz’s party and Homecoming. Yeah, very pretty.

And what about Ned? Ned was his best friend and he had saved his life—which somehow inspired the same squishy feelings he had experienced when he had known Keith Simms, star of the basketball team, in seventh grade. Unlike with Keith, he was genuinely fond of Ned and knew almost everything about him.

_Wow, I really am a flake. Two people at the same time?_ 

Maybe he was on the rebound. Or maybe the time away from being Spider-Man while being grounded was finally giving him the space to breathe and he was just a fifteen year old student again.

With an extra helping of inconvenient feelings about his friends.

Yes, they were inconvenient feelings, he told himself--because Ned knew about Spider-Man and MJ did not. Peter would rather be alone again than make things awkward between him and Ned. And MJ did not need to get involved in the chaos that was his life and his alter ego’s life. It was too dangerous even for Ned and May.

The thought of MJ—caustic, snarky and not-so-secretly over-protective of the AcaDec Team—in that kind of danger was starting to make him freak out a little more.

It would be better, Peter knew, if he could stop relying on Ned’s smile and MJ’s pointed barbs to get him through the long days. His friends were people that did not deserve a flake taking up their time and energy more than he already did.

So he tried to concentrate on being a friend first. Which was not hard with Ned because Ned was usually doing homework or building Lego models with him. It was fun and Peter never realised how much he missed it until he put the final minifig in position.

Yet his life seemed determined to throw MJ his way even outside of school and homework. He saw her the soup kitchen where May was helping out over Thanksgiving break and she had been—_a real one and not the I enjoy sketching people in crisis smile._

Which marked the return of the squishy feelings that did not quite abate. Winter recess would have been a good time to maintain his distance, but Ned suggested asking MJ if she knew of anything better to do on the day he was not grounded.

And so they had wound up volunteering at an animal shelter—which was wonderful because Peter was distracted from his problems by the overwhelming scent of cat pee (his nose gave up after a while) and a whole bunch of cats trying to get his attention. He had been so overwhelmed by the cute that when they played with the kittens, he randomly decided that his friends needed to have kittens on them.

That had been a really great idea because _wow Ned looked please to have a kitten on his shoulder_ and MJ was so surprised when he handed her the kitten—-

His hands—he was touching her hands and _whoa_—

MJ’s glare and the swooping feeling in his stomach reduced him back to middle school era Peter Parker—aka an inarticulate blob of feelings with limbs.
At least MJ did not notice him staring at her and Ned during puppy playtime. Marcus, the other shelter staff on duty, was tall and in common parlance, a hottie. Peter had been just a little envious of Marcus when he had handed MJ and Ned puppies, but then he was given an adorable snuffling bundle fur, so he was okay with Marcus the incredibly hot shelter staff with the voice of a much younger Morgan Freeman.

Distracted by puppies in the company of his friends was perhaps the nicest holiday surprise. Even the inconvenient feelings™ were not so troubling that day. He was able to go for lunch with Ned and MJ--just a normal bunch of high school students on winter break. They had no fancy ski holidays or parties to go to, but it was okay--better than okay, actually.

But his optimism was premature, as usual.

The hairs on the back of his neck stood up when Peter received a message from Ned when he reached home later that evening.

Ned: Mayday, mayday--MJ knows

“\You can’t tell anyone!” Ned hissed at her, trying his best to keep it down despite his rising panic. It was unlikely that the train was bugged--but you never knew these days.

\textit{Crap, someone else knew . . .} If it was so easy for MJ to find out, what were the odds that someone else would? \textit{But this was MJ, another student at their school--she was in the same class}, his logical side rationalised. \textit{And she was into Peter-watching--so of course she would be the first one to spot anything weird. Hardly anyone else bothered with them, right?}

So MJ had figured it out. All on her own. Maybe with a little help from Ned and Peter because they did not have the sense not to discuss Spider-Man in school. Right in front of her. The stuff right after Homecoming had probably been extra incriminating too.

\textit{Hey Peter, guess what? We suck at keeping secrets! Good thing no-one really pays any attention to us . . . Except MJ.}

At least MJ was not going to spill the beans, that much was clear after Ned's disastrous attempt at trying (and failing) to be a good bro.

“Nah, why would I do that?” she asked, a small smirk emerging on her face. “Anyway, I like watching you sweat.”

\textit{Tell us something we don’t already know, MJ!}

But MJ did know how to keep things close to her chest. She had managed to keep her discovery to herself, which was a feat in itself, as Ned personally knew.

“That’s not very comforting.”

“I don’t really care about your adventures with Spandex-Man, but it’d better not interfere with decathlon prep,” MJ said with a shrug.

“But you like Pe--”

“So you do--I mean you like Peter, even without the Spider-Man part,” she explained and Ned gulped because MJ was good at this--interrogation level good. “You’d be there for him even without
the second-hand thrill of dressing up in a leotard to fight crime.”

“You make me sound like a sap,” Ned said weakly. She gave him a look that said well you are.

“You’re a good friend, Leeds,” MJ said with something approaching a real smile. “I can’t do what you do.”

. . . Wait a minute . . . Ned might be fifteen, but he knew something about emotional manipulation.

“Oh no, you’re not getting away with that!” Ned leaned forward and looked MJ in the eye. “You feel exactly the same way, so you don’t get to push it all on me!”

“Goddammit,” MJ swore and Ned was secretly pleased to see her exasperated expression. “You’re a match made in dweeb heaven. You should make your move, ask him out and do your undoubtedly geeky Star Wars themed Junior Prom invite--the whole nine yards. I’ll punch anyone that looks at you two the wrong way.”

“That is the sweetest thing anyone has ever said to me, MJ,” Ned said for the sheer satisfaction of seeing her scrunched up grouchy face. “Why don’t you do it then? Upset high school gender conventions and all that?”

“Fuck off, Leeds,” she groused from behind a few unruly tangles of hair. “There is no way in hell I’m going with a guy with zero self-preservation. Or let anyone know that I have any feelings for people--much less any feelings for pasty dorks like Parker.”

The unspoken communication that passed between them at that point was simple. Peter does not need to know about this part of the conversation. I know you’re going to tell him about me knowing his secret because you’re a sap. Yeah well, I’m not that one that stalks him in detention, MJ. Shut up, Leeds--you hypocrite.

They were not going to tell Peter about that part of the conversation, period.

Their truce held as Ned disembarked and he finally managed to shoot off a message to Peter.

Peter worried a lot about the people who knew his secret--

Peter: Knows what???

Ned: About that thing we’re not supposed to talk about over the phone!

Ned rolled his eyes. Sometimes, Peter could be a bit dense.

Peter: Crap

Ned: But she’s not going to tell anyone . . . I think

Peter: May might freak out again

It took them until the next day when Ned popped over to Peter’s place to tell May about it. The expression on her face said it all.

“I forgot that you’re fifteen year old kids,” May muttered over her mug of allegedly calming herbal tea. “Who thought it was a good idea for teenagers to have secret identities when they can’t even stop talking about it in school?”

Ned supposed that if he did not know, they would never have talked about it in school. Whoops.
“But it’s MJ--she’s like really smart so she might have figured it out anyway?” Peter’s hair was still a mess from the repeated ruffling.

And a bit of a stalker when it comes to you Ned supplied mentally.

“She’s also a student in your school. With parents,” May said, setting her mug down so that she had her hands free for dramatic arm-waving. “Who would be really worried or upset if anything happened to her because of this! Heck, I’d be upset--I actually like her!”

“Um, she could study the see-and-flee list too?” Ned offered in lieu of anything constructive to say. “When she comes over next time?”

The next time proved to be the next day as MJ had scheduled just one short session during winter recess to check if Peter had managed to get through the readings for Lit class and make some headway on that essay about thematic dissonance.

As May was at work for most of the next day, it fell to Peter and Ned to handle the inevitable confrontation.

“I think I need something stronger,” May sighed as she stared at the bottom of her mug.

MJ had not meant to tell Ned that she knew about his buddy’s secret. But the time at the animal shelter had thrown her off balance (it was Parker’s fault) and she just wanted to call him out on his obvious crush on his bestie.

The fact remained that she had herself to blame for the upcoming discussion she did not really want to have with Leeds and Parker.

She wanted to call in sick on the one day she had oh-so-helpfully scheduled to work on their literature homework with Peter during winter recess. Or say that her mom wanted her to stay in to help with something.

But MJ was not a coward and she would not be intimidated by a pair of teenage boys.

So she marched up to Parker residence that afternoon with her messenger bag stuffed with reading packets, her own current leisure reading material and extra flashcards. At least May Parker was at work and she did not have to worry about another authority figure she actually liked being on the scene.

Both Peter and Ned opened the door for her and MJ made a dry comment about chivalry not being dead after all as she stepped in. Some effort had been made to straighten up the living room and common spaces, but it was still the same comfortable, lived-in space that she had been getting used to visiting when she did not haunt the public library after school.

MJ hoped that things were not going to be so awkward that she had to avoid them totally now. Friends were not something she wanted to rely on or even admit to having, but dammit, she liked having them.

“So,” she began since she believed in ripping off scabs quickly and painlessly, “Leeds told you, right?”

“Uhhh, yes--and thank you for not blowing my cover,” Peter said, running his hand through his hair in a distracted and distracting manner--he was distracted by stuff and she was distracted by his soft
brown curls. Damn you and your cute curls, Parker.

“Save it--I can’t be bothered to scout for another chemistry nerd for the team if you get forced into hiding for being a spandex-clad crime-fighter.”

“Which brings us to the main issue,” Ned chimed in. "The first rule of Spidey Club is--"

"You don't talk about it?" Michelle raised her eyebrows, unimpressed. "Which kinda means both of you are out of the Club."

Ned deflated slightly. "Yeah, we're working on that."

“Yeah? Well you’re lucky half the school doesn’t know already,” MJ said, feeling petty but pleased when Ned and Peter looked guiltily at each other. “But the god of geeks must favour you two losers because now everyone thinks that Ned was making things up and Peter probably never made it further than fetching coffee for SI staffers.”

“I’ve even got the letter to prove it,” Peter muttered. “It’s better that way, I guess.”

“Which brings us to the second rule,” Ned said with the dogged persistence of someone who had this entire script written out that they were hell-bent on using. “We don’t talk about our involvement at all.”

“Yeah--no-one except May knows that Ned’s been helping me.” Peter looked sheepishly at Ned, who cheerfully announced that he was the Guy in the Chair.

Seriously? These dorks . . .

“That’s easy,” MJ said, “I’m not going to be helping you swing around Queens looking for trouble.”

They both blinked at her.

“Oh. Okay . . .” Peter changed tack very quickly. “But it’s still not very safe and May insisted that we make a list of people to look out for and avoid--”

May Parker, bless her paranoid yet practical heart, had them maintaining a list of known criminals involved in alien tech smuggling amongst other crimes in case the repercussions of Spider-Man’s exploits wound up knocking at their door.

MJ could not help herself. She pointed out certain flaws in their reasoning--each and every one of these people had relatives and not all wrong-doers had criminal records. There were probably other people interested in Spider-Man despite never even meeting him too. So this was an incomplete list at best.

(“Don’t tell May about that--she’ll freak even more!”)

In all fairness, she probably knew it was going to happen. When MJ got involved, she got involved.

She quizzed them both about what they had been doing so far--May Parker had grounded him, so there was little chance that people could track Spider-Man down now, but Peter had not covered his tracks at least five times after losing his backpacks. Way to go, Spidey--a guy in a noticeable red and blue suit climbing up the wall of one particular apartment block each time?

It was more a testament to how people were more invested in looking down at their phones and conveniently missing the web-slinging vigilante swinging over their heads than any particular
stealthy skills on Peter’s part, MJ was certain. There were enough videos online to prove that at least some budding journalists were paying attention. And they all showed him in various parts of Queens.

“What you need is,” MJ drawled as she stabbed a finger at the screen of Peter’s laptop, “videos of Spandex-Man when Peter cannot possibly be present in those locations at that time. Right now, anyone with a laptop and enough patience can figure out that this Spider-dude is active between the hours of three in the afternoon and seven in the evening on school days.”

It was the criminal underworld’s loss, but MJ wanted to use her powers for good. And the students of Queens did not need weirdos trying to figure out which one of them was Spider-Man. She also felt a certain sense of satisfaction as Peter and Ned stared at her like she was proposing something other than basic common sense.

Ned already had a several social media accounts and email addresses, so it was a piece of cake to create a few more. Peter really did hug Ned when he said that he could change the timestamps on certain videos and photos so that Spider-Man was spotted in the morning rather than in the afternoon.

Her momentary bubble of warm, gloopy feelings was ruined when she realised that she had done exactly what she set out not to do. She did not need to see Ned’s knowing glance to know that she had messed up--again.

Proximity to Peter Parker makes me stupid. MJ mentally berated herself and knew that there would be no peace for her because Liz was coming back from meeting up with Cindy and Sally that night and she was essentially doomed again.

Which was why she barked at them to get a move on with their literature homework because she did not have all day. But it was already past five in the afternoon when they got started on the readings for the assignment and May Parker staggered in at six thirty with an armload of takeout.

MJ felt bad for Peter’s aunt, who was obviously trying to keep her paranoia under control throughout dinner. Being an adult in this situation would suck. Especially as the guardian of a super-powered mutant. She got the whole spiel about not getting on anyone’s radar because there were plenty of shady government agencies in addition to criminals. MJ did not trust the unwieldy acronyms--especially after the discovery of the Nazi death cult that had been festering inside most branches of the government--so she got why May was antsy about their underage involvement.

But it was still her fault for revealing what she knew and not focusing on homework to aid an underage vigilante.

So MJ promised May that she would be careful. She tried not to look at Peter too much as he munched his way through his taco (and licked his fingers afterward) and resigned herself to going back to a room where Liz Toomes was going to be bunking on her rollaway bed.

The look in Ned’s eyes when she said she had to go because she had guests staying over was definitely sympathetic--even borderline pitying. That was the worst part--so she nudged him when Peter wasn’t looking and mouthed use protection because he was staying overnight for yet another nerd fest.

Ned gave her the stink-eye, but it was totally worth it.

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Chapter End Notes
I don't usually write things that are this drawn out. I like characters to fall into each other's laps within three to five chapters, but that is not exactly happening in this fic. *shrugs*

(I either write a lot or not at all when stressed. It's been a stressful week.)
Trouble me (disturb me)

Chapter Summary

. . . Major spoilers for Star Wars: Rogue One in this chapter.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Waking up during winter recess should be awesome, because there was no school and Ned was free to do things like go for sleepovers at Peter’s place. (It had been a while--their last sleepover had been prior to Nationals.)

However, that theory did not quite work out in his favour. For one thing, he was awake and it was not even remotely close to eleven in the morning. The clock on the living room wall told him that it was six-thirty no matter how hard Ned squinted at it.

Who in the world woke up at six-thirty during winter break?

One Ned Leeds, apparently. Which brought him to the second thing--Peter Parker was an aggressive cuddler. Even when he was asleep.

They had not planned on falling asleep on the couch. The plan had been to try their hand at model-painting (Franklin has got him one of those small customisable figurines for tabletop RPGs), then work on their prototype drone before their Star Wars Rebels marathon. This was the run-up prep before they went to watch Rogue One. May had taken the day off and surprised them with tickets. (Given how frazzled May looked sometimes, Ned was slightly surprised that she had not taken leave more often--but December was a very busy time for all hospital staff--even those in Admin--according to her.)

The first part of the plan had gone off without a hitch. Even thought it had taken a lot of time and they proved that they both did not have the knack for painting miniature figurines. Their drone prototype might have a basic framework and the beginnings of a tiny motor by the end of winter recess if they kept it up. It was almost eleven when they started on Rebels and Ned figured that they had made it through roughly one and a half episodes before falling asleep on the couch in their blanket cocoons.

Sometime in the night, Peter had gone from leaning on Ned’s shoulder to full on hugging him. It was inescapable--both the fact that Peter was clamped onto him like a barnacle and that fact that Ned would not be leaving this couch anything time soon due to Peter’s super-strength.

Now Ned was mostly okay with physical affection, platonic or otherwise, from his nearest and dearest, but he liked it better when the person he was cuddling with was actually awake.

Ned wriggled a little experimentally. Nope, Peter was not budging. In fact, he was being squeezed fractionally tighter as Peter tried to burrow closer.

He supposed that if he really needed to go to the bathroom, he could just wake Peter up. With an
internal shrug, Ned got one hand free of the blanket and reached for his phone--just within reach on the side-table--and checked for new emails and messages.

Amidst the usual AcaDec pic spam (Flash like to show off--he was at some fancy ski resort or something), the Leeds’ family group chat and some of his old friends, MJ’s single message stood out. Mainly because the timestamp said six seventeen in the morning.

Ned opened MJ’s message and immediately regretted it.

MJ: Did you use protection?

Maybe she was in a mood because she was also up at this ungodly hour during a school holiday.

Ned: You’re up really early

MJ: So are you

MJ: Totally forgot that Liz was in my room

Ned: ??

MJ: Nearly stepped on her face just now

Ned supposed that that would be pretty disastrous, all things considered.

MJ: Liz doesn’t snore

MJ: Does Parker snore?

MJ messaging in the early hours of the morning was more unfiltered than anything he had experienced around her while face-to-face.

Ned: Nope

Ned: He’s drooling a little tho

MJ: You’re watching him sleep aren’t you?

That was unfair. He couldn’t help it when Peter’s face was barely a foot away.

Ned: Uh I can’t move away from this couch?

Ned: He’s kinda clinging to me

Ned: Wonder if this is what being hugged by an anaconda feels like

There was an entirely too-long pause that made Ned regard the next message that popped up with trepidation.

MJ: But does his anaconda want your buns?

Ned really did roll his eyes then.

Ned: Are you 10 years old?

MJ: You left yourself wide open for that
So maybe he had, but that had been beyond juvenile.

Ned: I revise my estimate

Ned: You’re 6

MJ: But the blackmail material!

MJ: Just one pic

Ned: Creepy

MJ: Yeah I guess it was

MJ: At least someone’s cuddling you

Ned: Trade you this crick in my neck for it

Ned: I can’t believe I managed to sleep like this

MJ: You two sound like an old couple that falls asleep on the couch while watching sci-fi re-runs

Ned: I’ll have you know that the latest season of star wars rebels is not a sci-fi re-run

MJ: Nerd~

Ned: And proud~

Sometimes, he just liked to poke at MJ by openly flaunting his inner fanboy. Not that his inner fanboy wasn’t really close to the surface all the time.

Ned: We’re going to see rogue one today

MJ: Congratulations on your nerd date

Ned: May’s going to be there

Ned: It’s a family day

Ned: May needs a break too

And maybe MJ might consider going to the movies with friends once in a while . . . Knowing what he did now, Ned wondered if MJ usually went to the cinema alone or just wanted to semi-stalk Peter at the same time.

Ned: You should come

Assuming she wasn’t with Liz and the other girls or had her own plans.

MJ: You should ask me along for the movies with John Boyega

MJ: Or any black women characters that are not CGI rendered

For someone that mocked their nerdiness regularly, MJ had a very good grasp of what was going on in the recent Star Wars movies.

MJ: I’m going out with Liz today to the shelter
MJ: She wants to say good bye in person

Oh. That was just sad. Midtown had lost one of their best and brightest when Liz moved to Oregon after her dad was arrested.

Ned: Tell her I said hi and all the best

MJ: I’ll give you her new contact and you can tell her yourself

Ned: Awkward

MJ: Me having her new number when Peter doesn’t

Ned: You can quit being his wingman at any time

They exchanged a few more messages, snarking at each other half-heartedly before they both decided to try for an hour or two more of sleep. After all, Ned thought, he needed to be better rested for the fanboying that would accompany Star Wars: Rogue One.

He woke up again at around nine thirty to the awesome smell of pancakes and the absence of strong arms around his midsection. Someone--Peter--had arranged him on the couch so that he was lying down instead.

The Parkers were in the kitchen with May “supervising” Peter as he flipped pancakes and they looked . . . kinda like how they used to back when Ben Parker had been the third person standing there teaching Peter the basics of cooking. They looked a lot less tense and Ned was glad.

Also, there were pancakes. And yogurt with fruit because May still insisted on them getting their five a day. Ned was a-okay with being fed and complimented May on her granola mix, which made her beam at him and he held onto the hope of one day calling her auntie.

They poked at the drone prototype for a while after breakfast before Ned had to go back home for lunch, drop off his stuff and shower before heading out for the matinee showing of Rogue One with the Parkers.

They had filled May in on most of what they knew from the trailers while she listened tolerantly. (“I was a teenager when the first movie came out, y’know?”) But he and Peter were obviously more excited as they entered the theatre with a box of mixed sweet and salty buttered popcorn and cups of orange juice with May smiling indulgently as she brought up the rear.

This was going to be so next level, Ned thought as he made himself comfortable and the lights dimmed around them.

He had been wrong--he realised that as the credits rolled and he was blinking his eyes to dispel the dampness that had gathered in them. Peter reached over to pat his arm in a consoling way--Ned noticed that Peter had discretely wiped at his eyes earlier after a certain scene earlier on.

Ned had not been ready for the feels. Actual Asians in Star Wars--he could cry . . . well, he did cry--a little. (If they had Pinoy actors in Star Wars as main characters, he would have been able to die happy.) And they had such a great cast. May was surprised by how much she liked it as well.

“He’s fifty-four? They’re both fifty-four . . . Wow. Now if only they had more older women in there,” she remarked over dinner. They were having post-movie beef pho and fresh rice noodle rolls, but Ned was still vibrating with excitement and the feels. He just had an abundance of feels.
That ending . . . oh man. (If he ever spoiled MJ for it, she’d been hopping mad about how it had played out.) Ned was not ready for that even though he knew that many rebels had died to obtain the plans for the Death Star. Oh and Riz Ahmed? Totally cute and such an emotive actor--Ned got a lump in his throat just thinking about his last scene.

“I’m just . . . Bodhi and Chirrut and Baz,” he said to Peter after his friend had shot him a few concerned looks. “It wasn’t even their fight and they jumped right in . . .”

“Yeah,” Peter chimed in and there was complete understanding in his eyes as he looked at Ned, “they’re awesome.”

“They’re all probably having a break someplace sunny,” Ned decided. “That’s my alternate universe canon and I’m sticking to it.”

“They’re on a beach, having those drinks with the fruit sticking out of them,” Peter said, nodding in agreement.

“Yeah.”

When he got home later that evening, Ned went online and found out that he was not alone in wanting a nice long vacation for a scrappy bunch of rebels. (The fanart though . . . the fanart kinda wrecked him.)

As a princess-in-exile in the suburbs of Portland, Liz Allan-Toomes still unfailing gracious while visiting her former stomping grounds in Queens, New York.

MJ had to mentally check her inner maudlin prose-writer several times that morning as she went with Liz (like a faithful retainer carrying her train or tooting her horn) to the animal shelter. The morning shift was not popular, especially at this time of the year--they hoped to avoid people that might recognise Liz from the photos that the most opportunistic photographers had got the morning right after Homecoming.

After some momentary awkwardness with Thuy and Marcus (because of the whole Adrian-Toomes-alien-tech-weapons-trafficker thing), they reconnected over some of the cats and dogs that had not been adopted yet and how great the volunteers Liz had recruited were.

“I only asked the best,” Liz responded. “They just happened to be my friends.”

MJ flushed when Liz smiled at her and hoped that it did not show. Fortunately, she wasn’t Peter Parker, whose flaming red ears were a dead giveaway most of the time.

Liz petted some of her favourite cats and dogs, sighed over the kittens and puppies and was her usual awesome self. Which resulted in MJ biting her lip and resisting the urge to whip her phone out to take a picture of Liz holding the most adorable beagle pup and cooing over it.

Ugh, MJ--stop being creepy over Liz, stop being creepy over Liz . . .

Marcus saved her the trouble and suggested that they take some photos for remembrance. If Marcus had been around five years younger, MJ would have crushed on him too because damn, he was fine and he worked with adorable animals so that people could adopt them. (That picture of Marcus with Liz holding beagle puppies--MJ was saving that one. And that one of Thuy and Liz making kissy faces over kittens, oh and definitely this one of herself and Liz smiling over the heads of senior cat Mr Rogers and senior dog Georgie . . .)
By the end of the visit, Thuy and Marcus were definitely sad to see Liz go. They hugged her goodbye and wished her all the best in Oregon. MJ saw the tightness in Liz’s expression and felt helpless because there was nothing she could do to change her friend’s crappy situation.

Which was why she agreed to volunteer at the shelter again when Liz asked her to. And she would recruit more volunteers to help out, sure. Of course she was fine with going to the homeless shelter on 169th Street with Liz next.

It wasn’t as though she had exciting plans for winter break anyway. School holidays at the Jones’ were usually quiet affairs with a lot of reading lined up and helping Kendra with her hair when they were not visiting Grandma Jones in Harlem. Kendra had been over the moon to have two older girls doing her hair that morning before her playdate at her friend’s place. (Liz confessed that she had little experience with 4C type hair unless she was visiting with her mother’s side of the family.)

The shelter Liz used to volunteer for appeared to cater to a varied group of people in need. They were also short on feminine hygiene products and socks, according a sign at the front counter that was calling for donations.

There was the usual hesitation when one of the staff recognised Liz and the whole her-dad-is-a-criminal thing before they unthawed.

Ms Gutierrez was certainly sympathetic when she learned that Liz had to move away. But Liz always seemed to have a back-up plan. Or back-up friends. Betty Brant had volunteered to take over from Liz. Christmas was over, but they could get a donation drive going after winter break.

MJ was still susceptible to Liz Toomes’ soft brown eyes and her belief that her friends would step up to the plate to help. Or however much help high school students were allowed to give. (Liz was probably going to be an ambassador on day. Or a senator. Maybe even president or chairperson of an international charity organisation.)

Sure, she could help Betty organise a donation drive or bake sale. Someone at school probably knew how to bake, right? MJ figured that she could trade essay editing for cash if they were really pressed for donations.

Liz treated MJ to lunch despite all her protests and they crammed themselves into the tiny corner table of a place that dished up what Grandma Jones called hearty soul food.

“I think I’ll miss this in, like, a month’s time,” Liz murmured over fried fish and okra with a side order of ribs. MJ could sympathise with that--having convenient and varied food options nearby was a life-saver. And no-one expected you to talk much while dealing with ribs. Which made avoiding the topic of Mr Toomes’ upcoming trial easier, because MJ had read that he was potentially facing a sentence of twenty-five years or more.

In need of someone to talk to or just talk at, she texted Ned while Liz was on the phone with her mother. Both Liz and mother were in New York against Mr Toomes’ wishes--stubbornness was apparently a heritable trait in her family.

MJ: Help

MJ: I have been dragooned into becoming a good person

MJ: Liz has people taking over for her extracurriculars already

Ned: (last seen at 2.33pm)
Oh, right—he was probably watching Star Wars with Peter and his aunt. And since her one sad attempt at being in the same movie theatre with Ned and Peter a few months ago, she had given up on that sort of thing. (And tickets were so expensive for most shows these days—she’d rather save her money for books.)

MJ only received a reply four hours later after bringing Liz to her favourite bookstores and breathing in the scent of books (it calmed her down). She decided to get a copy of *Everfair* by Nisi Shawl while making enthusiastic recommendations to Liz about Nnedi Okorafor and her other favourites when she asked about the kind of sci-fi and fantasy novels that MJ liked to read.

“I never took you for a lover of sci-fi and fantasy fiction,” Liz said, bemused by her eagerness.

MJ read a lot of genres, and one of the things that reading a lot taught her was that some of the so-called classics were dull and YA fiction totally rocked when done right.

“I just bring the thicker books to school because they last longer and people are less likely to bother me. And they make handy weapons,” she muttered, resisting the urge to hide her face because Liz had her body turned towards her with her head tilted slightly in a way that was . . . very attractive. They were practically the same height, so Liz could look right into her eyes.

That sensation was totally not MJ’s knees going weak, by the way. She would deny it if anyone asked her. Damn, but the central heating in the bookstore was going overboard . . .

They managed to get back to the Jones’ without slipping in the slightly slushy streets. Snowfall had been sparse, but the weather forecasts predicted more snow towards New Year’s Day.

MJ only remembered to check her phone when she and Liz were getting ready for a winter evening of Netflix and not watching any coverage of the Adrian Toomes’ case.

*Ned:* I’m not surprised

*Ned:* Liz has that effect

*MJ:* How was your movie date?

*Ned:* I am having a lot of feels rn

*Ned:* I also have many feelings about Riz Ahmed

*MJ:* Nerd~

*MJ:* At least you have taste

*Ned:* You’re a nerd too

*Ned:* Book nerd

MJ snorted at that. She debated telling Ned that she had a whole bunch of Extended Universe novels from the early 2000s.

*MJ:* Books are everything

Maybe she would save the novels for another time . . .

It was then that she noticed Liz’s absence. The older girl was taking a much longer time in the bathroom than usual. She did not know what do in situations like this, but MJ supposed that she
should be a good host and check on her.

Her parents and Kendra were not back yet, so the hallway outside her room was quiet—quiet enough for sound to carry through the walls. Hovering outside the bathroom door, MJ did become concerned when she heard something that sounded like someone trying very hard not to be heard while crying.

“Uh, are you okay?” MJ asked. Which was a dumb thing to say because Liz was obviously not okay right at that moment.

There was a pause in the sniffling noise from the other side of the door. MJ steeled herself to ask again, but the bathroom door swung open and she could see that Liz was red-eyed and her face was all puffy from the crying.

MJ sucked at being comforting. Largely because she had no idea of how to be comforting. But she led Liz back to her room after snagging a box of tissues from the bathroom and tried to be a non-verbal supportive presence.

Liz folded up into a ball at one end of the rollaway bed and buried her head in her arms. MJ did not know what to do with her hands and settled for stroking her back in what she hoped was a comforting way. They stayed that way for ages (in reality only ten minutes or so) before Liz unfolded and accepted the tissues.

After a few abortive starts and a lot of tissues later, MJ knew that Mr Toomes had suggested that no matter what the verdict was and how long his sentence turned out to be, Mrs Toomes should divorce him and revert back to her maiden name so that they would not be associated with a convicted felon.

Liz was against it. Liz’s mom had been against it—at first.

“The last time we met him at Rikers, Mom sounded like she was agreeing with h-him,” Liz said into a ball of sodden tissues. “This afternoon, she told me she was looking up divorce lawyers.”

Well shit. That was beyond awful. From what MJ gathered, Liz’s parents were still very much in love with each other. And Mr Toomes, dangerous felon and weapons trafficker, was still Liz’s doting dad.

“And they’re doing it because of me,” Liz finished dully. “It’s so that I’ll be Liz Allan instead of Liz Toomes on my college and future job applications.”

MJ could only offer her shoulder and a completely platonic hug. She had forgotten that brilliant, competent Liz was still a teenager and there were many things in the world that she could not change.

And the other selfish reason for keeping to herself a lot of the time was because of situations like this. Feeling for someone and empathising with them without being able to make anything better sucked.

Later, with Liz sleeping the sleep of the emotionally exhausted, MJ was alone with her own thoughts and the ceiling was not giving her any answers. She turned over with a huff and picked up her phone. It was just eleven—someone was bound to be up.

MJ: This sucks

Ned: ???

MJ: She’s all upset and sad
MJ: And it blows

It was not her place to share Liz’s secrets. Ned seemed to understand without context.

Ned: Not sure what this is about but sometimes being there is all you can do

MJ: Being here and not doing anything also blows

MJ: And if you start on any Force related mantras I will kick you so hard

Ned: (K-2SO head emoji)

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Peter would always remember the rest of the year after Homecoming as one of the weirdest times of his life. Not weird in the a-radioactive-spider-bit-me-and-I-mutated kind of way, but the I-don’t-really-know-what-to-do-and-what-is-my-life kind of way. There were no battles to be fought but there was certainly a lot of internal turmoil.

On one hand, the crackdown on Mr Toomes's gang had scared a lot of the mid-range players into hiding, so there was not that much serious crime on the streets. On the other hand Peter was no closer to finding the rest of Toomes' henchmen and whatever weapons they still possessed.

This was frustrating because Ned and May were right when they pointed out that scaling every building in Queens would not help if they were really good at covering their tracks. And Peter knew next to nothing about the criminal underworld. Aaron Davis’ words tended to come to mind whenever he thought about that angle—“You need to get better at this.”

This was an ever-evolving set of ideas that was only firmly rooted in his ignorance and loosely related to all the catching up he was doing while grounded.

As for the rest of Spider-man's activities, Peter Parker could and would help old ladies cross the street even out of the suit. May and Ben had always done their best to show him how to help whenever they brought him with them to the soup kitchens and shelters to deliver donated items.

So he compiled lists, often while standing on the ceiling wearing the mask. Karen was much better at organising information and they had a virtual wall of facts, evidence and known associates set up. But there were huge gaps in the virtual wall that needed filling in and Peter did not want to involve Ned in anything illegal--like hacking into secure files in the FBI database for new leads to add in. So they were working with what little they knew for now and listening in on various emergency services bandwidths.

When Peter very cautiously revisited his memories of Toomes’ lair and workshop (the actual site had been picked over by the DODC already and he was so not going back there any time soon, nope), he realised that there had to be at least one more person with the technical knowhow or engineering abilities to build weapons based on scraps of alien tech. He reported it back to Mr Stark, whose sudden non-committal response was almost as good as a confirmation.

Mr Stark was still very vague about what was going on with the investigation. There was apparently some departmental level head-butting going on as the DODC, the FBI and the NYPD played Whose Jurisdiction Is It Anyway?

Score one for local street-level vigilantism.

The most significant update came in mid-November and had nothing to do with the hunt for illegal
alien tech.

Peter had done his homework (hopefully to Mrs Warren’s satisfaction) and was trying out another police scanner app when he heard the discreet chime.

_SuitUp_: Conference call today in an hour--with someone more reliable. I definitely trust him with my life. No video, sound only

The Starkphone usually resided on its charging platform behind some vintage records in the living room because regular kids in Queens did not have access to advanced Starkphones. An hour after that message, the phone now sat incongruously in the middle of the table amidst the remnants of the Thai takeout they had for dinner.

May was slightly less hostile to Stark and co. after the suit had its Instant Kill function removed and a whole bunch of other specs changed according to Peter’s very long and extensive list. But Peter could tell that it would take a while before she would warm up to Mr Stark personally. She very subtly tensed up as the Starkphone’s screen started to glow.

“’Sup Spider-kid,” Mr Stark said, sounding more upbeat today, “and Spider-kid’s guardian, of course.”

“Uh, yeah, hi?” Peter said while May rolled her eyes at the ceiling.

"Oh goody, the voice modifiers work just fine. No picture, no names,” Mr Stark went on, "because Rhodey here doesn't want to know enough of anything to tattle on you--"

"I could have told them that myself, Tony.” A less amused voice joined the conversation. "Good evening, I'm Colonel James Rhodes--"

**War Machine**, Peter’s inner fanboy announced.

"Also known as Platypus, but only I'm allowed to--"

There was a noise like a heavy sigh from the other end of the call. "--and I would also like to apologise for this situation. Given the circumstances of your recruitment and the fact that you’re underage--"

"Honeybear, I apologised for that three times already!"

"Plus the current state of the oversight committee in charge of implementing the Accords," Colonel Rhodes continued despite the constant interruptions, "it's probably better if you lie low for now."

"Translation: so long as Secretary Ross is still in charge, we're pretending to have difficulty understanding long words and following orders." Mr Stark sounded almost fond as he continued speaking to Colonel Rhodes, “Remember that time you covered for me when the suit crashed into that--"

“Tony, you never had a problem with not following orders.” Colonel Rhodes sounded both annoyed and exasperated--but in a familiar way that suggested that this happened a lot.

“Back to the issue at hand, the Accords might not survive the next challenge at the UN Summit. Wakanda's probably going to pull out, so most of their supporters will go with them. Russia, the UK and China never actually let the oversight committee dictate anything to them and plenty of other countries aren't happy about what they see as an American-lead initiative to police their citizens. Honestly, I can't blame them--especially when hawks like Thaddeus Ross are in charge."
"Yeah, he's a real piece of work," May muttered. "I still remember what happened in Harlem."

Peter had been barely old enough to comprehend the news that the Hulk (and some other genetically engineered humans) had wrecked a considerable chunk of Harlem way back then. But May's workplace had received plenty of the casualties. His aunt and uncle had always maintained that the military had also been at fault for letting things get out of hand in a densely populated area.

"He's also the reason why Dr Banner is afraid to go near densely populated areas," Colonel Rhodes said, dislike evident in his tone. "The people of Harlem know who to blame, but citizen action committees get ignored by the high-ups that back Ross."

"They like Ross because despite causing citywide damages and plenty of needless deaths in multiple countries, he's still number one in the field of developing things that explode?" May could barely keep the sarcasm out of her tone.

"And probably a dickhead to boot."

"Whoops, pardon my French."

"Close. He's also deep into super-soldier research." Colonel Rhodes sounded apologetic. "Which is why this conversation never happened."

Peter felt his aunt's grip on his hand tighten even as his stomach turned to lead. No wonder some of the clauses in the Accords had sounded unethical.

"Chin up, Rhodeybear--you too, kid. The Wakandians and their supporters want Ross out as part of the proposed revisions. So if Ross stays, the Accords are likely to fall apart after the human rights investigation gets through with him. If Ross goes, the Accords will get picked apart and hopefully get revamped from the ground up."

"Sic the human rights investigation on him anyway." May looked mutinous and upset. She had friends that had been affected by the Hulk in Harlem incident.

"It would be my pleasure to see him drummed out of the civil service, but we're working on getting him and his sticky fingers out of the oversight committee first." There was a short pause. "But oversight is still necessary."

"What does that mean?" Peter asked.

"Rhodey wants us to keep in touch. But not in a military prison way or a tag everyone with trackers way." Mr Stark was back. "Fury had the right idea with the Avengers Initiative. But what with that guy in the red costume in Hell's Kitchen and the other bulletproof guy in Harlem, it's probably better to keep the Avengers separate from the domestic crime-fighters."

"We're drafting it as we go," Colonel Rhodes informed them, "but your skill set is probably most suitable for local incidences--"

"He's not a soldier!" May cut in, eyes shining with suppressed rage that only Peter could see.

"Absolutely--so what Rhodey is proposing is a sort of local outreach programme," Mr Stark said in what he probably thought was a pacifying tone. "We've got the resources to back you up if things get hot in New York, but if you want to chip in if something big comes up--"

Peter could feel his aunt ready to explode next to him and he placed his other hand over hers.

"--feel free to do so."
“What Tony means is—he trusts you. So no more trips overseas unless you have permission to go. We’re not pushing for you or any of those meta-human vigilantes to sign up, but the laws still apply. Except the one about vigilantism—that’s going to have to go into new draft under the Good Samaritan clause.”

Peter leaned forward, recalling some of the stuff he had been reading up on. “So it’s like that thing where you see someone falling over, you can administer CPR without getting into trouble?”

“There will hopefully be some legal protections for individuals that render aid in extraordinary circumstances, yes.”

“So remember, don’t do what I would do--no underage drinking, theft, vandalism or--”

“There’s a line. Please do not cross it,” Colonel Rhodes said, dead serious. Peter roughly knew what he meant. “In the meantime, please do not run afoul of the local law enforcement.”

“The suit’s not completely bulletproof yet. Working on it though.”

“Thanks, Mr Stark. And Colonel Rhodes,” Peter said tentatively. “Um, I hope you’re better now after the whole situation in Berlin . . .”

There was a brief pause before Colonel Rhodes answered. “Thanks--I’m on the mend.”

“I told you he’s a nice Spider-kid, Rhodey--”

“I know better than to ask you to stay out of trouble, but try to.” This was obviously directed at Peter. “Tony, we’ve taken up enough of their time today.”

“Okay--adios, kiddo. And your guardian too.”

“Hmmph,” his aunt muttered under her breath after the call ended, “are you sure he’s engaged to just Pepper Potts?”

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So Spider-Man was still not an Avenger. Spider-Man’s abilities should remain a secret and if they could pass them off as something technological instead of actual meta-human enhanced biology, they would.

Peter was still negotiating with his aunt about being allowed out to patrol. In the meantime, he had helped around a dozen senior citizens cross the road or picked up their dropped groceries, saved a cat and her kittens from a storm drain (and dropped them off at the no-kill animal shelter) when no-one was looking and tripped up one purse-snatcher by pretending to stop to tie his shoelaces.

His experience as a teenage klutz had its uses, apparently.

The terrible alternative ending nightmares had eased up a little over the next few months. But it was still surreal because he was Spider-Man and another part of his life involved chats with Pepper Potts, CEO of Stark Industries. (Why yes, the Rescue bots were fully operational. And they did help when those two boats had an accident in Flushing Bay the other day. Yes, it was difficult to managed more than one identity and wear many hats, even as an adult. Therapy was not a one-size solves-everything deal, but it had helped Ms Potts for the most part after her ordeal. Ms Potts was also a badass. And being kidnapped and used as a guinea pig for someone’s whacked experiment sucked. Minus five stars—would not recommend.)
The other part of his life involved trigonometry, calculus, chemistry and the constant presence of Ned and MJ. They had actually been there for him when he had been too busy as Spider-Man, if all the voicemails he finally caught up on were any indication--and wow, there had been a lot of them. Peter just noticed them more now.

A lot more.

Which was just great because Peter had been an awful friend if those accumulated voicemails were any indication. He definitely owed Ned more than one Star Wars movie and he owed MJ a lot more than just his presence at AcaDec meetings.

Easier said than done when he was perpetually tongue-tied in front of MJ and having conflicting feelings about Ned. Which resulted in the awkwardness of their first sleepover since AcaDec Nationals. Awkward on his end, at least.

Peter wondered if he had been avoiding sleepovers because he was afraid that he would wake Ned up if he had a nightmare or he might let slip his more than friendly feelings for him.

He certainly did not dream that night after Rebels. But waking up to find that he had fastened onto Ned like a giant leech was alarming. What if he had accidentally cut off all Ned’s circulation with his strength? What if Ned had woken up before he did?

Peter had hurriedly rearranged Ned on the couch before dashing off to make breakfast so that he did not have to dwell on how nice it would be to keep hugging him.

(It would have been better than nice.)

“You know, it’s okay to have feelings for your best friend,” May said to him in the car after their post-Rogue One dinner. They had just dropped Ned off and Peter supposed that he had been kinda obvious to people that knew him well enough. Super obvious even.

“I’m just--Ned was just--” Peter could feel his face heating up even in the dimness of the car. He was surprised that his face was not glowing with embarrassment. He could only hope that Ned was too engrossed with his Rogue-One--related feelings to notice that Peter Parker was also one emotional mess where he was concerned.

“Your uncle and I were friends before we started going out together,” May continued blithely as she turned onto their street. “The movies talk a lot about love at first sight and all that, but there’s something to be said about being friends first.”

“I’m still trying to get the friends part right,” Peter muttered as his ear tips burned.

So Peter went to school on the second day of January with his resolutions (be a good friend, a valuable member of the team, get better at Spider-Manning) and cookies. Ned would definitely appreciate cookies--feeding people was his family’s thing. MJ might like the ones with peanut butter--he could try his luck.

Only to find an empty seat where MJ usually sat. Apparently, she had called in sick.

MJ was seldom unwell, if Peter’s memory was anything to go by. And when had Ned and MJ been on friendly enough terms that she would text him about it first?

“We’ve been hanging out,” Ned said, gesturing at his Literature homework when Peter asked. “She helped us with that themes dissonance essay. And we were at that animal shelter just last week?”
“Oh.” Peter looked down at MJ’s sticky notes decorating the margin of his papers. “You think I should bring her cookies with her homework after school?”

“Go for it, man,” Ned said encouragingly and reached for another cookie. “These are awesome by the way.”

Armed with a reason for actually dropping by (the homework) and cookies, Peter followed the directions Ned passed him and got off at the subway station that should be around three blocks from MJ’s place later that afternoon.

He saw them when he turned the corner--two familiar figures walking out from what should be the building where MJ’s family resided. Peter recognised MJ’s distinctive height and purple scarf immediately and realised two things.

Firstly, MJ did not look sick. Secondly, she was with Liz Toomes.

Peter’s eyesight had never been better after the bite, so he could tell it was Liz even under the beanie hat, thick scarf and sunglasses. He could also tell that Liz was upset and trying to cope when she took the sunglasses off to speak to MJ as they stood on the curb with what looked like a small rolling luggage bag.

He had froze instinctively when he saw them. Guilt made him duck into the nearest alleyway. What was Liz doing in New York?

There could only one possible reason--oh. His mind helpfully supplied the latest headlines. Adrian Toomes’ trial was . . . today. It was probably over by now. No wonder Liz looked upset.

He felt like a stalker, but this was not the time to walk up to Liz and ask her how she was doing. Peter was stuck looking out of a freezing cold alleyway as the two girls spoke to each other at a volume that was too low for him to catch.

It was hard not to notice how soft MJ’s face was when she looked at Liz. Maybe it was sympathy or something similar, but Peter was struck by the sudden realisation that MJ--largely antisocial and sarcastic MJ--genuinely liked Liz.

The second bolt of enlightenment that followed on the heels of the first made his jaw drop a little because Peter knew what he looked like when he looked at Liz now. His expression would have been a mirror of MJ’s at that point in time.

Not that there was anything wrong with that. Liz had a lot of admirers at Midtown--but only Peter Parker had been thick-skinned enough to ask her for Homecoming because he never thought that he would succeed.

MJ also had a thing for Liz, but it looked as though she had never said anything about it. Which was getting more and more apparent as a car drove up and the two girls hugged each other good-bye before Liz got in with her luggage. MJ’s wistful expression as the car moved off was obvious even to Peter.

He had to duck back into the alley again as the car drove past. It looked like Liz’s mother was in the driver’s seat. Neither of them noticed Peter lurking in the alleyway. With a sigh of relief, Peter turned around and--

“Parker! I know that dorky hat anywhere!”

He nearly swallowed his tongue when he saw MJ marching up to him.
Chapter End Notes

So I heard that Bisexual Awareness Week happened in some places this week~ Not where I live, but still! (And yes, I love a pepperonyrhodey sandwich~)
Like A Web Over Troubled Waters

Chapter Summary

MJ and Liz’s one hundred and one problems.

The Return of Spider-Man.

Peter and the return of Aaron Davis.

Ned is still The Guy in the Chair.

Ned and MJ are Helpful(TM).

And Ned and MJ find out that Peter’s better at swinging around via web than driving.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

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“Parker! I know that dorky hat anywhere!”

MJ, let the record state, was taller than Peter and probably would continue to be taller than Peter for a while. He knew that, but watching her stomp up to him in her boots and an extra two inches of height from her hair under her coat hood, Peter felt himself shrink another foot. Did she think he was stalking her? It probably was his destiny to come off as creepy to people he liked.

As destinies went, that kinda sucked.

“I--” That came out more high-pitched than Peter intended. He cleared his throat and tried again. “I thought you were sick! I’m not spying on you or anything!”

The looks she gave him was enough to make teenagers with weaker constitutions cower. Her eyes took in the Tupperware box of cookies and homework packet he was holding up defensively in between them and her face did that scrunched up thing that might have been a scowl combined with a frown.

“You still busted me though,” MJ stated flatly.

“I won’t tell,” Peter blurted out. “Really! S-so . . .”

“Ugh, it’s freezing here—I’m not having this conversation in an alley.” With an exasperated sigh, MJ turned about and started walking back to her building. “Keep up, Peter!”

Well, at least she was back to using his first name . . . Peter gripped his offerings tighter and caught up with MJ at the door to her building. MJ opened the door and gestured him in with a jerk of her chin.

It was marginally warmer in the lobby, but MJ seemed to be generating a cold field via her glare as she poked at the elevator buttons. Peter knew that he was not exactly very awe-inspiring—pale, not
very tall with his ears sticking out even underneath his beanie hat—but he was Spider-Man . . . and he was still this uncoordinated mess in front of his classmate.

That whole thing with Liz had thrown him for a loop because . . . well it was Liz--his crush that almost, but not-quite made it past the first date stage. Had MJ and Liz been that close? Peter had no idea how to ask about it without sounding weird.

The elevator ride up to the fifth floor was the most awkward in the history of Awkward Silences (in the subcategory just for Peter alone). MJ let him into her family’s apartment and held out a hand for her homework.

“Thanks, I guess,” she said after a brief flip-through of the contents. “Sorry I’m not ill and in need of chicken soup.”

“No problems.” Peter shrugged and tried not to look like he was wondering if the rest of her family was in. His last encounter with the Toomes family was still fresh in his mind. “Sooo I’ll just make a move then?”

MJ looked at him, brows raised. “You’re not going to ask about Liz?” she asked as she took off her scarf and coat. Her hair seemed to unwind itself and poof out into curly halo around her head after escaping the coat hood.

“No if it’s none of my business,” Peter said carefully. “I mean, Liz probably never said tell Peter--”

“Damn right, she didn’t--and she doesn’t even know the truth about your so-called internship,” MJ said with a snort before gesturing at the coatrack. “You might as well take your hat off and sit down.”

He heard her banging about in what was probably the kitchen as he got his outerwear off and tried not to stare too much at his surroundings. It was another apartment that showed signs of subdivision--like two bedrooms that might have been one once--and asides from the extra bookshelves that were excessive even by nerd standards, it looked just like any other home in Queens.

The Steven Universe merchandise and My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic DVDs indicated the presence of a younger sibling. Which was confirmed by the set of gauzy costume wings tacked onto the door of one bedroom. Someone in the household played basketball--the fully-inflated ball on top of the shoe rack showed signs of use. Conclusion: MJ had at least two siblings.

“Here.” Popping back into the living room, she shoved a mug into his hands and pointed at the couch. “It’s just microwaved hot chocolate. Because you brought cookies.”

“Thanks,” Peter muttered as he sat down gingerly on the large couch--one of those that could fold out into a double bed. The warmth from the mug seeped into his cold fingers, so that was a plus.

MJ flopped down on the other end of the couch. “So you know Liz’s dad’s trial was earlier today?”

“Yeah--I just remembered,” he confessed.

“Twenty-seven years. Mainly because he was unrepentant. Plus that guy he vaporised. Also, swearing at all the city officials and the DODC probably didn’t help him.” MJ jerked her chin at the TV. “It’ll be on the news cycle for a while because it’s a saleable soundbite.”

“Liz looked really upset,” he ventured. He was not up to discussing that sort of thing. Partly because he had been responsible for Mr Toomes’ arrest and partly because it wasn’t his fault that Mr Toomes had ventured into weapons manufacturing and trafficking. It wasn’t Liz’s or Mrs Toomes’ fault that
Mr Toomes had somehow decided that he had to build weapons to support them. They must be devastated though.

“Liz almost threw the remote at the TV, but didn’t because she’s nice and remembered where she was,” MJ said dryly. “They’re going back to Oregon today after saying good bye.”

To Mr Toomes. Liz and her mom--he couldn’t imagine what they were going through.

“It’s nice of you to help.” Although I didn’t know you were that close to Liz . . .

“She didn’t want people to drown her in sympathy. I offered and she was okay with it.” MJ started to investigate the box of cookies. “Did you make these? It doesn’t look like your aunt made them--no offense meant.”

“None taken,” Peter assured her. “I made them. My uncle and I learned to do it just before . . . before last Christmas, I mean.”

It was easier to talk about the things he and Ben used to do together now. Just a little bit easier.

MJ made a non-committal noise and bit into a cookie. While Peter was seized with the sudden fear that maybe he messed up the second batch and substituted salt for sugar by ac--

“Not bad,” she said after finishing the entire cookie. “It’s actually edible.”

Hiding his relief behind a sip of hot chocolate, Peter watched as MJ took another cookie. Ned’s family had it right--it was nice to make stuff that people like to eat.

“Sorry about your uncle,” she said out of the blue, causing Peter to almost drop his mug. “I never got a chance to say it, so . . .”

“I, uh, thanks--we miss him.” Peter and May had a moment around the time when the cookies were baking when they both remembered Ben pottering around the kitchen. “The anniversary is later this month.”

The silence that descended after that was doubly awkward, with MJ retreating behind her hair and Peter wondering if it had gotten too personal. No luck in having one of MJ’s family interrupt--it was all too clear that there was no-one else at home at the moment.

“Sorry, overshare--” Peter started to say at the same time MJ said, “Sorry, that was--”

They lapsed into silence again before MJ shook her head ruefully. “This is pathetic,” she groaned. “Not you--this situation.”

Which situation exactly? Peter thought, because there were too many things going on and proximity to MJ plus the whole emotional vulnerability thing was making his head spin.

“If this is making you uncomfortable, we could go through the organic chem lab you missed today?” he offered.

MJ gave him a measuring look before inclining her head. “Thanks.”

“I’m just making up for the times you helped me with my homework,” he said with what he hoped was a friendly and non-creepy smile. “I sorta owe you and Ned a lot for that . . .”

“Make more of these cookies and I’ll consider,” MJ said. “Or contribute to the bake sale Betty and the others are organising--they haven’t announced it yet, but there’s going to be a fund-raiser for a
homeless shelter. And a sock-collection.”

“Sure--May won’t mind if it’s going to a good cause.” Peter was struck by a stray thought then. “Do you bake? I mean--”

“I made a mug-cake once in the microwave from a video I saw online. That’s the absolute limit of my skills,” MJ declared, deadpan. “Now organic chemistry, that’s more my speed.”

Peter instinctively knew that it was not the time to compare organic chemistry lab to cooking. Any residual tension faded into the background as they focused on alcohols and alkenes for a while.

That weird feeling came rushing back when Peter’s phone buzzed around half an hour later.

May was checking in. She was still worried and all that, but she also encouraged him to spend more time with his friends. Especially MJ and Ned. Her well-meaning attempts at giving him the normal teenage experience aside, there was still the whole “this is 2017 and not the 1970s” and the girls and guys were different . . . in their approach to all things romantic.

Take MJ--who believed that love was a bunch of squishy feelings experienced by people in books. Real life might not actually measure up--she actually said that during her presentation in Literature class. And her perspectives on love stories were not exactly encouraging . . . (“Mr Darcy would not have got anywhere if he wasn’t rich” and “The mentally unwell wife in the attic, really?”)

Ned would probably have his first two kids’ names decided by the end of senior year. And a retirement home planned someplace nice and sunny.

Where did one mutant with spider-powers fit in?

On the positive side, after that initial bout of fanboying, Ned was almost as chill as MJ about the whole Spider-Man thing. Any fear that they might treat him differently was dispelled in short order and there was nothing like MJ grilling him about the quantitative analysis portion of the lab to remind him about here (he’s in someone other than Ned’s family home) and now (MJ’s still a bit sore about being second in chemistry even though Peter’s head had not been in the game for a large chunk of the last semester).

“You still grounded?” MJ asked casually, nodding at his phone.

“Not that much now? I think it’s back to normal--just no swinging around looking for trouble--bigger trouble than usual,” Peter admitted as he typed a quick message to May.

“Great--so you can help out with the bake sale then.” MJ opened her notebook and jotted something down. “That’s you and Ned down too . . .”

Sometimes, MJ was so chill that Peter had to check with Ned again to remind himself that she actually knew he was Spider-Man, but would still haul him over the coals for missing AcaDec practices.

“You asked Ned already?”

“Yeah--his mom’s family has a killer pineapple upside-down cake recipe, remember?”

Peter did remember that cake that Ned brought in. He also remembered Ned and MJ mock-fighting each other for the crumbs—that was how he knew that MJ was a genuine friend despite her prickliness. Ned did get along with most people, but from what little Peter had seen of Ned’s other friends, the ones that stuck with him were usually solid gold--the Leeds’ judge of character test was
practically infallible even if Ned was not aware of it himself.

At least his best friend and next closest friend were on good terms . . . Peter looked up to see MJ staring at him with an unfathomable expression on her face.

“Do I have something on my face?” he asked, half in jest.

“Yeah—a chocolate moustache you’re much too young for.” MJ passed him a box of paper napkins and smirked at him.

“I’ll grow into it one day,” Peter mock-grumbled as he cleaned up and got ready to go. MJ insisted on seeing him out after that when he said that he had to go meet May for dinner.

“Don’t do anything too stupidly dangerous out there, okay?” she said right out of the blue as they stood in the elevator.

“Define too stupidly dangerous,” Peter retorted. He was pretty sure he had done stupidly dangerous quite often prior to Homecoming.

“Don’t get maimed or killed,” MJ qualified as the elevator door opened to let them out on the ground floor. “Because Ned would get sad and I don’t think I could deal with that.”

“I already promised May not to get killed.” This was one of the few times MJ had acknowledged his alter ego’s existence--and she looked serious about it too. “Ned worries enough for both of us.”

“Someone has to,” MJ muttered as she walked him to the door. “For a smart guy, you have the self-preservation instincts of a heroic lemming.”

Did MJ think Spider-Man was heroic? “Uh--”

MJ whipped around so quickly that Peter almost thought she had meta-human abilities. “That was not me endorsing your spandex-clad shenanigans!”

Peter blinked, surprised by her vehemence. “Okay . . . See you at school tomorrow then.”

“Yeah,” MJ said before the door swung close, leaving Peter feeling very much like he was missing out on one very important part of that conversation.

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MJ had never played hooky before. Sure, her Mom and Dad were permissive enough to allow her to stay in if she was having really shitty cramps, but she seldom took advantage of that.

This was the first time she had deliberately skipped school for non-medical reasons and her Mom would write a note to back her up. Because it was not like missing one day of school in January would put a dent in her grades and Liz needed someone to be there while she awaited the outcome of the trial.

And she would have got away with it too if not for Peter Parker being Too Nice and deciding to Show Concern for once. It was a nice change from Ignoring All Of MJ’s Voice And Text Messages, but Peter’s timing was, as usual, less than ideal.

Her Mom and Dad had sensed that something was up that morning other than Liz’s dad’s trial, but they wisely left her to it.

There was a reason why Mike and MJ never used the A-word or the D-word around the house.
Kendra had been their little sister since she was one year old. As far as anyone knew, Michael Elijah Jones and Michelle Jeanette Jones were Kendra’s older siblings and they would die before anyone disabused her of that notion.

Liz’s parents splitting up troubled MJ more than she let on. Even if they were doing it for logical reasons. And a surname change. MJ had nothing against name changes--it was just something that had to happen sometimes.

As far as she was concerned, she was Michelle Jones and had always been Michelle Jones. She and Mike had decided, from very early on, that The Time Before did not count. If anyone commented on the fact that Mike was three shades darker than MJ or Kendra’s hair texture seemed unique in her family . . . well, that conversation usually never got off the ground because MJ would stare at them until they changed the subject--explaining polygenic inheritance to most people was a waste of energy. Mike was the polite one, after all.

Now Liz wasn’t one to air her personal laundry out in the open, so MJ was the only person in her family who knew about the Toomes’ major decision. She also had a front row seat to Liz’s phone calls with her mom.

Mrs Toomes had consulted a lawyer specialising in expedited divorces. There were like seventeen forms to fill in for uncontested divorces with children. As the grounds (imprisonment) were clear and both parties had hashed out everything beforehand, the divorce petition had gone through relatively quickly.

Naturally, Liz was mad at both her parents--it was a simmering sort of anger that was hovering under a very polite shell that MJ was watching with some concern. Liz had never been anything other than pleasant with a sarcastic edge even when dealing with recalcitrant or underperforming AcaDec members (see: Peter Parker and Flash Thompson).

But Liz held it together better than MJ could have. Maybe being away from her parents allowed her some space to cool down. Or perhaps Liz was more mature and could see the stress and strain that her parents were going through. She still called her mom every day and visited her dad the day before the trial despite his objections. The Toomes family seemed to be growing closer despite the obvious rifts that were splitting them apart to opposite coasts.

Then the second of January arrived and Liz’s mom called just five minutes before the news reported on the verdict of the trial. Twenty seven years for manslaughter, illegal weapons manufacture, theft of exotic materials and illegal weapons trading--and those were just the major charges. Which made sense because the government liked to know where the extra dangerous weapons were (preferably in their hands), but Liz was hardly in the mood for discussing the obvious flaws in the legal system because her dad might qualify for hip replacement surgery before he would qualify for parole.

“My mom’s coming to pick me up,” Liz said after emerging from the bathroom where she had claimed twenty minutes of privacy after getting the news. She was not pretending to be anything other than upset, but MJ could see her visibly pulling herself together. “We’re visiting him before leaving New York. Thanks for everything, MJ . . .”

“It’s the least I could do,” MJ muttered. In truth, she was mostly sorry about the mess that was causing Liz to move to another state than Mr Toomes’ sentence. Cool motive, still murder and all that. His family had their lives disrupted because of his actions alone, so MJ did not feel bad for the guy at all.

It was Liz she felt terrible for.
She helped Liz pack the last few items of clothing and toiletries and saw her out. MJ didn’t have the time or the patience to do her hair, so she stuffed it under the hood of her winter coat.

“Keep in touch,” Liz said as they stood on the curb outside MJ’s building. “I’m going to miss you—and your family.”

Always saying the right thing at the right time. MJ managed to respond that her family—especially Kendra—was going to miss her too. She did get a little sniffy when Liz hugged her, but she could blame it on the cold air.

She had got it mostly under control and was turning back when she spotted movement in the alley between her building and the next one.

That just took the cake. It was just typical of Peter Parker to come around just when she was getting emotional about Liz. As though she wasn’t feeling conflicted enough—

He had brought her her homework and cookies. Ugh, she couldn’t even be properly mad at him because he had come with good intentions. And peanut butter chocolate chip cookies he had baked—his late uncle had taught him how. Like, who gave him the right to be this giant sad-eyed puppy?

If MJ had one real weakness, it was people being nice to her on a personal level. She still got a warm, fuzzy feeling every time her Mom and Dad remembered that she didn’t like meat on pizza or when they got her book vouchers because they knew that she liked to pick out her own reading material instead of being given books. It was why she appreciated Mike being all brotherly and growly about the mere presence of teenage boys even though MJ could handle herself in most situations.

So she hadn’t left Peter out in the icy street despite not feeling up to having visitors and she tried to return the favour by microwaving hot chocolate.

And he didn’t even demand any explanations from her. No, he just went through the organic chem lab she had missed like it was no big deal that Liz Toomes (soon to be Liz Allan) had been staying over. MJ had no idea how much he had seen earlier on, but who knew Peter could be that opaque when he was radiating helpfulness?

It was probably how he was able to be both Spider-Man and the dork she had been crushing on for months. MJ tried not to think about the awful situations Spider-Man had been in (which was difficult because they aired footage of the plane crash and the ferry incident every now and then on the news). Because she would have to confront the fact that this teenage boy who could barely string a sentence together when he was nervous had been in real mortal danger while she had been hanging out in the school gym with Liz.

She supposed that Ned’s natural chill balanced out the eternal worrying that came with knowing that your best bud was out there risking his neck to protect Queens. MJ had to actively distance the two concepts in her mind—otherwise she would become as paranoid as May Parker.

If reading a mountain of books had taught her anything, it was that the good ones died young—and Peter was, for all his clumsy and somewhat destructive attempts at heroism, good. The stuff that tragedies were made of.

It helped that he wasn’t allowed out in his ridiculous suit yet. But knowing Peter and Peter as Spider-Man, MJ figured that it was only a matter of time before people would report sightings of Queens’ own web-slinging vigilante again.
So MJ told him flat out that he had no self-preservation. And that she didn’t approve of the vigilante gig.

But what she really meant was *You won’t listen to anyone but don’t get killed out there.*

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Define *too stupidly dangerous* . . .

In May’s book, that involved going out in the mask as Spider-Man. But he had been cautious—more cautious now about the people around him on the street. It helped that he seemed to be able to tell when someone was staring at him now—and no, it was not a teenage thing. He could actually sense people behind him before she heard or saw them.

Peter was uncertain if this was another manifestation of his spider powers, but he was not going to know if he didn’t try to use them.

Just for an hour, Peter bargained with his aunt during winter break. An hour at first. Then maybe two hours . . .

May relented after New Year’s.

After swearing that he would not throw himself into danger recklessly, Peter compromised and wore his suit under his clothes and winter-wear. Not having to change out of his clothes outside in January was a plus.

Also, May had thrown up her hands in wordless exasperation when she discovered why he had been losing backpacks. (“Webbing them to dumpsters? Really?”) Ned had been appalled when he described changing in an alleyway. (“That’s kinda gross, dude. Getting bitten by a rat would probably get you a trip to the hospital for shots instead of superpowers.”) MJ had looked like she was torn between laughter and sheer disbelief. (“And you *haven’t* been discovered yet?”)

Muffled up in three layers and sporting a hat with earflaps, Peter was as anonymous as everyone else on the street that chilly evening. During winter recess, he and Ned had rigged up earpieces and synced them to a programme on his laptop along with Karen in the suit so that they could communicate more easily. Everyone who didn’t want to take their gloves off had an earpiece these days anyway.

On the other hand . . . May was checking in every fifteen minutes—hopefully, she would calm down once it was clear that winter in Queens meant that most serious and small-time criminals stayed indoors.

> *Recent studies have shown that crime rates are significantly lower during periods of extremely cold weather,*” Karen said into his ear after he had commented on the lack of criminal activity. Scanner traffic indicated an increase in falls, vehicular accidents and altercations between people and landlords that had failed to rectify heating issues.

> “Yeah, who would want to be out and about now?” Peter was grateful for the extra layers over his suit—it had snowed last night and it promised to snow again later today. “Even if they wanted to steal something, they’d have to haul it through all this slush.”

After canvassing a few blocks with buildings that did not have operational burglar alarm systems, the most danger he came across were some kids playing too close to the side of the road.

> “Don’t run out onto the road without checking for traffic first,” he admonished after pulling one of
them out of the path of a car that could not brake in time. If the children were surprised to see Spider-Man in winter-gear, they did not show it as they solemnly promised to be more careful.

“See, I told you Spider-Man was still around,” the tallest kid said, nudging his closest friend.

“My older brother said you were probably hibernating during winter,” another kid in a Disney-themed beanie hat chimed in.

“Is it too cold for you to swing around outside?” asked the smallest member of the group.

“Uh, I’m always around--just not everywhere at once,” Peter said. “And yeah, it’s kinda cold and slippery on the rooftops--just like on the roads.”

What he did not tell them was his abortive attempt at taking a shortcut over a few blocks approximately half an hour earlier. Webbing and iced-over roof-ledges did not mix--especially when the ice gave way in the middle of his ascent. Now he had Karen double-checking for non-iced surfaces for web attachment points.

He helped an elderly lady carry her groceries back to her flat and was considering pushing his mask up and heading to Mr Delmar’s reopened store (just a few units down from his old store) to pick up a sandwich when he saw a familiar face at the crosswalk ahead of him.

“Karen, is that who I think it is?”

“Scanning for visual confirmation . . . Aaron Davis.”

“He doesn’t live around here . . .” Ducking into the nearest side street, Peter started to climb up the wall and managed to make it to the roof without encountering too many ice patches. From his vantage point, he could see Davis head down the street and turn . . . right into Delmar’s newly renovated store (after the residents of Queens came through when the insurance company procrastinated).

*Maybe his nephew lives in this neighbourhood?* Curious, Peter perched up on the roof and waited until Davies emerged again with a takeout bag in hand before rappelling down so that he could intercept the other man at the next alleyway.

“Hey, I thought Sub Haven was your regular sandwich place?”

“You! You said that white stuff would dissolve in two hours!” Initial shock aside, Aaron Davis did not look pleased to see him at all. “It took almost two days!”

Uh-oh, his last formula was apparently too long lasting . . .

“The ice-cream melted! That was for Miles--I was on the way to play video games with him!”

Now that made Peter feel guilty. “Uh, it wasn’t supposed to--”

But Aaron Davis obviously had a lot to say and some serious steam to let off.

“And no-one bothered to help me get unstuck!” He looked disgusted. “Typical!”

“You could have called emergency services,” Peter offered lamely.

“Existing criminal record,” Davis said, pointing at himself. “Also--black man unable to move from one place--so no, I’m not calling no emergency services!”
MJ’s presentation on racial profiling came to mind as Peter cringed inwardly. “Sorry--the formula needs tweaking--”

“Your whole act needs a do-over,” Davies declared. He looked left and right quickly before ducking into the alleyway. “And we can’t be seen talking like this, okay? People’ll think I’m a snitch.”

“You did tell me about the fe--”

“That did not happen,” Davies gave him a flat yet knowing stare. “Unless sinking the ferry was part of your plans, I’d say that several things did not go right that day. If I tell you anything, how do I know you won’t make an even bigger mess?”

“I’ll owe up to that, but that sorta tech’s unstable and some of it’s still out there,” Peter argued. “And I know the guy that built those weapons is still at large.”

“Don’t look at me--I’ve not been shopping for an alien laser-type thing,” Davis said with a shrug. “And it’s kinda fucked up that I’m your one connection to all things illegal, y’know?”

Oh. So it was that obvious. Mr Toomes was in Rikers, of course, and his aunt would go ballistic if he actually sought out individuals from the criminal underworld.

“No offense--but you haven’t actually shot at me or beat me up, so . . .”

“Ignoring how stereotypical that would be for a moment . . . Why would anyone shoot at some vigilante in spandex tryin’ to stop them and hand them over to the police?” Dropping the sarcasm, Davis looked serious again. “I don’t know anything useful, so you’re out of luck.”

“If you do know something--”

Davies held up one gloved hand. “I’ll stick a note on the roof of Delmar’s, okay? Not gonna risk getting stuck to anything again. Now if you don’t mind, my chopped cheese is getting cold.”

“Oh, Delmar’s does a great chopped cheese.”

“Yeah—and it’s stuff like that that’ll lead you to the part where you talk too much and reveal too much about yourself. That’s my free advice for today. Don’t get used to it.” Davis backed out of the alley and started down the street again.

Peter swung back to his higher vantage point. Halfway down the block, Davis waved at another shorter puffer-coat-clad figure across the road.

“Miles! I got your favourite!”

That must be the nephew, Peter thought, fond nostalgia washing over him again as he watched them head off. Going to Delmar’s for hot sandwiches was a thing that he and Ben did before and sometimes after going to see the Mets--they had a great season in 2015.

The memories were not the regret-tinged reminders of what-could-have-been. It was a start though.

“Karen, put me through to May please.”

“Connecting to May Parker . . .”

“Peter?” May sounded less worried than she had an hour ago, so that was something. “That was a good thing you did back there with those kids. Are you coming back?”
“Yeah, you want anything from Delmar’s?”

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Ned discovered that Spider-Man was back because he had carefully programmed notifications to track any news related to Queens’ costumed crime-fighter, aka his best friend. He had set them up approximately around the time of the ferry incident--so sue him, he was worried.

Some kids had posted a video talking about how they had just met Spider-Man. Ned was pretty good at figuring out if the reports were true or not simply because it was Peter behind that mask and from what the kids said, it sounded like him.

Ned: Dude, your aunt let you go out as Spider-Man?

Peter: Just for a while

Peter: Not much going on tho

Ned: I’m still available if you need any help

Hint, hint. Ned was just a little disappointed that Peter had not told him that he was back as Spider-Man. But he didn’t want to come off as a Spider-groupie--

Okay, that sounded wrong. But he was The Guy in the Chair--currently reduced to finding out his best friend’s return to vigilantism via the internet.

So yeah, he was kinda sad, but it was the closest he would come to something much, much larger than himself. Unless future!Ned built a start-up to rival Google--but he wasn’t going to wait that long.

(“I’m not an Avenger, Ned. There’s nothing glamorous about this.”)

But it wasn’t about the non-existent glamor and zero perks of being a street level vigilante. It wasn’t even about getting attention from girls (or guys). The world had changed so much in the past ten years and Ned could not quite define the feeling properly, but it was probably the sort of time that the characters in Star Wars were living through. And Peter might actually stand a chance at making a difference as Spider-Man.

(“A pivotal point or crux,” MJ would say later.)

Also, he’d like very much for Peter to survive. As much as Ned admired Peter, he was still kinda green at the whole superhero thing--and it showed. (When he and May reviewed the footage of the night they had supposedly gone to Liz’s party via Karen’s helpful recordings, Ned had felt almost as horrified as May.) He knew that Peter was not telling him a whole lot about what happened on the night of the dance, but something in that unrecorded interval had definitely change his friend.

He was a lot more wary on the way to school and back (more than the average kid from Queens that liked to keep their phones and wallets) than before. He had even startled at a car engine backfiring the other day.

There was no denying it--there had been real danger and Peter needed someone to watch his back.

So Ned texted the one other person who might understand just a little. Even though they weren’t supposed to do that over the phone.
Ned: He’s back out there again

He would just couch it all in ambiguous terms—he could be careful too.

MJ: You knew it was coming

MJ was quick on the uptake—she knew immediately just who it was and exactly what he was talking about.

MJ: I thought you two had an arrangement?

Well, Ned had thought so too . . . But Ned did not want to come off as whiny or insecure about it. MJ would tell him if he was being whiny.

Ned: He said there wasn’t much going on

MJ: Call him out on his bullshit

Ned: There’s only so many times I can tell him that he almost died before I sound like my mom

Ned: Also I think he knows it’s dangerous but he’s too worried about getting other people involved

Anyone who saw their conversation would think that they were talking about their mutual friend who was some sort of drug dealer or similar.

MJ: Okay here’s what we’ll do

It was totally not a coincidence that MJ joined Ned and Peter on the way out of school the next day.

“All set for the bake sale?” MJ asked casually.

“Yeah, Betty only reminded us three times today,” Peter said.

“Four times—just got another message.” Ned waved his phone.

“Welp, time to get cracking on those cookies.”

“My Mom’s only back after seven, so I can help with the cookies before going back to help her with the cake,” Ned offered.

“I’ll be the taste-tester.” MJ smiled blandly when Peter looked over at her. “We need some quality control after all.”

And such was the force of MJ’s personality that Peter found himself at the bodega with Ned and MJ in tow to pick up ingredients.

Ned wound up being the one helping Peter to press the cookie dough balls down on the baking sheets while MJ called out encouragement from the other side of the counter. She had preheated the oven and was supervising via the group chat (because while Betty was good at organising people, she tended to be a little vague on the details of exactly what needed doing).

“Okay, Cindy says she’s done with the raspberry muesli bars and is moving onto lemon bars . . .” MJ was keeping a running commentary going as she made checks against her list. “Sally says the second batch of cinnamon buns are proving—whatever that means in real life—and Abe has fried two dozen vegetarian samosas with the help of his uncle. Flash—or Flash’s housekeeper—has the cupcakes out of the oven and presumably will ice them afterwards . . .”
“I’m hungry already,” Ned groaned theatrically. “Can we eat the spares?”

Because MJ had taken quality control very seriously, there was a tray where cookies that might be a little too brown or misshapen were consigned.

“No eating of the spares until we’ve got everything cooled and packed,” MJ instructed.

“You could help fill the trays,” Peter said from where he was mixing up another batch of dough. Meta-human resilience meant that while normal teenagers might be exhausted from making three large batches of cookies, Peter was just a little more red in the face after all that exertion.

“I’m making the little signs.” MJ waved some of the small placards for labelling the bakes. “And fanning these nice hot cookies to cool them. Are those the peanut butter chocolate chip ones you’re making now?”

MJ did help with the packing of the cookies into their little bags afterwards.

By the end of it all, Ned was pooped and was seriously considering lying down on the floor. But MJ nudged him when Peter started looking restively at his bedroom where the suit presumably was.

“Uh, are you going out on patrol again today?” Ned asked, trying to keep it cool.

Peter looked up from his phone. “Yeah, just checking in with May that we didn’t burn down the kitchen. I’ll head out in a bit.”

“I can man the comms,” Ned volunteered. “Just let me get my laptop started . . .”

“It’s only for an hour or two,” Peter protested. But he suddenly narrowed his eyes because Ned had come fully prepared with his stereo headphones (with the microphone attachment).

“I’m just here for the cookies,” MJ said when Peter turned to look at her suspiciously. She had a very convincing nonchalant face, Ned had to give her that. “But if you’re going to fall flat on your face after slipping in a puddle, I’m down to watch that too.”

“Did you just come here for that?” Peter sighed and turned to his bedroom. “You know what, just one evening of this and you’ll be bored, okay?”

“Already kinda bored,” MJ called as he shut the door behind him.

Ned tsked at her as she pouted, obviously just a little disappointed that she couldn’t see anything. MJ rolled her eyes at him and wandered off to poke at Peter’s laptop. She did look surprised when Peter emerged again with his suit on under two layers of clothing.

“What? It’s freezing out there and the heater needs constant recharging if I use it every day.” Peter shrugged on his coat and tied on his scarf. “Spiders don’t have extra adaptations against the cold and mammalian homeostasis only goes so far.”

“Syncing with suit HUD,” Ned said with relish. He had been waiting a while to say that.

“Good evening, Peter. Do you wish to add Michelle Jones to the list of HUD communications users?” Karen’s voice definitely startled MJ when she took over the laptop speakers.

“Suit AI—super cool or what?” Ned was always a fanboy of tech first and foremost. “She’s Karen and she manages the suit functions.”

MJ raised an eyebrow, sardonic expression firmly back in place. “And she knows my name?”
“I got it off Peter’s phone contact list,” Karen said brightly.

“Uh yeah, sure, Karen,” Peter cut in hastily. “Ned’ll walk you through if you’re interested—I’m heading out.”

“Go Team Spider-Man!” Ned cheered, earning him an eye-roll from MJ and a thumbs-up from Peter.

MJ sat herself down next to the Ned the moment Peter left the apartment.

“So you can see what he sees?” she asked as she peered over his shoulder at the screen. The programme’s interface was mirroring the HUD and currently showing a rather vertigo-inducing first-person view of Peter’s head-down descent.

“Essentially.” Ned was proud of his programme—even if he did have to look away for a second because whoa, vertigo. Like really, really proud in a quiet way. The interface was not aesthetically pretty or anything, but they could settle that later. The main thing was that it worked—actually worked outside the confines of the apartment. So they hadn’t tested it outside until today—but it seemed to be functioning just fine. “And we’re also able to track him on this map too.”

“Oh, that’s kinda cool,” MJ admitted grudgingly—before having to look away from a particularly speedy swing from what looked like a ten storey building. Even in the dim light of a winter’s evening, all that swooping and swinging came with the feeling of being on a roller-coaster.

“Heading north along 108th Street—” Peter’s voice came through the speakers slightly muffled, but still audible. “And I can also hear you just fine. Did you just say that this was c—”

“Eyes on the road,” MJ snapped as Peter reached an intersection.

It was already getting pretty dark outside despite it being barely past five in the afternoon. The streets were sparsely populated with people hurrying to get home and get out of the cold. The view from Spider-Man’s perspective was pretty cool though. Who knew that there was so much to see in all those side-streets--

“What’s that over there? That shape in that alley on your right,” MJ clarified.

“Karen, enhance visuals.”

“The heat signature indicates that this is an individual who might require assistance.”

“I’m going to check that out . . .” Peter said as he swung down.

Ned exchanged a look with MJ. It could be a person sleeping rough—not everyone made it into the shelters and some refused to go to shelters in winter.

When Peter got closer, they realised that it was a man sprawled face-down on the wet ground. The snow had melted quite a bit after the slight increase in temperature that afternoon—perhaps the guy had slipped?

Peter turned the guy over and they got an excellent view of his unconscious face. “He’s still breathing, I think--Karen, vital signs?”

“Adult male--mid-forties. His pulse is weak and his body temperature is below the normal average range. He is exhibiting signs of hypothermia.”

“Oh god—they’re on 108th and Roosevelt--nearest hospitals or shelters?” Ned asked, rapidly
searching for first aid for hypothermia. “Firstly: insulate individual from the cold ground--”

“On it--nearest hospital is . . . Queens Presbyterian,” MJ announced from where she was commandeering Peter’s laptop. “Nearest shelter is St. Ignatius on 34th Avenue. Your call.”

Peter lifted the guy off the ground with no visible effort. “Karen, plot the fastest route to Queens Presbyterian--via web all the way if possible! Anything else we can do?”

“Protect person from the wind, especially around the neck and head,” Ned instructed.

“Right, neck and head . . .” They watched as Peter adjusted his grip on the unconscious man so that he could take off his own hat and scarf. “There we go . . .”

“How are you going to get all the way to the hospital carrying him?” MJ asked, voicing the very practical concern that Ned also had about the whole situation.

In the end, Peter wound up strapping the guy to his back with an improvised harness made of webbing before heading off at a speed that would have been unfortunate if his passenger had been conscious. Both MJ and Ned had to look away from the screen every time he made a particularly sharp plunge, but they did not move an inch until Peter reached the emergency department of the hospital and handed hypothermia guy over to the staff.

“Whew!” Ned breathed a sigh of relief when actual trained medical staff took over. “That was intense!”

Had they actually just saved someone? Wow.

“Yeah, the nurses said that hypothermia-related cases go up in January,” Peter said from where he was climbing up on the roof of the building opposite Queen’s Presbyterian. “Luckily we got him to the hospital in--”

“Hospital? Who’s at the hospital?” May Parker had returned, unheard by Ned or MJ due to their preoccupation with monitoring events on the laptop. “Is Peter--”

“He took someone with hypothermia to Queens Presbyterian,” MJ said quickly before May could freak out. Peter assured his aunt that he was fine and on his way back.

“Oh thank goodness . . . I know some people at that hospital--that guy is in pretty good hands.” May looked relieved and took her coat off. “Ned, MJ, did you come all this way to help Peter?”

“We were making cookies earlier,” Ned said at the same time Peter said “They totally did!” through the speakers. The slight blurring of his words indicated that he was swinging at speed again.

“Bake sale tomorrow,” MJ said from behind the pile of treats they had packed. “In aid of the Ridgewood Community Shelter.”

“Right, Peter told me about that--and the sock-collection. We’re going floor by floor for that on Saturday.” May beamed at them and picked up a cookie from the spares tray.

“Except for apartments 417 and 902,” Peter chimed in, “because some people are just cranky.”

“Yeah well, the less said about some people,” May muttered around her mouthful of cookie. “Mmm, this is pretty good--oh, I almost forgot to ask if you two want to come out to dinner with us? We’re dining out today. I was thinking of either Mediterranean or Middle Eastern . . .”
“I don’t want to impose--and my mom is expecting me back for dinner,” MJ declined politely.

“And I gotta go back to help my mom with the pineapple upside-down cake--” Ned looked down at his watch automatically and froze. “Uh-oh, might be a little late . . .”

“Late for what?” Peter popped out of his room, hair dishevelled from the mask he had just taken off. He looked fairly upbeat after his trip across a quarter of the borough.

“For the all-important baking of our centrepiece.” Ned suddenly did not trust that all-too-innocent look on MJ’s face at that moment. “If it’s convenient, I think Peter should send Ned home.”

“No,” Ned declared, “categorically no and no--”

“Come on, don’t tell me you’ve never helped Ned get home?” MJ said to a very bemused Peter. “Ned lives in Woodside, right?”

Oh no, Ned was not about to go down without a fight. “You live in Jackson Heights! We take the same subway line!”

“Whatever you guys decide, make sure you get home safe, okay? No funny stunts and the roads are slippery--stay in touch, Peter. I’ll go get freshened up first . . .” May retreated to her bedroom, but not before calling out to Peter, “That Mediterranean place on 63rd okay with you?”

“Sounds great, May,” Peter agreed, before turning back to Ned and MJ, who might or might not be waging a war of invisible words by glaring at each other. “That’s not my first time carrying someone via web across a few blocks, y’know?”

“Yeah, but I get dizzy in an iMax theatre,” Ned protested. “Since MJ’s so keen on it, you should take her home--”

“Looks like someone doesn’t trust your web-slinging skills--”

Which ended up in both of them wearing webbing harnesses (safety-first) on the roof of Peter’s block somehow, Tupperware boxes of spare cookies in their backpacks and no idea why they had agreed to this. But Ned had this feeling that Peter was wearing a shit-eating grin somewhere behind that mask and was sort of getting his own back.

_Not cool, bro._

“If you drop us, I will come back to haunt you,” MJ threatened from Peter’s left. As she was slightly taller, slinging her right arm over Peter’s shoulder and Ned’s arm was easier. So Ned could totally feel that she was kinda tense as well.

“The webbing’s good for a couple of tonnes at least,” Peter reassured them. “If we fall, we all fall together--”

Yeah, Ned knew that _in theory_, but still--

“Uh, if we all fall, two of us won’t survive.” Ned had to point that out from where he was hanging onto Peter’s right side.

“Gee, thanks, that’s _so_ comforting to know--” MJ’s complaints were cut short as Peter stepped up onto the parapet, easily taking on their combined weight. Ned knew about this too, _in theory_--to actually experience super-strength first-hand was something else altogether as his feet left the ground.
Ned was so glad he had not had any dinner yet as Peter balanced on the ledge.

“We’ll take it slow,” Peter told them as he extended an arm to release a rope of webbing. “May has more faith in my skills now too. More than my driving skills at any rate.”

“May isn’t the one up here,” Ned muttered, his right arm instinctively clamping around Peter’s chest. MJ’s arm was already there and Ned found himself clutching her left hand over the webbing harness.

“Passengers please refrain from grabbing onto my arms—I need those for web-handling, thank you—and we’re good to go—”

The initial fall was mercifully short as Peter swung across the street onto the next block. While the drop had been sorta scary, the upswing actually felt like they were flying. Really flying—no wonder Peter always preferred to go by web.

“That wasn’t so bad, right?” Peter asked as he readied himself for the next swing.

And Ned realised that it wasn’t that scary the second time as they leapt again into the air again.

The slush-covered roads whizzed by underneath them, lit by the glow of street lights. It was definitely chilly, but the wind cooled his overheated cheeks as they swung over another intersection like they weighed nothing at all.

Yes, it was awesome—beyond his wildest dreams awesome (though even in his wildest dreams, he had not been propelled across Queens via Spider-Man’s biceps).

Looking over at MJ, Ned wondered if he had the same wonderstruck look on his face. She looked back at him over Peter’s neck and actually grinned before glaring at him through her wind-blown curls to not say anything.

Ned didn’t say anything because he didn’t want to ruin the moment.

(As moments went, they totally had a moment right there.)

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Chapter End Notes

Just about another part to go to make it a nice rounded eight-parter . . .
The kids are all right

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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So MJ’s plans had not gone the way she had planned them. Like, ever.

She had not planned on being webbed to the back of Peter Parker alongside Ned Leeds. She had never wanted to swing through Queens via web--artificially created auto-drying, auto-assembling polymers that didn’t look like they could hold the weight of three teenagers but somehow did.

But once they were in the air, her threats died in her throat as she was swept up--yeah, really--by the sheer exhilaration of flying through the winter night without a jetpack. While hanging onto Peter Parker, startlingly graceful in the air in a way that he was not on the ground. It was . . . like poetry in motion if poetry involved a trapeze and no safety net. Dangerous, but exhilarating.

Not that she would ever tell him that.

Peter as the vigilante of Queens was also a lot more confident than his student alter-ego. Despite their layers of winter-wear, she and Ned were practically glued to Peter’s back and sides--and he had lifted them up onto the parapet like they were three-year old children before jumping off the roof.

MJ had totally not screamed and buried it in Peter’s shoulder at that point. Because she had not asked if Peter knew the King of Wakanda or inveigled the King of Wakanda’s younger sister Shuri’s contact from him yet. Because she had not even started on her article on the underfunding of the education system yet. Because she really would rise from the grave to haunt people if she perished as a result of this stupid stunt--that may or may not be a result of her own hubris.

(And because she had not told off Peter Parker for making her feel like the lovelorn schoolgirl in a YA library book yet.)

But they did not fall a short way to an untimely end if the wind rippling through her hair was any indication. MJ looked up to see the windows of various buildings speeding past as they swung through the concrete canyons of the borough.

When she had recovered enough to enjoy the ride, she found Ned grinning back at her over Peter’s neck. Yeah, okay, this was cool--don’t tell Peter.

It totally wasn’t romantic either because swinging through Queens on a winter’s evening was not the same as a carriage ride through Central Park--not that MJ wanted a carriage ride through Central Park because the horses weren’t always treated well. And this was better, in a way.

Because while it was one thing to know that Peter was Spider-Man, it was another thing to realise that, yeah, he did this on a daily basis. And yeah, he could totally lift a bus in addition to helping old ladies across the street. This fact was brought back to MJ rather sharply when they reached her street.

So MJ expected Peter to drop her off a short way from her parents’ apartment and give her the “Glad to be of help, citizen!” spiel in his fake-ass-Brooklyn-wannabe-Captain-America voice in case anyone was close enough to listen.

But noooo, he actually swung them onto the roof of her building.
Her feet touching solid concrete after all of *that* broke the spell. “Wait, how am I--”

“Fire escape--no-one’s looking at this side of the building.” Dammit, he was right and MJ did not know whether to give him props for being competent or feel weirded out that he had scoped out her building to find the fire escape.

Then Peter just casually gripped the webbing with one hand and the strands that could allegedly hold several tonnes shredded like cotton candy to release her.

And he watched as she made her way down the fire escape too, obviously keeping his word to his aunt to see them home safe. Ugh--because on one hand, MJ did not need some super-powered guy to see her home and on the other hand, Peter had just managed to ruin her for any and all other future car rides home by potential dates. She gave him the one-finger salute in place of a wave before ducking indoors because the whole evening had given her *feelings* she was ill-prepared to deal with.

Back in the relative safety of her bedroom, she turned to watch as he swung off with Ned. She could not believe that she was hyped-up over Spider-Man and his shenanigans--and she had become an accessory to his (illegal) vigilantism as well. Her brain was still trying to catch up with the fact that Peter Parker had essentially carried her and Ned home. And she had *let* him.

Now MJ was not the type of girl to swoon--“oh Spider-Man, you’re so strong!”--but she would bet *money* that Ned’s inner fanboy was a swooner.

So she texted Ned as soon as she could take her gloves off.

*MJ: I dare you to kiss him goodbye*

She got a reply a few minutes later.

*Ned: Too late*

*Ned: And it’s not like I can use my phone while dangling over 34th Street*

*MJ: If you ever plan to lay one on him, tell me so that I can get my phone ready*

*Ned: I’ll give you an extra slice of cake if you do it the next time he brings you home by web*

Leeds was a sassy one when you got him going. She doubted that Ned had kissed anyone in the romantic more-than-just-a-crush sense though--which was a shame because he was such a sweet and kind soul under all that nerdery. (Outside the odd dare or two perhaps--he did have a large family and probably a larger circle of friends than she did.)

Which meant that both of them, crushing over Peter Parker, had probably not kissed anyone other than That One Time in Seventh Grade That Was A Dare. And never in the I-wanna-engage-in-a-meaningful-relationship sort of way.

Holy crap--the feelings were back.

*MJ: Who says there’ll be a next time?*

She remembered to sneak out to open and close the main door so that her parents would think that she had just got home. MJ did not look at her messages again until after dinner to avoid thinking about the whole affair, but her parents noticed though.

“You looked a little . . . warmer than usual,” her Mom commented as they tucked in.
“A little more sparkle in your eyes since Liz left,” her Dad said knowingly. “I also saw another box of those cookies.”

“What does that mean?” Kendra demanded to know.

“Nothing important,” MJ mumbled into her plate and tried to ignore The Look that her parents gave each other. If they were gearing up to give her another version of The Talk, she might just act like the teenager she was and scream.

Because MJ might be aloof, standoffish and above most teenage things, there was only one way to respond when parents were trying to lecture you about safe sex. She supposed that she was lucky her parents did not believe in preaching abstinence--but they were both lecturers at the local community college and supported Planned Parenthood, so that was pretty unlikely.

She thought she was safe as dinner passed without any other mention of her or her presumptive relationships. Her parents offered to pitch in for the bake sale. With some melted butter, walnuts and store-bought brownie mix, they had pans of brownies in the oven within half an hour.

MJ was rather impressed by her parents’ last-minute inventiveness. So she was a little caught off guard when her Mom came by her room afterwards. (To be fair, she had read Ned’s *Projecting much?* message and had been stymied because she had no witty retort for that.)

“Now, sweetie, I’m not going to judge you or anything,” her Mom began in a placating fashion.

“Moomom,” MJ groaned into her mathematics textbook. “I’m not in a relationship and I’m not having sex--with a guy or a girl!”

“Yes, we know you’ve read up on everything--just thought you might want to consider some things . . .” Her Mom placed a pamphlet on the edge of her desk before retreating. “Be safe!”

MJ squinted at the pamphlet after her mother had closed the door. It was about HPV vaccinations. Like any well-read student of biology who wanted to avoid cancer caused by viral infections, MJ knew that preventative vaccinations were available and HPV vaccinations were usually administered before the age of seventeen.

She tucked away the pamphlet thoughtfully. That was something to consider. She’d definitely have to get vaccinated before college, but it all led back to sex--as in *her* having sex. Which was a thing that she had thought about briefly in abstract but had never actually applied to herself.

Maybe later. She could get vaccinated and think about that sort of stuff later. Because she could barely even sort out her shit concerning one Peter Parker--she was definitely not ready for the whole sex thing, no matter how many books she had read and no matter what the surveys said about teenagers.

MJ had successfully shoved aside all of those thoughts by the time she headed to school with her brownies the next day. She even managed a cordial nod at Ned in the hallway, balancing his precious cargo of cake, as though the two of them had not been swinging through the streets with Spider-Man the night before.

“Hey, watch it!” Ned stumbled a little as he was jostled from behind by a rowdy group of juniors.

“What a bunch of assholes!” MJ snapped as she reached out to stabilise the cardboard containers Ned was trying to balance for dear life. She was a fraction too late to catch both boxes but suddenly, another hand reached out--
“Close one,” Peter said, snagging the toppled cake box in mid-air. “Losing this would be a total disaster.”

“Whew--my mom and I worked hard on those!” Ned exclaimed.

“Not a caramelised pineapple out of place,” Peter reported after checking the contents.

“Great--you’re just in time.” Betty Brant bustled up with the others--wearing expressions ranging from I’m-gonna-run-if-she-is-going-to-film-this and I-haven’t-had-enough-coffee-to-deal-with-this-yet--in tow. “We can get a few publicity shots of the bakes for the mid-morning update.”

MJ had her brief from Liz: Keep Betty on track--she meant well but sometimes could not resist whipping out a microphone or video camera for another story. It only required a little prodding from MJ but Betty soon had everything set up on their officially allocated cafeteria tables near the main doorway to her liking. MJ had to give her points for effort--she had even brought nice tablecloths and a couple of those fancy cake stands.

While Betty dictated to her cameraperson of the day, MJ got out her schedule and disseminated the shift timings to the volunteers.

“I sorted this out according to your timetables, so Elishya, you’re with Charles for first break, Cindy with Abe for the second, Ned and Peter, you’re third . . .” MJ pulled out her labels and signs. “Flash, you’re with me for first lunch. Sally and Betty, you’re on the second lunch period, Halimah and Charles--if anything’s left, you’re the after school shift. Someone make sure I got these halal, kosher, gluten-free, nut-free and vegan labels correct--”

“What? During lunch?” Flash whined.

“Yeah, got a problem with that? You volunteered after all.” MJ shot him a glare and he subsided.

“That’s a wrap,” Betty declared. “Is that the schedule? Thanks, Michelle. Everyone remember to sell as much as you can--it’s for charity.”

“Don’t forget to target the teachers,” MJ put in. “They’re most vulnerable to the lure of sugar after longer stretches of classes.”

In fact, most people were lured in mainly because a) it was January and they were rebounding from the surfeit of goodies over the holidays and b) any excuse to consume sugar, chocolate and fried treats for a good cause. They were out of samosas and cozonac by lunch time and MJ had to bring out the second of Ned’s cakes and the reserves of cookies and brownies for the first lunch period.

MJ kept an eye on their total earnings and on Flash, who had managed to persuade quite a few of his rich jerk pals to buy stuff when he wasn’t complaining about getting the lunch shift. They had plenty of extra pocket money, so MJ had no qualms about charging them four dollars for a cupcake.

“Don’t be so surprised,” she said to Flash when Cindy and Abe came over to pass them lunch trays. “We’re very organised--and you’re not missing lunch, so go with it.”

Flash, not complaining for once, looked thoughtful as he started on his spaghetti.

Until Peter stopped by and bought the last slice of pineapple upside-down cake.

MJ did not refuse his contribution though. “You know Ned shares his cake with you all the time, right?”
“It’s the thought that counts—and it’s for the shelter after all,” Peter said with a smile that should not have been as boyishly charming as it was but it just was.

“I think Parker has a crush on you,” Flash said in a sing-song voice as he watched Peter head back to Ned.

“Shut it, Eugene.” But MJ’s heart wasn’t in it and Flash could tell.

“Which is odd because I could have sworn that he and Ned had the bromance of the century going-”

“The next thing out of your mouth had better not be homophobic, or else, so help me, I will find a way to gut you with a plastic cake server,” MJ warned him.

“I was going to say that bisexuals and pansexuals exist,” Flash said, holding up his hands in mock surrender. The pink plastic cake server was within range of her grasp after all. “It’s the twenty-first century after all. You’re a little too cool for Parker though.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere, Eugene,” MJ retorted. It was just her luck that she had known him in middle school, but he had not been such a massive jerk back then.

“Just sayin’,” Flash continued in his annoyingly condescending I-am-so-doing-you-a-favour way, “if you want to try something different, there are possibly some junior guys or girls I could hook you up with.”

“Eugene, do I look like I have taken leave of my senses?”

Ew—MJ wanted to throw up at the mere thought of Flash’s friends showing any interest in her general direction. The only senior she had remoted even wanted looking her way had been Liz. She was also strongly reminded of why she refused to subscribe to hook-up culture—why should teenagers be subjected to all this pressure to find a girl/boyfriend/SO?

“Did those jerks buy cake because you promised to put in a word--“

“No--geez, give me some credit here,” Flash protested. “And give yourself some too--someone did say you were cute—*in an intimidating fashion* after your campaign for more accessible gender-neutral bathrooms—and that’s an actual quote. But I guess I’ll have to tell them that you’re not interested.”

“Yeah--and tell them to not use you as an intermediary,” MJ huffed. “Immediate blacklisting.”

“Way to harsh on my attempt at being a friend, MJ.”

“It’s Michelle to you, Eugene.” MJ glared at him and hoped fervently that his hair gel would catch fire in when they used the Bunsen burners in chemistry lab later. “Just because we knew each other in middle school doesn’t mean that--”

“Ahh, reminiscing about middle school?” Mr Harrington saved Flash from MJ’s fury by wandering up to inspect the bakes. “Nothing like some good old fashioned nostalgia--why I was married to--”

He caught sight of both Flash and MJ’s faces and stopped himself. “Um, right, what’s good?”

“These cupcakes--made with love, right, Eugene?” MJ said, plastering a wide smile on her face. The one person she did know from his personal life was Mrs Alvarez, his housekeeper and the possibly the nicest adult he had spent most of his formative years around. Which was why it was pretty awful to see how Flash had turned out in school.
“Yeah,” Flash muttered while MJ successfully sold overpriced cake to Mr Harrington.

“Uh, I did help,” Flash said in a small voice after Mr Harrington had left, munching on his cupcake.

“I appreciate that a lot more than you helping your allegedly shy friend,” MJ said, subsiding at last.

“So leave it at that before I get the urge to murder you again and make Mrs Alvarez sad.”

Flash kept a lid on it for the rest of their shift. He did give her a knowing look when Peter produced the cake to share with her and Ned prior to AcaDec practice that afternoon, but said nothing.

MJ ate her feelings along with pineapple upside-down cake. At least the cake was tasty.

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So Peter had not been all that pleased at first when Ned and MJ had invited themselves onto his patrol. Being Spider-Man was more dangerous now that he had attracted all the wrong sorts of attention.

But Ned had been the one to write the code for the suit HUD syncing programme (they needed a better name for that) and MJ had always been there to kick his ass whenever he got sloppy with his homework. Manning the comms indoors meant that they were in no more danger than May was. Other than the danger of aiding and abetting Spider-Man, but not directly in harm’s way.

It was . . . reassuring to know that his friends had his back. They had faced down an emergency together without panicking--which Peter already knew Ned was capable of after Homecoming, so he really should give him some credit.

It was just that they were so important to him that he was being . . . overprotective. He did not need one of Ms Potts’ therapists to know that his history of losing people was probably spilling over into his relationships. Such as they were.

Peter was still relieved when they got hypothermia guy to the hospital and nothing had gone wrong--Ned, MJ and May were still there when he got back.

So he had been showing off when he had taken them home by web, but it had been coupled with the honest desire to be nice to his friends. He didn’t have a car or even a junior driver’s license yet, but he could still get them home safely on a winter night.

MJ might kick him for thinking that she needed protection on the way back home but it was a risk he was willing to take.

Also, Peter had better-than-average peripheral vision. He could see the expressions on Ned and MJ’s faces while they swung through the street. And he would be lying if he claimed that he hadn’t liked what he had seen. He had flexed a little more than necessary to break the webbing, but he was a teenager after all--he was never going to be able to show off like that in gym class.

He had also been steadfastly ignoring Karen, who had been giving all kinds of helpful input about their accelerated heart rates. Oh, and suggesting that he kiss them when he dropped them off at their respective apartment blocks.

Peter did not have the time or space to explain to Karen that kissing people when they weren’t in that sort of relationship might seem a bit gross and presumptuous.

“But you like them, Peter,” Karen pointed out. He was currently perched on the roof above a busy intersection, taking a short break from patrolling and somehow, they had wound up talking about
other things after stopping a cyclist from careening into a lamppost due to the worn-out brake-pads that they had forgotten to replace.

It was the weekend, so Ned and MJ had their own family commitments. Peter was grateful that they would drop everything to come over and help, but he wanted them to have all the time with their families that they deserved. May was currently manning the comms in between doing the weekly laundry and vacuuming. She had calmed down a little more now that super-powered criminals were not popping out of the woodwork.

May and Karen did have certain things in common though. Especially where his personal life was concerned.

“Do you think it is wrong to like more than one person?”

“Uh no, but there’s still the whole reciprocity thing,” Peter qualified. “It might have been okay to kiss Liz if she wanted to at the Homecoming dance because she knew that I liked her . . .”

And maybe she might have liked him enough for that too, but that relationship was long past any hope of resurrection.

“Liz is in Oregon now,” Karen stated. For an AI, she did give the impression that she was a little put out at missing Homecoming. “Do you miss her?”

“A little, guess, but I respect her need for privacy.” The press coverage had been merciless, so he couldn’t blame her family for moving away.

“Ned and MJ live in Queens.” As if it was that easy.

“Yeah—and so do a lot of other people. I’m not sure if I should be complicating things with them like that,” Peter sighed. “They’re my friends and I like them as my friends first.”

“You don’t wish to forgo your current friendships?” Karen asked.

They were the only significant ones he had at the moment. Peter had not been close enough to anyone in grade school or middle school to maintain contact with them. He didn’t have a massive extended family like Ned had—or if he did, they weren’t the sort to send greeting cards with five dollar bills inside.

“It’s not like I can date people as Spider-Man anyway. I’d have to date them as Peter Parker. Which might not work out that well when I actually have to be Spider-Man.”

He mimicked the likely conversations he would have to have to explain why he was late for dates and everything: “Uh, I had to work overtime at the internship. Sorry I missed the bus! This bruise? I tripped and fell down the stairs at school! Was it your birthday—sorry I forgot!”

Ugh, he sounded like a terrible date even to himself.

“I know Ned and MJ’s birthdays—I could remind you.”

“Karen, have you been stalking them online?” Peter asked, suddenly terrified of what he had unleashed.

“The information was available on the internet. I am programmed to screen all your close friends and acquaintances.”
Peter wanted to rub his temples because he could feel the beginnings of a headache coming on. Also, he would have to try to write a protocol for Karen about respecting privacy and boundaries. And maybe not engage in cyber-stalking and data-gathering—all those data-mining algorithms were probably a bad influence.

“It’s too dangerous . . . It’s already too dangerous for them, I mean, as associates of Spider-Man.” If anyone that wished him harm found about May, Ned and MJ . . . he shuddered to think about that scenario. It was bad enough that Adrian Toomes knew his real identity, but Peter couldn’t exactly waltz into Rikers to ask him why he had not let the cat out of the bag yet.

There was a pause as Karen presumably digested all of that digitally.

“You should be with the people that make you happy, Peter.”

“I am.” And when he said it, Peter realised that he was okay with his friends . . . just being his friends. Going too fast was probably why he and Liz had tanked faster than the Hindenburg. (All he had to do was make sure that MJ’s parents were not villains—he was pretty sure that Ned’s parents were not plotting anything more nefarious than trying to get their children to eat more vegetables.)

“I’m lucky to have them as friends,” he told May when they were in the large indoor parking lot at The Home Depot and taking a short break from driving practice. His aunt had asked him casually about Ned and MJ. Which was not surprising given the number of times she had come back to find the apartment converted into Spidey HQ (strewn liberally with homework and snacks) in the past month. “I wouldn’t mind if they wanted to hang out together when I’m not being Spider-Man either.”

“You already hang out together at school. And our apartment is some kind of study hall already,” May said. “Not that I mind, because you’ll give some poor librarian a heart-attack if you ever wander up the walls and onto the ceiling of the library while pondering how to improve your formula for web fluid.”

“But my grades are definitely improving,” Peter pointed out.

“Uh-huh—something to do with the fact that Ned and MJ are also top of the class for Computer Science, Biology, Maths, Literature and Spanish, I’ll bet. You sure know how to pick ‘em.”

Peter was certain that his ears were glowing in the dim interior of the car. His friends were smart and he was kinda proud of them. Okay, he was very proud of them—Ned was also the current Robot Demolition Derby Champion and MJ wrote impassioned essays for the school newspaper and campaigned for more accessible gender-neutral bathrooms.

“I’m not even going to get through Drivers’ Ed at this rate,” Peter confessed. He was not a competitive student most of the time, but Flash Thompson having the edge on him in this one particular area was just a little grating.

“You need practice. Especially with parking—you almost took the paint off that sedan just now.”

“I think I’m going to have to resign myself to the fact that I’m a terrible parker,” Peter said, causing the both of them to crack up after a beat.

“Okay, maybe we’ll tackle parking again next time,” May promised when they recovered. “Let’s do one more round to practice your steering and braking . . .”
Being the *Guy in the Chair* had been pretty great as usual. But swinging through Queens by webbing had been better than both Disneyland and the Star Wars Experience combined.

Once the fear of falling to an untimely end had passed, Ned was properly ready to soak in the exhilaration. He had been right—this was the coolest thing that would ever happen to him.

It ended a little too soon on the roof of his building. But Ned was still impressed when Peter replicated his earlier casual snapping of the webbing harness—they needed to figure out the maximum load one day but for now, he would settle for *yeah that was badass*—both the invention of web fluid and Spidey-strength.

“That was awesome,” he exclaimed and raised his hand automatically to start The Handshake. Ned could not see Peter’s face because of the mask, but he looked as though he was about to say something before thinking better of it.

And Ned had thought that they were not going to do The Handshake after all and his brain had gone . . . elsewhere for about two seconds as the moment stretched out--

But reality asserted itself and they did a sort of fist-bump thing because it wouldn’t do for anyone to see that level of familiarity between the two of them.

“Yeah,” Peter said. “Anytime.”

And Ned had to hurry back to help his mom with the cake he was bringing to school, so he was safe-or so he thought until MJ texted him.

*Whoa, projecting much?* he sent back.

Ned supposed that he got the last word in that day. They were busy with classes, PE and their shift at the bake sale the next day, so he barely had any time to dwell on The Thing.

The Thing. Which had gained a life of its own and was determined to be referred to with capital letters. Ned would have ignored it, but The Thing was conspiring with fate or some outside forces to make it impossible to ignore.

Example: Peter had bought the last slice of upside-down cake for their after-school before-AcaDec practice snack.

That was so sweet that Ned was not surprised to see MJ trying to hide how touched she was by saying, “Ned helped to make it—he deserves it more.”

“Yeah, but you both helped—with the cookies.”

They both understood that what Peter really meant. *What a sap. But an adorable one.*

Ned snuck a look at MJ, who appeared irritated for a moment but did not refuse the cake. She was a bit more brusque than usual that day at practice, so she might be experiencing a similar mix of conflicting emotions.

MJ did not say no to another study session at Spidey HQ though. She did check in with her family if she was needed, but apparently her younger sister Kendra’s class had an excursion that afternoon. Ernie was at a friend’s place playing video games and probably getting up to less dangerous things (and less illegal) than his older brother.

Because the one thing more attractive than Peter Parker was Peter Parker trying to do good. That
afternoon, Spider-Man saved an elderly lady from being run over by a speeding car and got Timmy the cat plus Timmy’s human Elaine down from the eighth floor fire escape so that they could be reunited with their family.

Ned and MJ got a screen-shot of the license plate off the video feed so that they could drop off an anonymous tip about the irresponsible driver later, freeing up Peter to make sure that Mrs Simpkins was all right instead of haring off after a speeding car. Fortunately Timmy did not scratch and Elaine had been quite calm throughout it all— in stark contrast to her mother and the extremely guilt-stricken babysitter.

It sort of became their routine every other day. Get out of school, grab snacks, set-up at Peter’s, sync with the HUD and start monitoring.

In between critiquing his quip game (“You’re trying too hard most of the time”), MJ worked out a patrol pattern for Spider-Man that could be reversed to maximise coverage and unpredictability. Ned continued to upgrade the HUD sync programme and set up various search algorithms to look out for any signs of alien tech or modified weaponry. Peter dictated modifications to his web fluid formula during lull periods. They were from a science and tech-focused school after all— playing to their strengths rather than trying to infiltrate the criminal underworld was probably the most realistic option for a bunch of teenagers.

Ned and MJ had both vetoed contacting Aaron Davies again directly. Peter did not even mention it to his aunt.

While waiting for Peter to get back from patrol after returning a kid that had been separated from their school excursion bus group by accident, Ned and MJ got on with reviewing the Virtual Wall of Scant Evidence while a physics textbook dangled from the bedroom doorframe via a strand of webbing—they were also testing how long the latest batch of web fluid would last.

So how would a guy go about selling illegal weapons? Illegal weapons manufacturers did not advertise the normal way . . . or did they?


“Yeah, that does exist, but the way those guys operated . . . I don’t think they’re into that sort of thing,” Ned said distractedly as he tapped in another line of code into SpideySync—their current working name for the programme.

“I can’t believe Adrian Toomes thought hawking it on the street was a good idea—geez, it’s not like Liz didn’t go to school around here once,” MJ muttered, obviously appalled by the lack of logic displayed by adults that allegedly had their kids’ best interests at heart.

“This isn’t Adrian Toomes we’re looking for though. So they might have changed tactics.”

“But it should be someone Adrian Toomes associates with . . .” MJ paused in her poking of the webbed up textbook. “Associated with . . . All those news articles—”

Ned watched with interest as MJ scrambled to wake her laptop and popped open a particular folder. “Toomes said that it was all because the DODC had muscled in on a contract that his salvage company already had . . .”

“His salvage company! It’s registered!” Ned caught on immediately and started searching.

“Chances are, that guy they found webbed to the bus was also working for him,” MJ added. “They didn’t reveal much about him to the press though.”
“But the company--it should have a physical address . . .”

In fact, there was an address to a salvage yard that was *not* the one that the DODC had cordoned off and searched thoroughly.

“This address might be out of date though . . .” Ned was saved from the decision to tell Peter about this because SpideySync was working just fine and he had heard most of their conversation.

“What’s the address?”

Peter was more than excited and it showed.

“Parker, don’t rush into this,” Michelle started to caution him.

“It’s just a stop on the way back--”

In the end, they had Peter promise to use his suit’s capabilities to scope out the old salvage yard first before going in.

There were no signs of life in the smallish fenced-off plot of land and the two dilapidated buildings that made up Toomes’ early operations. In fact there was precious little left except dust and a few odds and ends from what Ned could see via SpideySync as Peter broke into the abandoned office via the window--metal grills were clearly no obstacle.

“Well, at least--wait, in that corner!” Ned leaned in closer, his nose almost touching the screen as he peered into the dim interior.

“Right! Jackpot!” Peter exclaimed as he unearthed a dust-covered rectangular plastic casing.

MJ was also squinting at the screen, trying to make out what he had found. “A CPU?”

“A really old one--possibly over ten years old.”

“If Toomes’ company joined the computer revolution back then--”

“Then they might have records on this thing!” Peter wasted no time in webbing up the CPU and slinging it onto his back.

“Can you guys get into that old CPU?” MJ asked Ned. And she was not sceptical this time, just curious.

Ned did not want to brag, but he was pretty good with computers and Peter’s hobby was upcycling second-hand tech. “We’ve got some experience fiddling around with technology--”

“And a lot of nerdiness and grit. Thought mainly nerdiness.”

“Your quip game is still weak, Parker.” But MJ still helped them dust off the CPU that Peter brought back and passed them the required components when they opened it up.

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MJ thought that hanging out with Peter and Ned would make it easier. She could indulge in all the Parker-stalking while engaging in activities that no teenager should be getting up to. But not the ones that her parents would ever ask her about.

She could still answer “no” honestly if they asked her about drinking, drugs and sex. Because there
was no drinking, drugs or sex involved. Unless drinking May Parker’s cocoa and Ned’s mom’s lemonade counted. And vigilantism could be a drug.

It totally could be in Peter’s case. He seemed to take the whole missing alien tech weapons thing personally . . .

What totally threw MJ off was how well she and Ned got along. There might have been some initial jealousy on both their parts, but after a month or so, MJ was trading barbs on a friendly basis with Ned and worrying about Peter in general. Ned was the Best Friend and MJ knew that he had Peter’s welfare at heart despite his goofy exterior.

And she liked how competent Ned was when he was elbows-deep inside the guts of the old CPU Peter had dug up or just fiddling around with code. MJ realised that she had a competence kink and an acknowledgement kink somewhere around the time she passed Ned the Phillips-head screw driver and he acknowledged her help with a nod. Zero commentary about how she knew which tool was what and all that. Ned just accepted that she knew stuff and he knew how to write code that made a homemade robot drone smash into another robot drone in mid-air.

So the Robotics Club really got into demolition derbies as a sport. And Ned was determined to make his mark as a senior by eventually organising a school-wide competition for drone fights. Or a city-wide one if he could get his other friends involved. MJ had to admire the guy for his vision. And his lack of sexist commentary regarding the girls in his club. If he had any preconceived notions about gender roles, two older sisters and a mother that took no shit was probably responsible for ridding him of them.

It probably gave him special powers too–like the ability to not to say certain things like “whoa PMS much” (no thank you very much, Eugene) and when to offer up chocolate without any questions asked when MJ was really craving some. Peter, despite his super spider senses, was less likely to pick up on her moods when she was withdrawing because of the cramps or her hormones fluctuating. Not without a poke from Ned or the unsubtle throat-clearing that made her remember that these guys actually discussed Peter’s extracurricular superheroeics publicly in P.E. class.

Yeah, they were totally unsubtle and not super interested in literature, but MJ had to admit that they were growing on her. MJ was not the type to reward basic decency but she had eventually come to terms with the fact that Peter and Ned had actually put their lives on the line last year. So not just basic decency.

It was hard to wrap her head around it when Ned was right there passing her the chips while doing homework. While he was top of the class at computing and physics, Ned never rejected any help with chemistry or literature homework. He was just an all-round chill and down-to-earth guy with all the teenage enthusiasm that MJ generally would not show to the world.

Like that time they were playing with the puppies. Or when they swung across the borough while strapped to Peter together. Or when she announced the totals for the bake sale. It was kinda refreshing really.

They even worked well together. Case in point: right this moment as she and Ned hefted a huge cardboard box of sanitary hygiene products between them. Peter was acting like he was staggering under the weight of three boxes of donated socks behind them. Ned and MJ helped by calling out unnecessary instructions about where the steps and doors were as they wrangled their loads into the shelter’s entrance.

They had loaded their supplies into Flash’s car while the others had piled into the convey that included Charles’ uncle, Betty’s mom and May Parker on Saturday morning after gathering all the
donated and bought items at school. Flash had newish car—nothing as expensive as the original model, but it did have more space to carry more stuff. They did not say anything about the car that Spider-Man had trashed because they heard that Mr Thompson had given him enough grief about it.

Flash had been pretty good about it all despite sitting next to boxes of hygiene products on the drive to the shelter. Any awkwardness about the whole situation—with MJ, Ned and Peter squeezed into the backseat with more boxes on their laps—had been diffused when Ned asked Flash if he liked Star Wars.

In the half hour they took to navigate their way to the shelter, Ned had managed to coax Flash into admitting that yes, he had watched the movies and yes, he had enjoyed *Rogue One*. And they coaxed him into agreeing that Cassian Andor was pretty hot too.

It turned out that Flash could be okay to hang out with when he was not in front of an audience of other rich jerks. He even drove them right up to the curb to unload in front of the shelter before parking and coming back over to shift the last few items indoors.

All in all, it was what MJ would call a small success. Even Betty did not say a word about wanting a few photos with the shelter staff. High-fives all around before they exited without fuss. They dropped Sally off at the most convenient subway station and the three of them remained squished together in the backseat on the way to lunch, which May Parker firmly insisted on bringing them out for, no arguments.

MJ and Ned both caved because there was no fighting May Parker and Peter’s puppy-dog eyes.

Ned looked at her sideways as Peter’s grin threatened to eclipse the weak February sun.

Yeah, they were totally having a moment. MJ could give him that. The slightest twitch of her lips upwards set Ned off and it was all MJ could do to make up a story about how she had accidentally poked Ned in the side while reaching for her phone. Ned was ticklish, after all.

Ned just gave her a goofy grin. *You’re a sap too.*

*That’s the last time I cover for you, Leeds.*

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Chapter End Notes

The last bit wound up longer than expected.

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