Stetsons and Schoolteachers

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Stetsons and Schoolteachers

by NotEvenCloseToStraight

Summary

Alpha Sheriff Steve Rogers doesn’t know what to think of the new school teacher in his
small town.

Omega Tony Carbonell is a quick witted, sharp tongued, sarcastic Omega with a butt that won’t quit– and a temper that won’t quit either.

Every attempt the Sheriff makes to get close is met with rolled eyes and snarkiness, but finally Tony gives in a little bit and the pair spends a few moments together that leaves the Alpha panting, desperate for more.

But there’s a layer of secrets beneath the Omega’s attitude, and the more Steve pushes, the more Tony pulls away.

When Tony’s past comes back in a terrifying way, Steve learns more about the Omega than he ever thought he would, secrets that make him rage, stories that break his heart, and when Tony is kidnapped, the Sheriff saddles up to bring his Omega home.

But Tony doesn’t consider Wildrock home, and he certainly doesn’t consider Steve his Alpha.

How can the Stetson wearing Sheriff convince the stubborn Schoolteacher that they are meant to be?

NOW WITH A 5000 WORD BONUS CHAPTER FOR CHRISTMAS!!!!

** BONUS VALENTINES DAY CHAPTER ADDED** 2/3/19

Notes

Welcome to the Story! A Stony Western AU featuring Alpha!Sheriff!Steve and Omega!Schoolteacher!Tony with a side order of sass from all our other faves! Saddle up (ha!) for some romance on the western frontier, bonding over barn dances and horse rides, randy times with cowboys, and a healthy dose of feels!
“Mornin’ Sheriff,” the blacksmith stepped away from his forge, wiping his hands on the big apron and grinning broadly at the Alpha standing in his doorway. “Welcome home.”

“Thanks, Happy.” Steve grinned right back, always pleased to see the other Alpha. “How are you? How have things been while I was back East?”

“Slow.” Happy grunted. “I dunno if your deputies are doing a damn good job keeping the riff raff away, or they are doing such a shitty job that the bad guys don’t bother coming around. Maybe it’s the summer heat. Either way? It’s been slow.”

“I don’t have a problem with slow.” Steve raised his eyebrows. “Wildrock could be crime free, and I would gladly hang up my Sheriff’s star and start ranching.”

“You know you wouldn’t hang up that star.” Happy shook his head. “You like how important it makes you look, don’t lie.”

“Yeah, well.” Steve glanced down at the gold star. “I suppose I’m a little attached to it.”

“A little attached.” the Alpha blacksmith snorted. “You’re practically half a man without it. And I’m always happy t’see you, Sheriff, but what’s the real reason for stopping in?”

“Nomad threw a shoe.” Steve headed out the door to check on his horse, and Happy followed behind. “About a mile and a half out from town. I walked him the entire way in, but he needs checked out.”

“That is the dumbest name for a horse I ever heard, but sure I’ll look him over.” Happy started running gentle hands down the gelding’s legs, tsking over the thrown shoe and the state of the hoof. “It only came a off a little, huh?”

“Yep.” Steve ran his fingers through the thick mane, working at a few of the knots. “I pulled the shoe, pulled any nail I could find– he was just starting to limp as we came through town so I don’t think the damage is too much.”

“Don’t worry, I got him.” Happy led the horse over to the stable so he could rest. “Say, Sheriff have you met the new schoolteacher?”

“No.” Steve carried over a bucket of water to fill the trough. “Sam wired to let me know that Ms. Lorraine had to step down, but he didn’t say why. And I heard that we found a replacement teacher for the children, so the schoolhouse will be a stop on my route today. How is she fitting in? The children like her alright?”

“They like him just fine.” Happy corrected. “And by the way? He’s an Omega, just so you’re aware.”

“An Omega?” Steve’s eyebrows nearly flew off his forehead. “Is he mated?”

“Nope. Unbonded.” Happy raised his eyebrows as well. “And decidedly less spinsterish than our last teacher, if you know what I mean. Real easy on the eyes, that one. Young too.”

“Less spinsterish.” Steve repeated. “What is an unbonded Omega of marrying age doing teaching in Wildrock? Most teachers are Beta’s, and usually single. Why is he here?”
“If you can figure out that answer, we’ll all be grateful.” Happy patted Nomad one last time before heading to get his tools to trim down the hoof and recast a shoe. “Your terribly named horse will be ready tomorrow, yeah?”

“Thank you, Happy.” Steve reached to shake his hand. “I’ll buy you dinner at the saloon tomorrow night. We can catch up, yeah?”

“Sure thing, Sheriff.”

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“Welcome home, Sheriff!” A young Omega called to Steve as she and her brother walked down the sidewalk, her cheeks tinting pink when he tipped his hat in her direction. “Happy to see you back!”

“Glad to be back, ma’am.” Steve lifted his hand in a wave to her brother and continued on his way.

“Sheriff!” the shop keep shouted, waving from the door of the mercantile. “Glad to have you home!”

“Thank you!” Steve waved back, sending a smile towards the next person who called hello as well.

He loved Wildrock. Loved the land, the hardworking people, how everyone knew everyone else’s name. There was less than three hundred people in town, close to fifteen hundred if he counted the smaller surrounding communities and life just moved at a different pace here than it did back East.

Slower. Friendlier. Easier.

After the war had torn the states apart, Steve had come West hoping that he would never have to fight again. He had been a good soldier, a Captain even, but taking orders from men who thought a body count determined victory, who didn’t care who was hurt in the process, or whose lives were destroyed as the soldiers came through their towns—

—Steve had had enough of that to make him sick, and the minute the war was over, he had packed up and left, his best friend Bucky coming along with him, both of them looking for a new adventure.

They had found the adventure in Wildrock in the form of stopping a bank robbery in process.

Steve had jumped from Nomad’s back and knocked one of the robbers off his own mount, and Bucky had simply reached up and dragged the other one of his horse to the ground, laying him out with one hard punch.

They had snatched the rifles, aimed them at the other two thieves, and the whole incident had come to a screeching halt.

Only a few months later, Steve had taken over as Sheriff of Wildrock, Bucky as Chief Deputy.

Being Sheriff here meant settling land disputes, hauling the occasional drunk from the saloon, and judging contests at the Harvest Fair. Occasional horse thieves came through and they really got some excitement, but after years of war, he and Bucky were content with the slower life. The could still help people, could still take down bad guys, but now Steve could sleep at night, knowing in his heart that he was doing the right thing and Bucky didn’t have nightmares.

Steve had bought a small piece of land a mile out of town, and Bucky lived in the other bedroom. When they weren’t at the department, they were raising a few crops, a few animals, spending their
evenings watching the sun set.

It was a good life here, maybe a little lonely, maybe a little predictable, but good.

A good, quiet, life.

“Well, well, look who moseyed back into town!” In a decidedly unquiet voice, the proprietor of the town’s saloon leaned across the rail of her porch and looked him over with an interested eye. “How was the city?”

“Crowded.” Steve tipped his head back so he could see her properly. “How are things, Valkyrie?”

“Slooooow.” The beautiful Beta female groaned loudly. “I’m not sure if I’m happy or not that you’ve returned, because the bad guys have learned to stay far away from Wildrock when the Sheriff is in town. There hasn’t been hide nor hair of someone interesting in this place for months, and you’re such a stick in the mud, that now it will really be boring!”

“A stick in the mud? I’m hurt. You don’t think I’m interesting?”

“You’re not hurt.” She denied, flicking a long piece of hair off her shoulder. “And you certainly aren’t interesting. Even though, do you know who is mighty interesting? That new schoolteacher.”

“I’ve heard.” Steve nodded. “An Omega, and according to Happy, decidedly less spinsterish than the last one.”

“Decidedly less spinsterish?” Valkyrie said blankly. “Good Christ, you Alpha’s and the way you talk about Omega’s. It’s so stupid. He’s young and beautiful. Almost ridiculously so.”

“How can someone be ridiculously beautiful?” Steve asked, not bothering to hide his amusement over her choice of words.

“Trust me, Sheriff. When you see him, you will understand what I mean. Once you pick your jaw up off the ground, come tell me what you think about him.”

“Ah. Well, thank you.” Steve changed the subject. “So, your saloon is slow, is it safe to assume that all is well upstairs as well?”

“You would have to ask Natasha.” Valkyrie shrugged. “My business is drink, hers is distraction. I couldn’t tell you how the whores—” Steve cleared his throat loudly. “— how the ladies are doing.” She amended. “But if you come by for food tonight or tomorrow, you can ask. I’ll keep a table for you, I’ll even pay for your meal as a welcome home present. See? Isn’t that nice of me?”

“Thank you ma’am.” Steve tipped his hat and she laughed at him. “I’ll bring the deputies as well. I’m sure if things have been slow they haven’t had reason to come around.”

“Make sure you bring Deputy Wilson.” Valkyrie’s eyes lit. “I’ve been trying to get him in for a drink and a discussion for ages now.”

“Deputy Wilson has a mate.” Steve reminded her. “Having a drink with you—”

“It’s just a drink, Sheriff! You’d think I was trying to corrupt the man!”

“Valkyrie, myself and my Deputies are well aware of how quickly you would corrupt us if you could.” He said dryly, but stepped onto the sidewalk to give her a kiss on the cheek, because despite the attitude and general bickering they tended to do, Valkyrie was easily one of his favorite people.
“Please let Natasha know I’m looking forward to seeing her soon.”

“Will do, Captain-Sheriff-Sir.” Valkyrie tossed him a mock salute. “I want to know what you think about our new school teacher!”

“I’m going to see the school now.” Steve assured her as he headed towards the other end of town, starting to feel vaguely uneasy about the new teacher, and wondering why everyone felt the need to warn him. “I’ll let you know what I think.”

Valkyrie’s laughter could be heard all the way down the street. “Good luck!!”

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Steve had every intention of going to the schoolhouse next, bypassing his office entirely in an effort to meet the school teacher and see what exactly was so interesting about him.

He was on the other side of the street, nearly jogging to get to the schoolhouse, when shouting erupted from the Sheriff’s office and he stopped in his tracks.

What the—

Crossing the street and yanking the door to the station open, Steve walked into the middle of a screaming argument.

Harrison Thompson, an Alpha who owned most of the land around Wildrock, and the office of Mayor, was standing toe to toe with an Omega that was gorgeous enough to make Steve’s steps falter.

Wow.

Steve stopped for a full minute and just stared, unable to take his eyes off the man, his eyes traveling from the unruly, curly hair down lean shoulders and slim hips and long legs and—

“Omega!” Thompson was shouting, and Steve pulled himself out of the day dream and back to the moment. “I own this town! If you think I’m going to let some uptight little prick from the East tell me how to parent my child—!”

“I wouldn’t have to tell you if you had raised him to act like a person and not an animal!” the Omega shouted right back, and just as Steve was moving forward to separate them, to drag the Omega to safety and talk Mayor Thompson into calming down, a hand on his arm stopped him.

“Don’t bother Sheriff.” Clint shook his head and tugged Steve back towards his desk where Sam and Bucky were sitting with their arms folded. “Don’t even bother trying to separate them, it won’t do any good.”

“Won’t do any good?” Steve repeated as Clint pushed him into a chair. “What the hell, you guys? You can’t let them talk to each other like this.”

“Welcome home, Sheriff.” Sam handed Steve a bag of pretzels. “Settle in for a show, this should be a good one.”

“A show? There is an Alpha screaming at an Omega right now! You guys aren’t really going to let this happen!” Steve was halfway to his feet when Bucky clapped a big hand on his shoulder and
pushed him back down.

“Stevie. Don’t bother. This is the third or fourth time this month. Let it happen. Tony can handle himself.”

“Tony–”

“The school teacher.”

“THAT’S THE SCHOOL TEACHER?!?”

Steve’s shout was so loud that it actually cut through the argument on the other side of the room, and both the Alpha and the Omega schoolteacher turned to look at him.

“Oh thank god.” Mayor Thompson threw his hands up in the air. “Finally someone with a drop of common sense! Sheriff Rogers, tell this Omega–”

“I would think you know my name by now, Mayor Thompson.” Tony rolled his eyes and the Alpha snapped out a growl that had Clint scooting over to sit in Sam’s lap, squeezing at his mate’s hand nervously.

The Omega, Tony, didn’t even blink though. If anything he stood up taller and spread his hands, obviously waiting for the Alpha to correct himself.

“Tell Mr. Carbonell that he needs to change his attitude and learn to be friendly or he won’t survive in this town.” Thompson spat.

“I am not going to make friends with you and excuse your little brat’s behavior to survive in this place.” Tony scoffed, and folded his arms over his chest. “You’re lucky I only threw him out. I should’ve tanned his hide for using that kind of language!”

“ARE YOU THREATENING MY SON!?” Thompson roared. “HOW DARE–”

“IF HE OPENS HIS MOUTH LIKE THAT AGAIN I’LL SERVE HIM HIS TONGUE FOR DINNER!!” the Omega shouted right back. “You are mistaken–!” a finger in the Alpha’s chest and Sam clapped a hand over Clint’s mouth so he wouldn’t laugh out loud. “You are mistaken if you think I will allow that behavior in my school! I’ll kick him right out the front door hard enough to leave a boot print on his ass!”

“Oh shit.” Bucky leaned forward with a grin, rubbing his hands together gleefully. “It’s getting good. Tony might actually growl at him. I love when he growls.”

“Cutest growl you’ve ever heard.” Sam agreed, and when Clint pouted at him, Sam leaned up and kissed his Omega on the lips. “Besides yours, baby. Cutest growl besides yours.”

Clint wrinkled his nose but kissed his Alpha anyway and turned back to the conversation in front of them.

“You have no right to kick my son out of school! He is there to learn and it is your job to teach! You should be willing to work with his behavior!”

“One of the other Omega’s bent over and your son made a crude comment and then grabbed at his ass! I will NOT work with that behavior!”

“He’s an ALPHA! What do you expect?! That is how Alpha’s act!”
“WHAT?! Being an Alpha does not excuse acting like a lecherous cretin! Teach your son some manners or the next time he sets foot in my school I’ll throw etiquette books at him! BIG ONES!”

“You wouldn’t dare!”

“Watch me!”

“You listen here, Omega—!”

“No, you listen to me, Alpha.” Tony had to stand on his toes to see eye to eye with the Alpha, but he did it anyway, leaning in close and growling as loud as he could, baring his teeth in an outright snarl.

“The next time your son puts his hands on another one of my students, you will be picking him up from that cell right over there because I will drag him down here myself, do you understand?”

The stare down lasted another few seconds, and finally Mayor Thompson turned and stormed away, grumbling under his breath and slamming the door as he went.

“Alright, Tony?” Sam and Clint were the first ones to move towards the Omega, Clint running soothing hands down Tony’s arms, pressing close for a hug. “Alright? You good?”

“I’m fine.” Tony leaned back into Sam’s hand at the back of his neck for only a second before moving away with a brief smile. “Gentlemen.” he waved at Bucky. “Always a pleasure. Same time next week? I should start bringing drinks, huh?”

“Tony.” Bucky cocked his head and looked the Omega over. “When are you gonna come by the station just to say hello? Why does every time hafta be a fight? You’re killin’ me sugar.”

“When are you going to come to the schoolhouse so I can teach you how to speak instead of slurring your words all the time?” Tony retorted, but his eyes were soft. “Thank you for the support, deputies. I thought the Mayor might really push this one.”

“You’re the new school teacher.” Steve finally spoke up, annoyed at being ignored, annoyed that a confrontation like this had not only happened in front of him, but apparently had happened multiple times while he had been gone. “And you are engaging in screaming matches with our Mayor as a regular occurrence?”

“I wouldn’t have to scream at him if he had raised his son to keep his hands to himself.” Tony replied calmly. “You must be Sheriff Rogers. I guess you left a few weeks before I appeared. A trial back East, isn’t that right?”

“Yes.” Steve folded his arms and narrowed his eyes at the Omega. “I had to escort a bank robber and murdered back East to stand trial, and stayed long enough to see him hang. So it’s Tony, is it?”

“It’s Mr. Carbonell.” Tony corrected, and winked at Bucky. “I only let Alpha’s I trust call me by my Christian name. How terribly inappropriate of you, Sheriff.”

“You’re Alpha’s you trust?” Steve’s jaw dropped and behind him, Bucky started laughing, obviously pleased to be one of the Alpha’s Tony trusted. “You can trust me, I am the Sheriff!”

“And that’s the Mayor.” Tony pointed out the door. “A fancy title doesn’t mean you deserve my trust, wouldn’t you agree?”

Steve had nothing to say to that, and Tony blew a kiss at Clint before waling strutting—sashaying out
the door, humming a tuneless song.

The door had barely shut before Steve jumped out of his chair and pinned his deputies with a severe look.

“That’s the new school teacher? Not one of you thought to wire me and tell me that he was regularly shouting it out with the Mayor? That he is refusing to teach children and throwing them out of the school room? Sam, you wired me to tell me that you two celebrated an anniversary, but no one told me about the school teacher?!”

“You told him about our anniversary?” Clint asked and Sam’s dark skin tinted a little rosy. “That’s adorable!”

“It was important.” Sam muttered, but he opened his arms for Clint to come close, running his fingers through the dark blonde hair, bending down to whisper something sweet into his mate’s ear.

“To be fair, Stevie, he’s got a point. Flash is a menace.” Bucky put his feet up on the desk and crossed his big arms over his chest. “The older he gets the worse he gets. And Tony’s absolutely right for kicking him out if he’s gonna be grabbin’ on the Omega’s, you know?”

“I’m not saying he doesn’t have a valid reason to be angry.” Steve put his hands up. “But what good does a teacher do us, if the Mayor hates him enough to send him packing?”

“I dunno, the kids like him.” Bucky shrugged. “And you know, he’s gorgeous. The Mayor might hate him, but no one’s gonna get rid’a an Omega that pretty.”

“He is gorgeous.” Sam admitted, and Clint echoed it with a grin.

“I don’t care if he’s gorgeous. If he’s going to cause trouble in my town then–”

“Oh please.” Clint interrupted. “You were too busy staring at Tony’s ass as he walked away to care what he does.”

“You mean Steve was too busy staring at Tony’s ass when he walked in.”

“You mean he was too busy drooling when Tony growled to–”

“Enough.” Certainly not about to admit exactly how hard he had been staring, Steve changed the subject. “Catch me up on the last six months. I’ve heard it’s been slow, but that was from Happy and Valkyrie, and they are half the trouble in the town anyway. Catch me up.”

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“Tell me what you really think of him.” Bucky said as he and Steve made it back to the house later that night, laying their holsters on the kitchen table before moving into the living room to relax.

“What do I really think of who?”

“Of Tony.” Bucky shrugged out of his Deputy’s uniform and tossed it into his room. “What do you think about our new school teacher? Tell me the truth.”

“He’s got a mouth on him.” Steve went into his own room to change, coming back out in his favorite flannel. “And a temper. Opinionated. Loud. Stubborn.”

“You sure seem sweet on him.” Steve poured himself a glass of cold milk, snagging a biscuit from the counter and sprawling out on the couch across from Bucky’s chair. “I was gone a long time, Buck, did you give up on Natasha and decide to pursue Tony?”

“Of course not.” Bucky rolled his eyes. “And you were only gone three months. Probably seemed a lot longer for you havin’ to be back east, but it was fine for us. And don’t change the subject. I think you and Tony would be good together.”

“Nope.” Steve jumped up to his feet and started shaking his head. “Nope. Don’t do that, Bucky. You are not going to play matchmaker with me and that—that—”

He closed his eyes, the mental image of dark eyes and fully kissable lips, a sweet growl and a brilliant smile floating through his mind.

“Damn it.” he groaned. “Why, Bucky!”

“You been alone a long time, Stevie.” Bucky said slowly. “You don’t ever smile anymore. Ever since Peggy—”

“Don’t.”

“Ever since Peggy left you’ve been alone!” Bucky said louder. “You went through the rest’a the war like you were half a soul, she broke your heart and you weren’t even mates! It’s been years now, it’s time to move on!”

“I’ve moved on!”

“Yeah?” Bucky raised an eyebrow. “When was th’last time you got a knot off?”

“BUCKY!”

“Calm down.” Bucky was laughing now, pointing at Steve’s red face. “I’m just playing. And I’m not sayin’ it has to be love or nothing, I know you are wary of that sort of thing. I’m just sayin’ that maybe a sweet Omega like Tony would make you smile again. He’d be good for you, you’d be good for him.”

“I don’t know, Buck.” Steve started piling kindling in the fireplace. “I haven’t tried to court anyone in a long time. Don’t know if I remember how to do it.”

“Don’t worry.” Bucky headed out the door for firewood. “I’ll help you with the charm, Stevie. Make sure you won’t do nothing stupid. That your clothes match and all that. Just like we used to back East when all the little Omega’s swooned over our uniforms, huh?”

“That isn’t encouraging.” Steve called after him. “Every time you tried to help me charm someone, they end up going home with you!”

“I can’t help that!” Bucky protested. “I’m beautiful, Steve! The people love me!”

“Whatever.” Steve grinned and settled back to watch the fire grow.

He was more tempted than he wanted to admit by the thought of courting the fiery Omega. He had never been an Alpha to prefer his Omega’s soft spoken and domestic, which is why he had thought
Peggy would be perfect, and why it had hurt so badly when everything had fallen apart between them.

Tony, or rather, Mr. Carbonell, certainly wasn’t soft spoken and didn’t seem domestic.

He would be a challenge to court, a challenge to win over, and an unbelievably sweet prize to earn.

Steve smiled a little.

He could enjoy a bit of a challenge.

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“Tony.”

Tony looked up when Clint knocked on the door of the school house and waved him through. “Hey Clint, come on in. Is everything alright?”

“Just thought I’d check on you.” the Omega ambled through the room, running his fingers over the desks, glancing up at the chalkboard. “Today was a little intense. I really thought Mayor Thompson was going to lose his mind.”

“What was I supposed to do, Clint?” Tony ran his fingers through his hair in frustration. “Flash practically groped one of the Omegas! I thought Peter was going to cry! The brat’s lucky I didn’t break his fingers!”

“You’re good for the children, some of them really need a champion.” Clint hopped up on the desk and watched Tony grade for a minute. “So….”

“So?” Tony doodled a quick smiley face on Clint’s hand. “What is the real reason you came all the way out here? I know it wasn’t to talk about the children.”


“He seems stubborn.” Tony said, flipping his pages over to get to the next sheet of homework. “Arrogant. Loud. You know. An Alpha? All of the things that come along with it?”

“Alright, he is all those things, but he’s also sweet and kind and loyal.” Clint countered. “Dedicated. Strong. Have you seen his arms? Or his thighs? And what about–”

“Stop.” Tony took his glasses off his nose and squinted at his friend. “What are you doing? Not only do you have a mate, and a very handsome one–”

Clint wiggled his eyebrows. “Sam is handsome, isn’t he?”

“Practically drool worthy.” Tony agreed. “So why are you here trying to convince me that the Sheriff is prime Alpha material? You don’t care about that, and you know damn well that I don’t care about any of that.”

“Well, you haven’t exactly warmed up to any of the other Alphas in town…”

“What do you mean, I haven’t warmed up to any of them? I like Bucky just fine, and that man is definitely an Alpha.”
“Yeah, he’s definitely an Alpha but you don’t like him for his knot.” Clint said bluntly. “And you seem lonely all the time, Tony. You always look lonely, or like maybe you’re too suspicious of anyone to relax and engage. We all love you, Tony. Well, everyone besides the Mayor. You’re a sweetheart, and you deserve someone good. I hate seeing you lonely.”

“I’m not lonely, I have you and Sam.” Tony argued, then made a disgusted face, “And you’re right, I don’t like Bucky for his knot. Thanks for bringing that up though, swell of you.”

“I’m just saying, maybe you should give the Sheriff a chance!” Clint encouraged. “He’s nice enough when he’s not in Captain mode—”

“Captain?”

“He was in the war.” He explained and Tony’s eyes dimmed in sympathy. “Came out here to escape, you know? When he relaxes, he’s a funny guy. Sweet, too…. And single. He hasn’t had an Omega in a long time, and he isn’t the type of Alpha to spend time at Natasha’s place, you know what I’m saying? He’s perfect for you.”

“He wears a Stetson.” Tony pointed out. “I will never be able to take a man seriously if he is wearing a hat that big, staring at me from beneath a ridiculous brim. Tipping it all the time. Give me a break.”

“What’s wrong with wearing a hat? Bucky wears a Stetson.” Clint argued. “And so does Sam!”

“Thank you for proving my point.” Tony teased and Clint shoved at him lightly. “Besides, I have no need for an Alpha. You and Sam take care of me when I—” he made a vague motion, and Clint nodded. “— and Alpha’s tend to be terrible company if they aren’t in bed. What good would spending time with the Sheriff do?”


“I’m not an easy Omega.” Tony went back to his papers. “I’m sure the Sheriff isn’t interested.”

“Tony.” Clint leaned over and kissed his forehead. “I don’t anyone in town thinks you are an easy Omega. Not only am I sure Steve knows what he’s getting in to, I can promise that he is interested.”

“I’m sure he’s not.” Tony grinned and kissed Clint back. “But thank you.”

“Just think about it.” Clint hopped off the desk. “Yeah? Promise me you’ll consider it.”

“I’m not promising you anything.” Tony tossed a pencil at him. “Kiss Sam hello for me.”

“Sure thing, Tony.”

Tony kept grading papers well into the night, keeping his mind firmly on the task, and definitely off the Sheriff.

He didn’t care that Steve was gorgeous, that his voice was deep and growly, that his eyes were a shocking blue and that his pants fit real tight around his–

“Damn it.” Tony put his grading pencil down and reached for his water, fanning himself with the other hand. “Alpha Sheriff Steve Rogers, I think you and that stupid hat are going to be trouble.”

Tony gave up not thinking about the Sheriff and let himself day dream just a little bit.

He might enjoy a little trouble.
Chapter 2

“Mr. Carbonell, I heard you punched the Mayor!”

“Miss Williams, I can assure you that I did not in any way come close to punching the Mayor.” Tony didn’t turn from the blackboard. “Not only is Mayor Thompson a leader in our community and a well respected Alpha, but even if he did deserve to be punched, violence is not the answer to disagreements, so I wouldn’t have hit him.”

“He’s lying.” A very confident Riri whispered to Mary-Anne. “Your brother told me that Mr. Carbonell put Mayor Thompson on his as–”

“I’m fairly positive you won’t be finishing that sentence, will you Miss Williams?” Tony called over his shoulder, and the girl made a zipping motion over her lips. “And I’m also sure that Harley isn’t spreading falsehoods about me containing profanity, are you Mr. Keener?”

He whipped around and sent Harley a look. “Hm?”

“Uh, no sir, Mr. Carbonell.” Harley mumbled. “Jus’ repeatin’ what I heard is all.”

“You were only repeating what you heard.” Tony corrected. “And what you heard is incorrect. In no way, shape or form, did I lay Mayor Thompson out on his fully deserving, overly arrogant, Alpha ass.”

The class exploded into laughter and Tony let it go for a minute before clapping his hands to settle them back down. “Now then, today we are working on our maths, because all of your homework was frankly, atrocious and–”

“What does atrocious mean?” Maria, who was all of eight, asked curiously.

“It means somethin’ about flirting.” Ned answered matter of factly.

“It does not have anything to do with flirting.” Tony wrinkled his nose at the young man. “Who told you that, Mr. Leeds?”

“My ma says that th’ way you were carryin’ on with the Sheriff in his office was atrocious. Said flirtin’ like that weren’t proper, specially not with you bein’ a school teacher an’ all. So i figured atrocious meant flirtin’.”

“Um–” Tony’s eyes widened, as did every child’s in the room. “Um, Mr. Leeds, I–I–”

“Mr. Carbonell.” Peter raised his hand. “Are you sweet on the Sheriff?”

“Ew! The Sheriff is a big gross Alpha, who wants one of those?” From Michelle, who couldn’t be bothered to even braid her hair, much less keep quiet over anything she found to be annoying.

“He’s not gross!” Liz shot back, elbowing her friend. “He’s practically dreamy.”

“I dunno about dreamy.” Peter muttered with an uncomfortable look at his long time crush. “Besides he’s old.”

“You sound jealous, Pete.” Harley flicked a pencil at Peter, who swatted it out of the air and threw another one right back.
“My pa says it’s good the Sheriff likes Mr. Carbonell!” another student piped up. “Says the Sheriff’s been cranky because it’s been too long since he buried his–”

“ALRIGHT!!.” Tony cleared his throat loudly and clapped his hands again. “Alright, children, thank you for all of those opinions, but a discussion involving Sheriff Rogers has nothing to do with arithmetic, so let’s try and focus on–”

“He’s too upset about what you said about him flirting to correct your grammar.” Peter whispered loudly to Ned. “Maybe he is sweet on the Sheriff!”

“ARITHMETIC!” Tony nearly shouted, and when all the children swiveled to stare at him, he cleared his throat and tried again. “Arithmetic. Please write the sums on the board five times each, turning your paper over onto the corner of the desk when you are finished, and enjoy a few minutes of quiet reading. Ms. Allen–” Liz perked up. “You are in charge while I step out for a moment.”

Tony waited until the class had settled down and was studiously copying their sums before slipping out the back door and up the stairs that led to his living quarters about the school.

He splashed some water on his face, took a quick nip of whiskey and tried to calm the flaming red blush currently taking over his face.

The last thing he needed was the children talking about Sheriff Rogers, about his good or bad qualities, and speculating as to whether or not Tony was sweet on the Alpha.

He was certainly not sweet on Alpha Sheriff Steve Rogers.

And the rather explicit dreams he had last night were only a result of meeting Sheriff Rogers in the wake of a rather tense situation.

Just a weird transference of the emotions from his run in with Mayor Thompson. Somehow all of that intensity had been…shifted…onto his first impressions of the Sheriff and had resulted in some spectacular surprising dreams that of course had unsettled him, and led to his fairly embarrassing reaction in front of the children.

That’s all it was.

A weird… transference.

Yep.

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“Sheriff Rogers.” Natasha cut such a striking figure coming down the stairs that every person in the saloon turned to look but she only had eyes for the Sheriff, ignoring the low whistles and outright leering from the rest of the bar patrons.

“Natasha.” Steve stood to his feet and doffed his hat, smiling down at the petite Omega. “How are you?”

“Doin’ just fine, Sheriff.” Natasha had to stand on her toes to hug him, because even in heeled boots, she was nearly a foot shorter than him. “It’s nice to have you home. Your deputies have been keeping the law, but the word order doesn’t even come close to describing the pack of coyotes you have working for you.”
“Noted.” Steve said dryly, and held her chair while she sat, looking away politely from the expanse of skin that showed when she crossed her legs. “Things have been relatively calm, then?”

“Positively boring.” Natasha assured him, and motioned towards the bar so one of the serving girls would bring her a drink. “How was the trial?” Steve grimaced, and Natasha’s green eyes dimmed in sympathy. “I know it wasn’t easy taking Rumlow back to face justice, but you know that man was rotten to his core.”

“He didn’t used to be.” Steve offered a quick smile to the serving girl when she set a beer down for him as she handed Natasha a whiskey. “Time was I could trust Rumlow more than anyone besides Bucky.”

“Maybe.” Natasha tossed the whiskey back in one go. “But men have been betraying other men since the dawn of time. I would have been more surprised if the bastard hadn’t betrayed you.”

“You never liked him.”

“I never liked him.” Natasha touched the still red scar on her upper thigh, a thin line that was all that was left of a knife wound courtesy of Rumlow as he had tried to stall a posse by taking her hostage. “But I’m still sorry for your loss. I know he was your friend.”

“Yep.” Steve ran his fingers through his hair. “Right up until he was swinging in the wind.”

“Hm.” Natasha waved for another bit of whiskey. “So, onto better topics then. Tell me, my dear Sheriff, have you met our new school teacher?”

“I–”

“Oh he met him alright.” Valkyrie brought the whiskey over this time, setting the glass on the table and bending over to give Natasha a long kiss, wiping a smear of red lipstick from the corner of Natasha’s mouth when they parted. “In fact, Sheriff Rogers got to meet the school teacher during the weekly dust up with the mayor.”

“Oh no.” Natasha looked away so it wasn’t so obvious how much she wanted to laugh. “Walked into a shouting match, did you?”

“Yes.” Steve clenched his jaw. “Yes, I did, and I am not happy that my deputies were doing nothing about it.”

“Tony got in a fight with Mayor Thompson the first day he came to town.” Natasha recalled. “Something about how Mayor Thompson spoke to one of the children? He was too harsh, and Tony got in his face and yelled at him to back off. He had no idea who Thompson was of course, but once he was informed that he was in fact yelling at the Mayor, I’m pretty sure that mouthy Omega just yelled even louder.”

“It was wonderful.” Valkyrie took Steve’s empty bottle with her as she left. “He’s a handful, that one. Keep your wits about you, Sheriff. He won’t be an easy Omega to court.”

“I don’t need–” Steve groaned. “Why does everyone keep saying things like that? I had four different people stop by the office today to welcome me home and tell how well they thought Mr. Carbonell and I would match. I have no intention of matching with our new school teacher.”

“Why not?” Natasha raised a perfectly arched eyebrow. “Is he not pretty enough for you? Because I have seen Omegas come and go in my business, and he might be one of the most visually pleasing I have come across.”
“What?” Steve frowned. “No, it has nothing to do with his looks. I have nothing bad to say about his–”

“I see, it’s because you think he isn’t smart enough?” Natasha interrupted. “Because I speak with him almost every day and I’ve heard that he tutors the older children in Latin. Latin, Sheriff Rogers, how is that not intelligent enough for you?”

“Natasha, I never said–” Steve spread his hands helplessly. “I never said anything like that!”

“He’s an Omega,” Natasha let her eyes drop to Steve’s lap in a very pointed look. “which means there is no reason your biologies aren’t compatible.”

“Uh no, no our biologies are– I mean yes, our biologies are compatible, but Natasha–”

“Is he too old?” A judgmental frown. “Sheriff I didn’t take you for the type to need an Omega just into legal age but if you are so concerned with his ability to provide you with children–“

“What? NO!”

“Ah, then he is too young, is that it?” she nodded in understanding. “You need someone more experienced to satisfy you?”

“Um–” Steve was completely lost, mouth open as he stared at the other Omega. “Why–What– Wh– Wh–”

“Is it because he’s outspoken?” Now she was obviously trying not to laugh. “Because shame on you for expecting an Omega to be seen and not heard. Living in Wildrock this long should have clued you in to the fact that we prefer our Omega–”

“I never said–!”

“It’s his hair, isn’t it? Wears it all unruly and curly, no Sheriff Rogers you are definitely an Alpha who prefers himself and his mate clean cut, hm?”

“Natasha, you are blowing this way out of–”

“Oh, it’s because you are looking for a roll in the hay and he is the kind of Omega you bond with, I see.” A wise nod. “Sheriff, if you are that desperate, I am happy to direct you to my best girl–”

“Natasha!” Steve banged his hand down on the table. “It is none of those reasons!”

“Well then why don’t you like him?!” Natasha snapped, smacking her hand down as well. “You have no reason to be rejecting him!”

“Rejecting him? I’m not rejecting him!” Steve retorted loudly. “I barely know him at all! I have no opinion either way!”

“You think he’s boring?? How could you not have an opinion?!”

“Why are you interrogating me?!”

Silence in the saloon then, as people turned to look at the sudden shouting match erupting between the Sheriff and the Madame.

“Why Sheriff.” Natasha took a calm sip of her whiskey. “Why on earth are you so defensive? Could it be that you already are harboring feelings for our new school teacher?”
“Absolutely not.” Steve said instantly. “Other than our initial meeting yesterday, I have had no interaction with Mr. Carbonell, much less an interaction that would facilitate any sort of—” he swallowed nervously. “—feelings, either favorable or not, for any of those reasons you just gave.”

“Hm.” Another sip. “Sheriff, you have picked up a remarkable way of speaking since your time back east. Been listening to those fancy lawyers, have you?"

“Damn it Natasha.” Steve finally grinned, relaxing into his chair now that he knew Natasha was only messing with him. “Why do you do that to me?”

“Because you are the biggest Alpha I’ve ever seen who is so easily flustered by a pretty Omega tossing questions your way. Heaven help you when Tony turns that wicked wit of his on you, you’ll be left speechless and wondering which way is up.”

“Thank you for that.”

“Tell me honestly.” Natasha finished her whiskey and leaned across the table. “What do you think of him?”

“Why does it—”

“It is my job to spot a lonely person, Sheriff Rogers.” She interrupted. “My entire career and that of my girls depends on lonely people, and you are about the loneliest man I have ever had the misfortune to meet.”

“Misfortune?!”

“And you are only surpassed by our dear Mr. Carbonell, because those are the loneliest, saddest brown eyes I have ever seen.”

“…oh?”

“Yes.” Natasha nodded decisively. “Yes. And misery loves company, isn’t that right? Perhaps together the two of you won’t be quite so lonely anymore.”

“The entire town is meddling, trying to set me up with the school teacher.” Steve muttered. “What did I do to deserve this?”

“At least my meddling ends with you smiling, hm?” Natasha patted at his shoulder as she stood. “Think about it, Sheriff Rogers. And welcome home.”

“Um, thank you.”

**********************

Happy joined Steve shortly after the sun went down, calling for a drink and retrieving his deck of cards so they could play a round of poker.

No less than fifteen minutes later, the deputies tromped through the door as well, yelling for dinner and drinks and crowding around the table, bickering over whether or not to use real money to bet, since apparently last time Clint had taken both Bucky and Happy to the cleaners, walking home with half their paychecks jangling in his pockets.

“Sam cheats with him!” Bucky insisted. “It’s a scam! Clint doesn’t even know the meaning of a
poker face, he has the worst bluff and the easiest tell and somehow he still won!”

“Accusing a man’s mate of cheating is fightin’ words, Buck.” Sam drawled, holding a very satisfied looking Clint tight on his lap. “I’d be real careful if I were you.”

“Oh please.” Bucky snorted. “You two are a pack’a weasels and—”

He stopped talking when Natasha swept through the dining room, her comparatively chaste gown from earlier traded for a lacy, ruffled number that stopped above her knees in the front, showing off long legs and knee high boots, and trailed the floor behind her as she walked.

Her collar was buttoned to her chin, and from the neck up she looked as if she had just come from church, which contrasted almost alarmingly with the amount of skin she was showing below.

All in all she made a fantastically dramatic picture, and Bucky was instantly reduced to a stammering, stuttering mess.

“Uh–uh–uh– evening ma’am.” he snatched his hat off, crushing it between his hands nervously. “How does today find you?”

“Deputy Barnes.” Natasha came to a stop in front of the big Alpha, looking up at him with a smirk that was borderline indecent. “Always a joy to find you here at my door. How are you?”

“Just fine, ma’am.” Bucky said with wide eyes, pushing a piece long hair out of his eyes before adding, “You look beautiful, if I may say so.”

“And you are always a treat for my eyes.” she replied easily, hands on her hips as she watched the Alpha blush and smile. “Gentlemen.” she raised her eyebrows in Sam and Happy’s direction, bussed a kiss onto Clint’s cheek– “pretty Omega.” and went on her way, heading over to visit a few of her girls that had already secured their dates for the night.

“I love when she calls me pretty.” Clint grinned and snuggled back into Sam’s lap. “Bucky baby, you breathing?”

“Nah, it always takes him an hour or so to get his mind right after seeing the Madame.” Sam chuckled, tossing a card down onto the pile. “Bucky, when are you just going to ask her to step out with you? You know she likes you.”

“I dunno.” Bucky flopped back into his seat, placing his crumpled hat back on his head. “Working the way she does means she’s nice to every fella who smiles at her.”

“Maybe.” Happy shrugged and lay down a card of his own. “But she doesn’t smile at anyone the way she smiles at you.”

“You think?” Bucky sighed wistfully in Natasha’s direction. “That’s an Omega I’d love to come home to at the end of the day, you know?”

“Yes.” Clint snatched at Bucky’s sandwich. “Yep, we know. You’ve been mooning over her since you and Steve came to town. We know.”

“Speaking of–” Sam raised an eyebrow in the Sheriff’s direction. “You have been real quiet tonight, Sheriff, what’s on your mind?”

“Nothing.”
“You’re a terrible liar, Stevie.” Bucky grunted and kicked at the other Alpha’s chair. “Go on.”

“It’s nothing!”

“Stevie—!”

“He’s all bent outta shape because Tasha took him to task for not going after Tony.” Valkyrie interrupted, bringing them another round of drinks and running her fingers affectionately through Clint’s hair. “Pretty Omega, how are you?”

“Doing good.” Clint grinned up at the Beta. “How are you?”

“Wishing you and your mate—” a pointed look at Sam. “would come by sometime so we could spend some time together, hm?”

“Valkyrie.” Sam rolled his eyes and tightened his arm around Clint. “I am not letting you have alone time with my Omega.”

“Who said I only want it with your Omega?” she wiggled her eyebrows and started laughing when Sam choked on his drink. “And Sheriff Rogers, I’m inclined to agree with Natasha. There’s no reason someone as lonely as you shouldn’t at least make an attempt to get to know Tony.”

“Mr. Carbonell and I—”

“Mr. Carbonell?” she interrupted. “Mr. Carbonell? Why don’t you call him Tony?”

“Uh, he was informed that Tony only lets people he trust call him Tony.” Bucky spoke up, finally over the nervousness from talking with Natasha. “So, to Steve, he is Mr. Carbonell.”

“My god.” Valkyrie made her eyes purposely wide. “That must be making you crazy, you being our trustworthy Sheriff and all.”

“It’s fine.” Steve said through gritted teeth. “And y’all need to leave it alone.”

“Uh oh, he’s starting to get that weird twang he gets when we’ve pissed him off.” Happy sighed and started dealing another round. “Everyone just shut up and play, huh? I didn’t work all day to gossip over cards like a bunch’a women. Let’s go.”

Steve breathed a sigh of relief when everyone went back to the cards, and let the matter of him and one very specific Omega drop.

He would talk to Mr. Carbonell in his own time.

No one needed to know he hadn’t stopped thinking about the Omega since that rather interesting first meeting yesterday.

No one needed to know he had been up half the night dreaming about the Omega either.

Nuh- uh. No one needed to know that.

********************

It was late, the poker game winding down when the doors to the saloon opened again and the deputies heard Valkyrie call out, “Tony! I thought you were going to stand me up tonight!”
“Of course not.” Tony leaned across the bar and kissed the Beta right on the lips. “How are you, Valkyrie?”

“Better now.” she winked at him and poured him a drink. “How are the little gremlins?”

“Children aren’t gremlins, Valkyrie.” The Omega sighed. “They are darling–”

“–obnoxious–”

“–bright eyed–”

“–nosy–”

“–yes, nosy.” Tony admitted. “Nosy children who repeat everything they hear whether they should be hearing it or not.”

“Something specific that the children are repeating?” she asked curiously. “Something that has you all hot and bothered and showing up late for our weekly Tuesday night chat?”

“They think–” Tony cleared his throat and closed his eyes for a second. “They think that I am sweet on the Sheriff for some ridiculous reason, and apparently all of their parents also agree that–” he squinted at the Beta. “Why are you grinning like that?”

“No reason.”

“Valkyrie–”

“Don’t look.” Valkyrie reached over to straighten his shirt collar. “But the Sheriff is heading your way right now.”

“Or for the love of–” Tony took a large swallow of his drink and tensed as he caught a hint of the Alpha’s scent, something smoky and warm and altogether tantalizing.

_No._ No._ Don’t think that._

“Mr. Carbonell.” Sheriff Rogers spoke from behind him, and Tony turned with a carefully neutral smile, masking his less than neutral thoughts.

“Sheriff Rogers. Evening.”

“Evening.” Steve removed his hat, nodding his head politely. “How does the day find you?”

“Exhausted.” Tony said bluntly. “And yours?”

“Ah– busy.” Steve answered hesitantly, thrown by the Omega’s short answers and aloof demeanor. “Law and order and– and all that.”

“Of course.” Tony kept watching him, obviously waiting for Steve to continue their stilted conversation.

“So.” Steve shifted his weight awkwardly. “So. It was suggested that I make you acquaintance again, since our first impressions of each other might not have been all that… stellar.”

“Suggested.” Tony repeated. “By whom?”

“Uh–” Steve glanced behind him, and Tony leaned over just in time to see all four members of the
poker game as well as half a dozen other spectators quickly turn around and go back to their drinks, suddenly talking loudly.

“Oh.” Tony finally smiled, shaking his head with an exasperated sigh. “I see. You have been heckled into talking to me, just like I was heckled into talking to you?”

“All of my students parents have rather strong opinions as to how I should conduct myself around you.” Tony grinned, and Steve blinked at the how wonderfully it transformed the Omega’s features. “Sheriff Rogers if I didn’t know better, I’d think this entire town has matchmaking in their set of skills.”

“Mr. Carbonell, I can tell you with all certainty that you are correct about that.” Steve said dryly, offering a smile back. “So then, this is me attempting to meet you again, hoping that this one will be a better first impression, and that it is enough to keep my deputies off my back.”

“It’s nice to officially meet you, Sheriff Rogers.” Tony said formally.

“Likewise, Mr. Carbonell.” Steve put his hat back on. “Now that all that is out of the way, could I buy you a drink?”

“Like the one I have in my hand?” Tony held up his still mostly full glass. “Or…?”

“Right.” Steve blew out a deep breath. “Well, are you hungry? I would be happy to buy you dinner?”

“It’s ten o clock at night.” Tony’s dark eyes were sparkling with amusement. “Do you make a habit of only eating after the sun has set?”

“Um, no. Nope.” Steve was starting to feel foolish. “Nope, I don’t. Sorry, it’s been a long time since I’ve tried to–”

“Since you tried to what?”

“Since I tried to–” Steve shut up before he said court someone. “Since I tried to get to know someone knew.” he finished lamely. “I’ve been in Wildrock for some time so I know everyone, and before that I was–”

“In the Army.” Tony supplied. “I know.”

“You asked around about me?” Steve asked and wanted to melt over the faintest blush that settled high in the Omega’s cheeks. “About my life back East?”

“I didn’t ask.” Tony hedged, knowing he sounded as if he was lying– probably because he was lying. “But this is a small town, people talk.”

“Like they are talking right now?” Steve grinned and the blush got a little darker. “I’m sure everyone in here is thrilled that we are having a conversation.”

“Yes, the gossip mongers should have plenty of fodder for their cannons tomorrow, won’t they?” Tony groaned. “Carry a shield in the morning, hm? Otherwise you might be felled by their arrows of speculation.”

Steve laughed out loud and Tony looked up in surprise. “Felled by their arrows– what? Why would
you say it like that!”

“Myself and the older students are learning about the Persian Army.” Tony explained sheepishly. “I’ve been using lots of war analogies in my speech lately.”

“Adorable Omega.” Steve teased, the words slipping out before he meant to, and the smile fell right from Tony’s face. “Uh, I mean– I didn’t– uh, don’t take that the wrong way.”

“I appreciate the offer for a drink.” Tony seemed to withdraw a little, his expression cooling. “And your ill timed if not generous offer for dinner. But Sheriff Rogers, despite the gossip, I am not looking to be paired with an Alpha in any way, shape or form, and that includes being called things like adorable by Alpha’s such as yourself.”

“Um, my apologies, I wasn’t trying to—”

“I’m sure you didn’t mean to say it.” Tony held up his hand to stop Steve’s apology. “And there is no offense taken, but I prefer people don’t refer to me as some pretty thing to be put up on a shelf and looked at, I can assure you that even though I am an Omega, I am in no way in need of anything.”

“Um–um—”

“And don’t feel too badly.” Tony tossed back the rest of his drink. “I won’t hold it against you. It’s nothing personal, I’m sure you and I will be great friends. Unfortunately, I have no use for your—” those devilish eyes dropped towards Steve’s lap. “—I’m sure, more than considerable charms.”

“More than considerable—!” Steve’s face went bright red. “Mr. Carbonell—!”

“Sheriff Rogers.” Tony grinned and put some money down on the counter for Valkyrie. “Enjoy the rest of your evening.”

It took a full five minutes before Steve made it back to the poker table, slumping into his seat with a puzzled expression on his face.

“How’d it go?” Bucky elbowed him. “He was smilin’ when he left, that’s good, huh?”

“I’ll be honest, Buck.” Steve ran a hand over his face and picked his cards back up. “I have no idea how that conversation went. That Omega is— is surprising.”

“He likes you.” Clint said confidently. “I can tell.”

“Yeah? Which part clued you in? When he turned down Steve’s drink, or when he walked out leaving Steve lookin’ like a fish outta water, opening and closing his mouth like that?”

“Thank you for that.” Steve shot a dirty look at Happy. “Are we playing or what?”

“I’m telling you he likes you.” Clint maintained. “Just give him some time, he’ll come around.”

“Hopefully Steve learns how to carry on a regular conversation before that happens.” Sam cracked up laughing. “Did you really offer him dinner? The moons up, Sheriff! What were you thinking?”

“I think that’s quite enough.” Steve threw a handful of coins into the pot and yelled for another drink. “That is quite enough from all of you.”

“Oh sure thing, Sheriff.”
“Yes sir.”

“Definitely.”

Silence for a few minutes, and then Happy— “What’d he say to make you blush that hard? You looked like a damn tomato.”

Steve shoved away from the table with a growl and stomped out of the saloon.

“It’s true love.” Clint said, calmly laying down a few cards. “I’m telling you. There will be wedding bells by spring. Definitely true love.”
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

This is a hella long chapter over 6200 words so buckle up lol SAY LOTS OF THINGS! More comments/feedback makes updates happen faster!

Also, slight TW near the end, I will mark it clearly!

The Omega Tony Carbonell was, for lack of better words, completely baffling, and Steve had no idea how to deal with him.

Tony was just…. baffling.

He haggled with the fruit and vegetable vendors in heated discussions that inevitable led to shouting matches, and yet somehow ended with the vendor smiling and laughing and Tony usually kissing them on the cheek before packaging up his purchases and waving as he left.

“He’s Italian.” Sam offered as an explanation when Steve asked about it. “He has to be dramatic about everything, yeah?”

The Omega was always snacking, and every child in town seemed to know it. If Tony was walking down the street eating a licorice, any number of children might come up to ask for a piece and Tony would pull more licorice from his pocket to hand out without even hesitating.

An apple? The schoolteacher would offer the child a bite and then take a bite of his own without skipping a beat.

His sandwich? Steve had seen Tony simply hand Harley Keener his sandwich and turn right back around to get another one from the shop, and yet despite the constant snacking, the Omega was lean and nothing more than that bouncy beautiful butt showed any wiggle and fit. He was fit.

Baffling.

“It all goes to his ass.” Bucky grunted when he caught Steve staring again. “You know?”

More often than not, class was held outside, with Tony walking the children through town and helping them learn their letters by spelling the names of the building: “Tavern! T-a-v! e-r-n!” And yet Tony walked under an umbrella fussing about the sun giving him freckles and how all the fresh air was hurting his nose.

Adorable, but baffling.

“He’s from the East Coast!” Valkyrie pinched Steve when he laughed about it. “Too much sun and he will combust!”

And despite a ready smile for anyone who waved to him, Steve noticed that Tony was fairly reserved. He had sweet cheek kisses for vendors and of course for Valkyrie when they met for their Tuesday night chat, but any other physical affection was few and far between.
Even the children, who would run and hug their teacher any time they wanted to, received a pat on the head and a fond smile before being lightly pushed away.

In fact, it Steve didn’t know better, he would think the Omega didn’t know how to respond to physical affection, or even that he had been hurt in the past but that… that couldn’t be right, right?

_Baffling._

“Everyone’s got a story.” Clint muttered when Steve commented on Tony’s behavior, and even though Steve was still curious, he knew better than to push.

It was convenient that Clint was the one to defend Tony’s seeming aversion to attachment, because Clint was the only one who seemed privy to all the schoolteachers sweetness, including plenty of hugs and kisses, cuddles and laughter.

More than once, Steve had caught the two Omegas embracing and he wasn’t quite sure what to think about it.

The first time was only a few days after he had returned to Wildrock, walking back to the office with Bucky after lunch at the tavern, and they had opened the door to Tony sitting on Clint’s desk, their lips touching just barely as Sam sat at the other desk and filled out paperwork.

“Sheriff Rogers.” Tony said calmly, and with a wink at Bucky, “Deputy.”

“Mr Carbonell?” Steve replied, obviously confused.

“Tony.” Bucky drawled and winked right back, carrying on with the rest of the day as if nothing odd had happened.

Then there was the time after a town meeting, when Steve had heard noise in an alley, and upon investigating had found Clint pinning Tony to a wall, his fingers buried in the dark hair and bodies moving together before Tony had broke away with a moan low enough to make Steve ache.

He had growled in response, helpless against a physical reaction to seeing two Omegas together, especially when one of them sounded like that, and Clint had laughed over Tony’s offended gasp and told Steve to go play voyeur somewhere else before kissing Tony again.

But even though Tony had no problem being so physical with Clint, Steve rarely saw Sam touch Tony at all, and Bucky didn’t even step close to Tony without asking permission first. Happy seemed to have a decent enough relationship with Tony, even if it was from a distance, and the Omega never showed any fear around Steve or the other Alphas– but there was something else there, something that both put Steve on edge, and made his protective instincts roar.

“I don’t understand him.” Steve complained one night after almost three weeks of watching the Omega. “Every time I think I might have him figured out, he changes again! Nothing about him makes any sense!”

“Why d’ya sounds so angry about it?” Bucky was cutting thick hunks of bread to go with their stew and frowned over at him. “Jus’ cause he’s not falling all over you don’t mean something’s wrong with him.”

“There’s just something off about him.” Steve insisted. “Something about the way he looks, or doesn’t look at people. The way he loves the kids so much but then looks lost when they hug him? Even you, Bucky, you walk around him like he’s going to break, but I’ve seen him go right at Mayor Harrison without blinking. What’s wrong with him?”
“Nothing wrong with him.” Bucky set a bowl down in front of Steve. “Maybe if you stopped acting like he was a damn puzzle and actually an Omega he’d warm up to you.”

“…what does that mean?”

“You know what I mean.” Bucky snorted. “You sit there and watch him and try to figure him out, but other than that one terrible conversation you haven’t even tried to—”

“He said he wasn’t interested. I’m not going to pursue him if he isn’t interested.”

“No, Stevie.” Bucky shook his head. “Nope. He said he didn’t need anything. Needing and wanting are two different things.”

Steve hesitated, and Bucky grinned triumphantly. “You like him, don’t you?”

“There’s something about him.” Steve admitted. “I’m not really sure—”

“It’s because he’s gorgeous and you’re desperately horny.” The other Alpha interrupted, growling teasingly when Steve’s eyes flickered red in annoyance. “So stop over thinking it and just go be nice to him.”

“Fine.” Steve went back to eating. “But if he shoots me down—”

“Yeah yeah, you can bitch to me. No problem there.” Bucky slopped his bread through the sauce and took a big bite. “Wear your Stetson when you try to be sweet with him, yeah? I’ve seen him looking at it. Definitely loves the cowboy hat.”

“Yeah?” Steve looked over at his trusty hat. “Thanks Buck.”

“I’m with ya, Stevie.” Bucky winked over another big bite. “You got it.”

“Hey, listen.” Steve drummed his fingers on the table. “Do you see it in him like I do?”

“Do I see what?”

“How scared Tony is.”

Bucky looked up from his meal, a troubled expression crossing his face. “What do you mean?”

“I dunno. Maybe it’s nothing, but—” he tsked in thought. “– I mean, do you see it? Sometimes he just looks scared. Like he’s running from something. What do we know about his life before Wildrock?”

“Nope.” Bucky shook his head emphatically. “Nope, Stevie don’t do that. Go after him because you want a kiss, not because you need to know his secrets.”

“Yeah alright.” Steve concentrated on his dinner, and tried to push away the nagging feeling that Tony Carbonell was using Wildrock less for his job as a schoolteacher, and more for the anonymity and protection it offered him being so far from anywhere else.

*Why did that bother him so much?*

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“Mr. Carbonell.” Steve stepped onto the street next to Tony as the Omega headed towards the
schoolhouse. “How does the day find you?”

“Very well, thank you Sheriff Rogers.” Tony replied politely, and Steve waited for the returning how are you doing, but the Omega had apparently said all he wanted to say, and kept right on walking.

“Um–” Steve hurried to catch him. “And things in the schoolhouse? All is well?”

“Yes, thank you Sheriff Rogers.” Tony lifted his hand in a wave as they passed the butchers shop.”

“Alright.” Steve took his hat off and ran his fingers through his hair. “I was thinking–” he stopped when Tony shot him a quick look. “Mr. Carbonell?”

“Yes, Sheriff?” Tony’s dark eyes sparkled in interest and he started walking backwards, a smile curving his lips as he looked Steve over. “What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking that perhaps I could escort you to the music in the park this evening?” Unnerved by having all of Tony’s attention on him so unexpectedly, Steve stumbled over his words. “If–if uh you were planning on attending?”

“I was planning on attending.” Tony agreed, still walking backwards. “But I don’t need an escort. Perfectly capable of walking to the park by myself.”

“Oh.” Steve put his hat back on and then blinked when Tony sighed a little and turned back around to walk correctly. What was that? “Well then, perhaps I will see you there?”

“It’s a small town, Sheriff Rogers!” Tony tossed his hand up in a careless wave, and went on his way.

“Ouch.” Happy said from the door of his forge and Steve turned and scowled at him. “Don’t you frown at me, Rogers. I can’t help how badly that went. Good thing the whole town wasn’t standing around to watch that. Embarrassing.”

“Thank you, Happy.” He griped. “Thank you for that.”

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“Let me to carry that for you.” Steve offered, and without waiting for an answer, took the packages right from Tony’s arms as the Omega left the post office. “Are these supplies for the school house?”

“No?” Tony scrunched his nose at the Alpha. “And I can carry them myself, thank you.”

“I don’t mind.” Steve assured him, and he really didn’t. Not only were the boxes surprisingly light, but they just the right size to keep his arms bent and flexed, biceps straining at his shirt sleeves, and he saw Tony glance over at him more than once. “To the schoolhouse, then?”

“Please.” Tony matched Steve step for step as they made their way down the street. “Thank you.”

“How was the music in the park?” Steve asked after a rather uncomfortable moment of silence that Tony seemed to have no intention of breaking.

“You didn’t go?” Tony seemed mildly surprised. “You seemed so keen on it, I thought you would be there early.”

“Ah, no, I ended up going home to take care of the animals.”
“I see.”

Silence again, Steve’s mind racing as he tried to find something to say. “Did you not go to the music?”

“I did.” Tony dodged a puddle, grimacing over the scuff mark on his shoes. “Peter invited me along with his Aunt so I went with them.”

“Mrs. Parker?” Steve raised his eyebrows and tried not to sound quite so shocked. “I ah— I wasn’t aware that you and she—”

“We aren’t.” Tony smiled and Steve nearly dropped the boxes right then and there, stunned by how beautiful the smile was. “She is a lovely woman, a sweet Alpha, and I’m sure Peter would love if I allowed her to court me, but I’m not interested.”

“Because she is a female?” Steve ventured, hefting the boxes a little higher as they walked down the short hill to the school house.

“Because she’s an Alpha.” Tony answered, and took the boxes out of Steve’s arm. “Thank you, Sheriff Rogers. Have a good rest of the day.”

“Mr. Carbonell.” Steve grabbed the door before it could shut all the way and the look Tony gave him was nothing short of irritated. “Today is Tuesday, and I know you come to Valkyrie’s every Tuesday for your dinner. Could I buy your dinner tonight? Maybe a drink?”

“Valkyrie buys me my meals.” Tony said matter of factly, but not unkindly. “But the offer is appreciated.”

“I don’t think she would object to me buying you one dinner.” Steve countered. “If you would join me for the meal?”

“No thank you, Sheriff Rogers.” Tony said politely. “But thanks all the same.”

The school room door closed with a soft thump, leaving a very confused Alpha standing on the steps.

“Um. Alright then.”

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Tony sighed to himself when he came from the tailors, three brand new pair of pants in his arms, and saw the Sheriff leaning against the railing talking to the Doctor.

Everywhere he had turned lately, the Sheriff was there waiting to help him with packages, trying to strike up a conversation, smiling that brilliant smile and doffing that stupid hat in a way he probably thought was charming, but was actually ridiculous.

Honestly, how was Tony supposed to take the Sheriff seriously when he wore a ten gallon hat. Ten gallon. There was just no reason for a man to wear a hat that big. No one needed that much shade, right? Right?

And it wasn’t that Steve wasn’t nice. The Sheriff was one of the nicest men Tony had ever met, not to mention gorgeous and if his recurring dreams were anything to go by, at least a little part of Tony
was attracted to the big Alpha but... but... ugh.

_Ugh_, Tony didn’t want an Alpha’s court. _No thank you._

“Tony!” The doctor raised a hand in greeting, and Steve turned as well, ready with a smile and a short bow. “How are you?”

“Yinsen.” Tony smiled back, met the Sheriff’s blue eyes with a little nod. “Sheriff Rogers. How are you?”

“I’m well Mr. Carbonell.” Steve replied quickly, politely. “And you?”

“Perfectly fine.” Tony smiled a little bigger when Steve took his hat off and ran his fingers through his hair, a sure sign that the Sheriff was about to ask him on something of a date. Not that Tony was looking forward to being asked out again, but _wow_ did he love all that blonde hair and the few minutes it spent without that giant hat covering it.

“Mr. Carbonell, I was hoping I could take you for a walk tomorrow evening?” There it was—the offer of companionship that happened at least once every three days. Steve was always unfailingly polite, a careful smile and hopeful expression, and after a few weeks Tony was starting to feel sorry for always turning him down.

But Steve had never _once_ reacted with anger or even anything more than a flicker of disappointment when Tony told him no, and the graciousness that the Alpha showed even in the face of rejection was... well it was amazing, really.

Tony had never met an Alpha who was so determined and yet respectful all at the same time, and if he was a different Omega he might actually consider saying _yes_.

As it was though—“Thank you, Sheriff Rogers.” Tony’s smile was a little softer this time than it had been before and Steve noticed. “Thank you, but I’ll have to say no.”

“Right.” Steve nodded, tipped his hat towards the doctor, then towards Tony. “Another time, then.”

“Another time.” Tony agreed, the first time he had ever said anything other than just _no_, and Steve’s eyebrows rose just the slightest bit before he replaced his hat and moved on with his rounds.

“Tony.” Yinsen cleared his throat once the Sheriff had left. “If you have time tonight, please come by the clinic so I can examine you.”

“My chest doesn’t even hurt anymore.” Tony said quietly. “It’s fine Yinsen, I don’t think we need to ___”

“I know it still hurts you.” the doctor interrupted. “And I need to see to your stitches, make sure they are healing together.”

“Doctor—”

“There was so much damage, Tony.” Yinsen cut him off again. “Do not risk more damage because you are stubborn. A few more exams and we will be done, the scarring is already extensive, it will be _worse_ without the proper care. Or do you enjoy your chest looking as if you were torn apart by an animal and then put back together by a drunk doctor with shaky hands.” He widened his eyes theatrically. “Oh _wait_, now that I think about it, that is what actually happened, isn’t it? Or at least, that’s the story you told _me_, isn’t it?”
“Alright!” Tony agreed with a groan, holding up his hand to quiet the doctor. “Alright, tonight after I am done with my grading for the evening, I’ll stop by and let you see.”

“Thank you.” Yinsen inclined his head down the street where Steve had stopped to talk with yet another person. “And then once you are feeling better, a little less self conscious about your scars, perhaps you could give our Sheriff a chance, hm?”

“Having you stitch me up, and accepting court from an Alpha are two very different things.” Tony said dryly. “Don’t push it.”

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The mansion that sat at the base of the mountains behind Wildrock was off limits to all but specifically invited guests, and there were very few people who had ever seen past the front gate.

Virginia ‘Pepper’ Potts was a mysterious woman who was rumoured to own gold mines in California, oil fields in Pennsylvania, and plantations in the south, and while no one knew for sure where her money came from or where it went, they all knew she was fabulously wealthy, to the point of making even Alpha Mayor Thompson look like a pauper.

The Omega female had no mate to speak of, only a handful of servants, and came and went in her elaborate carriage drawn by four matched horses, curtains firmly drawn so no one would catch a glimpse of her.

Steve was shocked to get an invite to her home at all, and even more shocked that the invite was for high tea.

High tea? He didn’t even drink tea.

Nevertheless, Steve dressed up in his finest clothes and found himself sipping tea from a horrifyingly dainty tea cup, sitting in the frilliest parlor he had ever seen across from an Omega who was stunning enough to render him absolutely speechless.

Virginia Potts was gorgeous, and very clearly laughing at him from behind her own tea cup.

“Sheriff Rogers, I must insist you relax!” she demanded good naturedly. “If you sit any stiffer I might think you are a doll!”

“Forgive me.” Steve forced his tongue to work, forced a smile to his face. “Your invitation was a surprise and I will admit to being slightly… out of my element.”

“And here I thought Alpha’s were never out of their element.” She was teasing, green eyes sparkling. “If only the other Omega’s knew all it took were a few lace doilies to turn our brave Alpha Sheriff into a docile, quiet thing, I’m sure you would be invited for tea at every Sunday afternoon.”

“Heaven forbid.” Steve muttered and took a large gulp of the tea, an interested hm! when he realized how good it was.

“And your time back East?” she inquired. “Distasteful I’m sure, but completed now, is that correct? No more of Rumlow or his gang left to terrorize our little community?”

“No ma’am.” Steve shook his head. “I was there until they put him in the ground. We don’t have to worry about him anymore.”
“My condolences.” Ms. Pott’s eyes darkened in sympathy. “Regardless of the man Rumlow became, I know at one point he was a close companion to you and your Deputy Barnes.”

“At one point.” he agreed, putting his now empty tea cup on the saucer. “Now, if you don’t mind me asking, Ms. Potts–”

“Pepper, please.”

“Pepper. Why did you invite me for tea? I have a feeling it wasn’t just to chat.”

“Ah.” Pepper set her own cup down and folded her hands neatly in her lap. “Of course, our ever diligent Sheriff, seeing right through my ruse. You are correct, I didn’t invite you just to chat.”

“Right.” Steve blew out a deep breath and leaned forward anxiously. “Something is wrong then? A shipment of goods has gone missing, or you are expecting one in and need additional man power? Something from the bank maybe? You are being threatened by the–”

“No no, nothing like that.” Pepper waved her hand quickly. “No, oh my I should have assumed that your first thought would be that I needed something. No, I’m afraid my intentions are much more meddlesome than that.”

“…meddlesome.”

“Of course.” Pepper wrinkled her nose at his cautious expression. “Tell me, Sheriff Rogers, how are you getting along with our new school teacher?”

“You too?” Steve groaned and slumped back onto the couch, his attempt at politeness left behind in a wash of annoyance. “You are trying to match us too?”

“I am doing nothing of the sort!” Pepper’s pretty mouth dropped open in surprise. “I was simply asking! Should I take this to mean that you don’t approve of him? How dreadful!”

“Jesus Christ–”

“Language! Sheriff Rogers, honestly!”

“Apologies.” Steve cleared his throat and tried again. “Ms. Potts, uh Pepper, ma’am– I have no issue with Mr. Carbonell. As a schoolteacher he seems well liked by the children, and all the parents but Mayor Thompson, but things have been quiet on that front as well lately. I don’t know him personally but–”

“But that’s not for lack of trying on your part, is it?” She interrupted, a very unladylike smirk on her face as she watched the Sheriff turn an unbecoming shade of red. “I’ve heard you are being persistent and yet a perfect gentleman in your pursuit of our favorite Omega, is that true?”

“I have been trying to be polite…” he said warily. “And yes, persistent, but I don’t think I’m being inappropriate.”

“Oh heavens no, if I thought you were being inappropriate to my friend then you and I would be having a very different conversation right now.” Pepper poured herself a fresh cup of tea. “No, there is never any question of that. I am simply wondering how the attempted courtship is going?”

“You and Mr. Carbonell are friends?” Steve asked instead. “I wasn’t aware of that.”

“I was the one to encourage him to come this way to teach for us.” Pepper replied easily. “It’s a
terribly long story involving old friends and families back East, but in a round about way I have known about Mr. Carbonell for most of my life, and I knew he would be an excellent match for Wildrock. Whether he is an excellent match for you, Sheriff Rogers, is another question though, isn’t it? What exactly is your interest in Tony?”

“Companionship.” Steve admitted. “It has been brought to my attention several times by my deputies and every other busy body in town that I am apparently desperately lonely, and after some thought, I have to agree. It’s been a long time since I’ve had an Omega catch my eye and Mr. Carbonell–”

“–is very eye catching.” Pepper agreed. “Yes, he is. And he isn’t responding well to your advances?”

“Uh–”

“Don’t be so shy, Sheriff.” The Omega crossed long legs as she leaned back into her seat. “Tony has been shockingly sparing with any details about this particular situation, and even though you and I don’t know each other all that well, I’m sure we will become great friends once this has run its course. So please–” an encouraging motion. “–please. Tell me how things are going.”

“Mr. Carbonell has shown little to no interest in me.” Steve said bluntly. “Even in a platonic sense, much less in a romantic sense, and even though he seems to need–” he stopped abruptly and put his hands up, not wanting to explain the uneasy vibe of scared he got from the Omega. “He isn’t interested.”

“You see it, don’t you?” Pepper’s eyes narrowed, her gaze sharpening. “You see it in him?”

“I see what, ma’am?”

“How badly he needs to be protected?” she whispered. “How badly he needs to be saved? You can see it, even though he pretends to be fine.”

Steve’s heart hammered to a stop. “You know about it?” he asked in a near whisper as well. “Do you know why? Or what happened–?”

“It’s not my story to tell.” she denied, her voice still soft. “But I would like to think you are the Alpha to protect Tony for us. You wouldn’t mind terribly, would you? If I asked you to keep an eye on him? It wouldn’t be too much of a bother?”

“Of course I wouldn’t mind.” Steve said automatically. “As Sheriff, it’s my duty to keep an eye on any and all of the citizens of Wildrock.”

“I’m aware that it’s your duty.” Pepper reached for his hand, squeezing it with her slim fingers. “But I am asking you for more than that. If you are pursuing a courtship with Tony, then all the better, but even if you decide to pursue another, more amenable Omega, please keep close to our school teacher. I am happy to accommodate you with additional pay or–”

“No.” Steve squeezed her hand back. “Ms. Potts, I have no intention of moving on to another Omega, Mr. Carbonell still holds my interest and I wouldn’t feel right about accepting extra money from you for doing my job while hoping for his attention but can you tell me why–”

“I can’t.” she let his hand go with a regretful sigh. “I don’t even know the whole story, and the pieces I do know are horrifying. It is up to Tony to share it with you, if you can earn his trust. Just be careful with him, he is more fragile than that sass-mouth of his lets on.”

“I’ll be careful.” Steve stood when Pepper did, shaking her hand as they said their goodbyes. “Thank
you for the invitation, Ms. Potts.”

“Thank you for visiting, Sheriff Rogers.” The butler appeared to show him to the door, and just as he was leaving, Pepper called, “Sheriff Rogers! Perhaps Tony would respond better to seeing how well you can protect him, not how much of a gentleman you are! Omega’s swoon faster for muscles than we do for manners!”

Well.

Steve didn’t know what to think about that.

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(Slight TW here for mentions of domestic abuse. Steve cold clocks the asshole though, so everything ends just fine)

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For the citizens of Wildrock, a domestic disturbance wasn’t something that required a Sheriff’s presence, usually just a husband wandering home drunk to a fed up wife, a lovers spat turned loud. 

Rarely were the deputies involved unless something was really wrong, or someone was in danger, so when word came in the evening of a disturbance at the Keener house involving the children, all four of the officers bolted from the office, running as fast as they could towards the other end of town.

Steve’s heart was pounding in his chest, fear clogging up his throat that if the children were hurt—

No.

No, thank god.

A quick look around showed only Mrs. Keener’s current boyfriend shouting at Harley, who was screaming back at the top of his lungs, so Steve motioned for Sam and Clint to hang back while he and Bucky went up to the small house.

“Don’t you treat my ma like that!” Harley was yelling, fists balled up at his sides. “You don’t even live here! You got no right to touch her a’tall ‘specially if you’re gonna hurt her!”

“You don’t watch your mouth and you won’t live here either!” the Beta male shouted back. “You little punk! Didn’t no one tell you to respect you elders! Jus’ cause you think you’re gonna be an Alpha don’t mean you can mouth off!”

Great. Richard Moll was drunk again, enough to be swaying on his feet and slurring his words and Bucky muffled a curse, torn between feeling sorry for Mrs. Keener somehow always attracting deadbeats— and angry that she continued to let them around her children.

“You’re nothing but a worthless Beta!” Harley spit at Moll’s feet. “Don’t work, don’t help my ma, just drink and lay around and—”

“Boy, you better shut your mouth—!” Steve was stepping forward to put a stop to it all, mid step actually, halfway through shouting for Richard to stand down, when he was nearly knocked off his feet by Tony, who shot past him and grabbed at Harley’s arm.

“Harley Keener! What the hell do you think you are doing!?”
“He yelled at my momma!” Harley snapped, tugging away from Tony and looking as if he had every intention of trying to punch the Beta male out. “He can’t talk to her like that! He’s not my dad! He doesn’t even treat her right! He should be strung up by his knotless dick and–”

“HARLEY!” Tony’s jaw dropped. “How dare you use language like that in front of ladies!” he motioned to Harley’s sister, who had both hands over her mouth. “You know better than that!”

“Sorry Mr. Carbonell.” Harley sulked. “But he should be.”

“I’m sure that’s true.” Tony sent a frosty look towards the Beta. “Because every well bred man knows that you don’t raise your voice towards women and children, and since he apparently hasn’t learned that lesson someone should teach him, but that someone is not you, do you hear?”

Harley was still red, breathing hard and Tony brushed a curl off his forehead, steeling himself so he wouldn’t cry when Harley flinched away from the touch, the boy turning his face away as tears sprang to his eyes. “Get your sister and both of you come back to the schoolhouse.” Tony worked to keep his voice steady. “I’ll get you a snack and a drink and we can work on our arithmetic, hm?”

“That sounds terrible.” Harley curled his lip in disgust. “I don’t wanna do arithmetic.”

“Mr. Keener your math is atrocious and you will do arithmetic whether you want to or not!” Tony announced and motioned for the little girl to follow him away from the house, desperate to get the children far away from the situation.

“Deputy Barnes.” Tony nodded to Bucky and glared up at Steve, lowering his voice to a furious whisper. “Sheriff Rogers. Maybe you should do something about that man. This is the third time I’ve had to come get these kids, and there is a hand sized bruise on Harley’s face right now.”

“What?” The word broke from Steve on a heavy growl and Tony paled a little, pulling the children away with him. “There’s a what?”

Bucky stepped closer to explain, a hand on Steve’s arm to keep him from doing anything drastic. “Stevie, we showed up about a week before you got home in response to shouting and screaming. Mrs. Keener had bruises and we threw Moll into a cell, but she refused to press charges, swore up and down it was an accident so we couldn’t keep him and when he got out–” Bucky shrugged helplessly. “I didn’t know she took him back, but Stevie, we did all we could.”

“Did we?!”

“You know just as well as I do that we can’t do nothing if no one says anything.”

“The hell we can’t. This time he hit a kid and I’m standing right here. Gonna do a whole lot more than throw him in a cell.” Steve pushed past Bucky and headed for the stairs of the Keener house.

“Richard!” he snapped and the Beta gave him a surly look. “Get your ass down here so I can talk to you.”

“No thanks, Sheriff.” the Beta snorted. “Ain’t done nothin’ wrong, only reason your here is because that little bitch Omega raises a fuss anytime I raise my voice. Always over here interfering’ with those damn kids, sticking his nose in my business. What a man does in his own house is his own–argh!”

He yelped when Steve snatched him right off the steps by his collar, all but tossing the Beta into the yard.
“This isn’t your home.” Steve glared down at him. “This is Mrs. Keener’s home and those are Mrs. Keener’s children and this is my town so if you are leaving bruises on children in my town—?”

“Get off your high horse Sheriff!” Richard scrambled back to his feet. “You got no right to tell me how to discipline—”

Mary-Anne cried out and hid her face in Tony’s shoulder when Steve cocked a fist back and laid Richard out with a solid punch, most likely breaking his nose, at the very least bruising something badly as the Beta went down screaming and trying to keep the blood from splattering everywhere.

“Stand up.” Steve demanded, unbuttoning his shirt collar and rolling his sleeves up. “Stand up!”

Richard got to his feet slower this time and once he was standing solid, Steve clocked him again.

This time Richard didn’t get up at all.

“Put this trash in a cell.” Steve snarled and Bucky moved forward to do exactly that, hauling a barely conscious Richard to his feet and shoving him down the street towards the jail. Steve pulled a kerchief from his back pocket and wiped the blood from his knuckles before walking over to Tony and the children.

“Ms. Mary-Anne, I’m real sorry you had to see that.” Steve knelt down in front of the little girl and smiled apologetically. “But he needed to learn a lesson, didn’t he?”

“Did you hurt him?”

“I sure hope so.” a growl lacing the otherwise friendly words and next to him, Steve felt Tony shudder a little. “But I can promise you, honey, he won’t ever leave a bruise—” in a surprisingly gesture, Steve turned Harley’s chin to see the fresh marks on his cheek. “He won’t leave a bruise on your brother ever again.”

“Harley! Mary-Anne!” From May Parker, who was nearly running down the street to get to the children. “What happened!”

She didn’t have to ask the question, because one look at Harley’s face answered it perfectly, and the Alpha female’s eyes blazed as she stared over at where Bucky was still man-handling the Beta towards the jail.

“Richard Moll you son of a bitch!” she shouted. “You are damn lucky the sheriff is here or I would beat your ass from here to kingdom come, do you hear me? How dare you! How DARE—”

“Mrs. Parker.” Tony handed Mary-Anne off to her, hoping to avoid any more violence by giving the Alpha a child to hold. “I would appreciate very much if you would let Harley and Mary Anne sleep at your home? I’d love to take them to the school house, but I’m afraid I suddenly have plans tonight. “

“I thought you were gonna give us a snack.” Harley wiped his nose on his sleeve and scowled at Tony. “Huh? What happened to getting us a snack?”

“And I thought maybe you could use a break from the arithmetic.” Tony answered back, raising his eyebrows until Harley finally smiled a little. “Huh? Wouldn’t you rather hang out with Peter and Mrs. Parker than do sums with me all night?”

“Definitely.” Harley was trying not to cry again, and Peter shoved between the adults to put his arm over Harley’s shoulder. “Pete, we should um–could we maybe–”
“Come on, I’ll take you to climb the tree.” Peter turned Harley around and started heading back towards his own house. “You can wear my pajamas too, since you’re so short an’ all–”

“I’M NOT SHORT!” Harley hollered, and the two young men took off running, chasing after each other.

“Well, they will be fine.” May hefted Mary Anne higher into her arms. “Tony, would you like them both at school tomorrow, or should I wait until the bruise has faded?”

“Give them some time.” Tony kissed Mary Anne’s cheek. “Arithmetic and spelling can wait a day.”

“You’re good for this town, Tony.” the Alpha female nuzzled her nose into Mary Anne’s hair and reached for Tony’s hand. “Thank you.”

“It’s no problem.” Tony stood in the street and waved until May turned the corner, and then looked back to where Clint was talking to Mrs. Keener, checking her over carefully for any broken bones and letting her know the children were safe with friends, while Sam looked on with folded arms and a disappointed expression.

“Mr. Carbonell.” Steve was still trying to get the blood from his knuckles. “I appreciate your assistance in this. It’s always good to have someone the children trust close by.”

“Sheriff Rogers, you need to tell Sam to stop glaring at Mrs. Keener.” Tony narrowed his eyes at the Alpha Deputy. “It isn’t her fault that Moll is a bastard. Sometimes you don’t know the truth of your partner until it’s too late and someone is hurt. And even then, sometimes you don’t know how to break free. Tell him to stop glaring at her.”

Steve watched the Omega curiously for a minute, but Tony didn’t say anything else, only stood with his arms wrapped around his midsection, his shoulders slightly hunched.

“I’ll tell him.” Steve said slowly, and jogged towards Sam, whispering something in his ear that had the Deputy unfolding his arms and moving away, shooting an apologetic glance towards Tony as he did. Steve bent down to talk to Mrs. Keener for a long minute, before apparently hearing all he needed, and motioning for Clint and Sam to leave her alone.

“Are you alright?” Steve asked as he passed by Tony again, settling his hat firmly on his head. “You seem shaken up.”

“I’m fine, Sheriff Rogers, thank you.” Tony said automatically, and when Steve went to move past, Tony lay his hand on the Alpha’s forearm. “Um, Sheriff Rogers–”

Steve waited, trying not to stare at where Tony’s fingers played with his shirt sleeve. “Yes, Mr. Carbonell?”

“I know it’s a little late.” Tony wet his lips anxiously. “Sun setting and all that. But if you were still wanting to go for a walk? I am free this evening.”

“Oh?” Steve frowned a little. “Really? Why the sudden change of heart?”

“No particular reason.” Tony’s eyes flicked back towards the Keener home. “But, if you had some free time later tonight, after your dinner perhaps. Maybe you could collect me at the schoolhouse?”

“Yes.” Steve said quickly, scarcely able to believe it. “Yes, Mr. Carbonell–”

“It’s just Tony.” The Omega said absentmindedly, his hand rubbing up towards Steve elbow without
even noticing the movement. “My friends call me Tony.”

“Tony, then.” Steve let a bit of a rumble into the words, and Tony’s head snapped up, his eyes dilating in the fading light. “I’ll come by later.”

“Looking forward to it, Sheriff.”

Steve watched Tony walk away, partly because he couldn’t help himself, partly because Ms. Potts words kept running through his mind.

– Perhaps Tony would respond better to seeing how well you can protect him, not how much of a gentleman you are–

Maybe she had been right.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Yeehaw for Stony porn

Steve made his way to the school house as fast as he could without seeming too eager, not wanting Tony to feel rushed or put upon, or anything else that might change the Omegas mind about their impromptu date.

The thought of getting alone time with the Omega who filled his days with frustrating habits and shenanigans and filled his nights with—well, a different kind of frustration—had him jumpy and anxious, his blood already racing, having to work to keep the Alpha red from tinting his eyes.

This was just a walk. He had no reason to believe the night would be anything other than casual conversation, perhaps a few sweet smiles and hopefully hopefully end in a way that would make Tony more open to more of this sort of thing.

Steve wasn’t thinking about how wide the Omegas eyes had gone when they had spoken at the Keener’s, or how Tony had kept touching him as if he couldn’t help himself.

No. Steve wasn’t thinking about that because this was a friendly, casual walk between two adults simply trying to become friends.

That.. that was it.

Really.

By the time he made it to the school house, Steve had managed to tamp down his baser instincts and was feeling respectable once more, ready to have a quiet evening getting to know the school teacher just a little bit better.

It seemed a little forward to climb the steps to the apartment above the schoolhouse and knock right at Tony’s door, so Steve rang the bell at the front door of the school room, then stepped around the back to the stairs that led to Tony’s quarters.

He didn’t have to wait long for the door to open, and when Tony stepped out onto the landing, Steve took his hat off, straightening his hair and offering a welcoming and hopefully benign smile. No use clueing the Omega in to how excited he was about their perfectly innocent walk.

“Mr. Carbonell. Good evening.”

“I told you to call me Tony.” Tony smirked as he came down the stairs, stopping on the bottom one so he was eye level with the Alpha. “And how are you this evening Sheriff?”

“I’m well, thank you.” Steve turned his hat over in his hands nervously. “Any place in particular you would like to walk tonight? Or if you haven’t had a chance to explore the hills, I know a beautiful trail we could take that would lead us to—“

“I have to admit, Sheriff Rogers, I had no intention of going on a walk with you tonight.” Tony said
matter of factly, reaching out to hook his fingers into Steve’s shirt, tugging at him. “So sorry to
mislead you.”

“I—I—” Steve came forward willingly, if not thoroughly confused. “Mr Carbonell why did you say
yes to a walk if you didn’t want to—“

Tony yanked Steve forward and crushed their mouths together in a hard kiss, keeping Steve close for
a long minute before pulling away to drag in a harsh breath. “I just thought this sort of thing would
be more fun than a walk.”

“Yeah?” Steve stared into Tony’s eyes for a long minute, searching for any sign of… anything… to
explain what was going on, forcing away the instinct to take, to assume that the first kiss mean the
Omega was automatically ready for more. “Why’s that?”

“No particular reason.” Tony slid off the bottom step, suddenly looking up at Steve from a four inch
height difference, the new position making his eyes seem larger, his whole bearing more submissive
and the Alpha wanted to howl over it. “But we can still go for a walk. If you want. Or we could stay
here—” a hand at Steve’s thigh, trailing up towards his waist. “And find something else to do.”

The Alpha’s eyes blurred to red with want, a growl working from his chest and Tony whimpered out
loud over the display, but still managed to snark, “No? Not so much with the walk?”

“No so much.” Steve agreed, and this time Tony’s whimper was muffled in a kiss, the Alpha
wrapping both arms around his waist and nearly lifting him off the ground greedily, Steve’s already
limited restraint failing in view of such a willing pretty Omega.

“Sheriff—“

“Steve.”

“Steve!” Tony yelped when Steve bit at his lips before bending and sucking hot kisses down his
neck, sharp teeth dragging at his skin. “Steve- Steve—“

“You’re so sweet, Tony.” Steve panted, big hands creeping from Tony’s waist over his hips and
down lower, a murmured question answered with a needy, pleading mewl, the Omega shuddering
when Steve grasped at his ass, rocking him forward to grind their hips together.

“Oh so sweet for me, honey.” A bite in Tony’s ear lobe, slick tongue tracing the sensitive skin. “I
knew you would be, been thinking about this for weeks—“ Tony keened when the Alpha grabbed
him tighter, kneading at his ass and working lower to his thighs until Steve could lift him up with one
quick jerk. “Right here baby, just like that.”

Tony’s legs went around Steve’s waist automatically, the Alpha growling something about perfect as
he started climbing the stairs to Tony’s apartment.

“No. No.” Tony wiggled out of Steve’s grip, not an easy maneuver since they were mid step and
Tony was literally several feet off the ground, but he managed to get back down to the stairs and
started pulling Steve back to the grass.

“Tony—?”

“If we stay outside then we can count it as our walk.” Tony was breathless, giggling as Steve
practically leapt from the stairs to the ground and glommed Tony right back to his body, the Omega
backpedaling until they were pressed against the back wall of the school house.
“You still think this counts as a walk?” Steve asked, caging Tony in against the wall with one thick arm, the other hand at the small of Tony’s back, bending him into an arch. “Hm?”

“Well.” Tony was still laughing as he rubbed against the Alpha languidly. “I didn’t see you skipping over here did I—mmp!”

They were kissing again, a clear attempt on Steve’s part to shut Tony up but oh it was worth it.

Tony got his fingers tangled in Steve’s hair, sifting through the blonde strands and tugging enough to make the Alpha groan, his own mouth falling open on a gasp when Steve bit at his bottom lip coaxingly before shoving his tongue past Tony’s lips to taste him, sliding slick through the sweet mouth, swallowing the pretty pants and sighs from the Omega.

Steve wedged a thick thigh between Tony’s legs, digging his fingers into his hips to encourage him to move and Tony obeyed in an instant, rolling his hips in an easy movement that had Steve almost shaking, blue eyes bleeding even darker red with desire as the scent of slick filtered through the air between them.

“Omega.” He rumbled, fit his hand to the back of Tony’s neck to keep him still, possessive and instinctual, the Alpha overwhelmed by how good the Omega smelled, the desperate grasp of fingers, the way they slid together. “Are you wet for me? Sweet Omega, such a pretty—“

“No.” Every line in Tony’s body went stiff. “Steve no.”

Steve froze, stilling even though he kept holding Tony tight. “What? What do you mean no?” The word no was completely unexpected, sounding wrong when everything they were doing felt so right. “Are you okay? Omega—“

“No.” Tony said again, clearer this time. “Don’t do that.”

“Alright.” Steve let Tony go, stepped away completely to give them both some space, shaking his head to clear the red from his vision. “Alright.” A deep breath, counting to ten so the growl would be gone from his voice when he spoke.

“Can you tell me what I did wrong?” He asked carefully. “Was it the way I was holding you? Or grabbing you too tight? Or when I called you Ome—“ Steve’s mouth snapped shut when Tony started nodding.

“I’m sorry. I had forgotten that you didn’t like when I called you Omega before. I should have remembered.”

Tony was tense, his eyes shuttered, fingers clenching and unclenching nervously. “It’s fine.”

“It’s not fine. When we met in the bar and I called you Omega, you didn’t like it. I’m sorry, I should have been paying better attention and stopped before you got uncomfortable.”

Silence between them for a long minute, and then,

“I didn’t tell you to stop though.” Tony said quietly, carefully. “Just no, about that. Specifically. As long as you don’t call me that—“ Steve’s eyes widened hopefully. “—then we are okay.”

“Yeah?”

“It would be awful rude of you to abandon me before our walk was over.” Tony peeked up at the Alpha from beneath his lashes. “I didn’t take you for the rude sort, Sheriff.”
“Tony.” Steve chuckled a little, and their next kiss was careful, cupping Tony’s jaw gently, his thumb brushing over his cheek. “Alright?”

Tony’s answer was to tug at Steve’s belt until they were pinned together again, then rock forward to rub against the bulge still straining at the Alphas pants.

“Tony.” Steve groaned, his eyes falling shut against the friction. “Baby—“ his eyes opened again. “Is that okay to call you?”

“Everything except Omega.” Tony whispered, eyes soft over the Alpha trying to make sure he was alright. “Baby is fine.”

“Come here then, baby.” The kiss this time was much less careful and much more selfish, Steve tilting Tony’s head back to deepen the kiss, tapping at Tony’s jaw and murmuring let me in until Tony opened for him, warm and wet and oh so sweet, coming back for more and more until Tony had completely relaxed against him again, not a hint of anxious souring his scent.

“That’s perfect, oh sweetheart that’s so good.” Steve praised as they kissed, whispering into Tony’s ear as their hands started roaming, the touches more determined as they got carried away.

Tony started yanking at the buttons of Steve’s short, plucking at his hem, trying to get to skin, whining in frustration over the layers Steve was wearing. “It’s a hundred degrees outside.” He complained as he found another shirt under Steve’s plaid. “Why aren’t you wandering around topless?”

“I don’t want to give the other Omegas a heart attack.” Steve teased, and when Tony burst out laughing, Steve kissed him again just because he was so happy they had made it past that tense moment so quickly.

“I got it right here.” The Alpha pushed Tony’s hands away and wrestled the button down off his arms so he was just in his thin undershirt. The moment he was free, Tony instantly shoved his hands beneath the material, flattening his palms against Steve’s abdomen to feel the warmth pouring off him.

“Oh.” Tony sighed the word, a full body shiver making his breath catch. “Oh that’s better.“ he scratched down the rows of muscles. “You are so—Steve you are so—“

“Mmm.” Steve hushed with him another kiss, nipping and licking at each other’s lips, sucking and teasing with their tongues, pressing Tony harder into the building and rutting against his thigh, pushing that thick bulge into the vee of his hips until the Omega’s mouth was falling slack, panting too hard to even kiss properly, clutching at Steve’s waist to keep him close.

“Can I?” Steve breathed the words into Tony’s skin, his fingers dipping the slightest bit beneath Tony’s waistband. “Can I touch you like this?”

Tony only nodded against him, nosing over Steve’s neck and leaving tiny kisses as the Alpha started inching the fitted trousers down over the curve of Tony’s rear and to his thighs.

Loathe to leave Tony’s mouth, coming back again and again for longer and longer kisses, Steve shoved the pants as far as he could, then Tony kicked them the rest of the way off, giggling quietly as his feet got tangled.

“Oh Sheriff?” He tugged at Steve’s hair to distract him from nibbling across his collarbone. “A little help? This is fun but I feel like it will be less fun if you can’t get my legs open.”
Steve went to his knees without a seconds hesitation or protest, almost faster than Tony could blink, and the Omega squeezed his thighs together over a sudden rush of wet, a high pitched noise from his throat at the sight of the Sheriff kneeling in front of him.

Steve winked teasingly up at the Omega, just barely able to see the flushed cheeks and the way Tony was biting at his lip. “I’ve got you, baby.” He promised and made quick work of the Tony’s pants, tossing them in the grass somewhere behind them.

Then he fit a rough hand to the back of Tony’s bare calf, feeling the Omega shudder at the touch, before drawing it up to Tony’s knee, following the bend with his lips, listening to Tony’s breath come faster and faster as he moved up a smooth thigh and to—“

“Jesus Christ.” He croaked, unable to tear his eyes away. “What are you wearing?”

“Just a little something pretty.” Tony tossed his head back and moaned when Steve buried his nose in the lace and breathed out a low rumble. “Like to feel fancy under my clothes that’s all.”

He could hear the tremble in his own voice, the sassy words overlaid by how close to overwhelmed he was, and he knew the Alpha had heard it too when the softest, tiniest kiss was on his waist before Steve jumped back to his feet.

“Just like to feel fancy?” Steve echoed, not wasting another second before grabbing two handfuls of Tony’s ass, rubbing over the lacy briefs that had been hiding beneath his trousers. “Just a little something pretty? Tony it’s gorgeous, you’re so beautiful, I wish I could see these in the daylight.”

“Ah- well you could be lucky enough to—AH!” Tony cried out when Steve lifted him up again, directing long legs around his waist and balancing him against the wall. “—to see them if the daylight if you—” a hiss when Steve hooked an arm under Tony’s knee, opening him up even further. “—if you do a good enough job tonight.”

“A good enough job?” Steve was laughing, but he wasn’t really laughing, not as Tony’s hands found their way down his abs to his pants, tugging at the buttons on his fly. “You’ll wear these for me again?”

“I wear pretty things for myself.” Tony managed as he nearly ripped Steve’s pants open. “But you might benefit from them every once in a while.”

“I might benefit—“ Steve’s fingers dug into Tony’s hips when the Omega finally touched him, stroking up and down his still mostly covered cock. “Ah fuck baby, don’t stop—“

“God you’re big.” A purr from the Omega, vibrating though his body and curling the edge of the words. “Oh my god, you feel so big.”

“I’m all Alpha, sweetheart.” Steve growled, his eyes a solid red now, a steady rumble from his chest as Tony stroked over him. “All Alpha. Give me a second and I’ll show you exactly how much—“

Steve didn’t bother pushing his pants any further down his thighs than he needed, just enough to lift his cock free and nearly shouting when Tony’s hand closed hot around him. “Fuck Tony, you do that so good honey, touch me touch me, come on.”

“O-oh.” Tony stammered a little, his legs tightening around Steve’s waist when he felt the heavy length twitching beneath his palm, hot and solid, the scent of Alpha filling his nose until he could barely breathe. “Steve—“

Steve groaned and shoved forward into Tony’s grip, shifting his weight and adjusting his stance until
he could thrust again, the head of his cock slipping across the lace to Tony’s hipbone and back down. “Can I touch you?” He asked breathlessly. “Tony can I touch you? Please?”

“I think you better or I’m going to start thinking this is a one sided sort of thing.” Tony grinned, but then yelped and smacked his head snack against the wall hard enough to make himself see stars when Steve finally touched him, tracing him through the panties.

“I wouldn’t want you to think that.” Steve teased, still thrusting against Tony’s thigh, sighing over the softness, humming in satisfaction when the Omega cock jumped beneath his fingers. “Sweetheart will you let me—“ The Alpha bent his knees so he could change the angle, and the next push of his hips had him gliding over Tony’s base, behind his sac and bumping against his entrance. “Oh god that’s so good, Tony you are—“

“Steve,” Tony froze, his fingers tightening to almost painful in Steve’s shoulders when he felt the blunt tip against his hole. “Wait.”

“Not gonna go further than this.” Steve assured him, voice hoarse, body straining with the effort of holding his Alpha back, controlling the need to claim that rocked him when he felt the dampness of Tony’s briefs, Omega slick spreading wet through the fabric and over the head of his cock. “Is this alright?”

“Just this.” Tony said firmly, if not still a little dazedly and Steve crushed a kiss to his mouth in agreement, adjusting his hold so he could still keep a steadying hand on Tony’s ass, the other free to pet and play over Tony’s thighs and up to his waist, lingering over every hint of skin he could reach, wishing he had thought to get Tony out of his shirt and vest as well, wanting to rub his face over the Omegas chest and mark him with his scent.

“This is perfect.” Steve whispered. “Tony you’re perfect.” This time when he moved, Tony canted his hips up and they both yelled when heated flesh caught over a sensitive rim, the Alpha growling, the Omega whimpering.

It was heaven sliding against Tony like this, the texture of the lace driving Steve mad, the way the Omega was wetter and wetter with each pass until the panties were sodden and sopping wet, barely a barrier at all but still one Steve respected, rejecting the urge to just push them aside and slide into Tony’s body.

No, this was perfect.

Tony was making the sweetest noises as they moved together, grasping at Steve’s shoulders then down at his sides, gripping at his arms to feel the muscles flexing beneath his fingertips. Eager little sighs and quiet pleas for yes and more, Tony giving up his sass from earlier to lie pliant in Steve’s embrace, letting the Alpha move them together like he wanted.

Every time Steve pursed his lips for a kiss Tony gave it to him, every time Tony pulled at him, Steve was budging closer, holding him tighter and every time their hips met Steve’s breathing got a little rougher, every time he squeezed at Tony’s ass the Omega went a little more boneless, the dark brown eyes fluttering closed and pretty mouth falling open as they got closer and closer to—

“M’gonna come, Tony.” Steve grunted and Tony couldn’t do much more than wail as the Alpha thrust harder against him, his knot starting to swell, working a hand between their bodies to coax Tony closer to his edge too, trying to get them both there at the same time.

Tony’s nails left red marks down Steve’s back when the Alpha moved just right, the blunt head of his cock shoving hard against Tony’s hole and pressing for a few seconds before withdrawing to do
the same thing all over again, the motion familiar and tempting and if Tony would have been any
other Omega he might have yelled for the Alpha to rip his panties off, to hold him against the wall
and knot him, to come inside him, but Tony wasn’t that kind of Omega.

It didn’t matter anyway, because Steve held him close, hot and possessive and for the first maybe
ever Tony didn’t hate being held like that, so when Steve pleaded, “Tell me how to touch you
sweetheart, need you to come before me, want to see you—“

—it was enough, it was more than enough and one last push, one last thrust, another few seconds of
heat and pressure against him and Tony was lost, his back bowing, hiding his face in Steve’s neck
and whispering a broken Steve as he came in a rush between them.

“Tony.” Steve was just as quiet, reverent almost, and he fit as tight as he could between Tony’s
thighs as his cock started spurting thick and white, ruining the lace, mixing with the slick seeping
around the edges, rubbing himself through the mess until he was close to blacking out, lips sealed
over Tony’s pulse where he could taste the sweat, the desire, the barest edge of Tony’s scent.

“Can I—” Tony could barely talk, slurring his words but he reached low to palm over Steve’s knot
before closing his hand in a tight grip, and Steve yelled, jerking forward as he came again, the
pressure around his knot forcing him into a second orgasm before he had even come down the first.

He ground against Tony helplessly, hips moving in rough circles, pinning Tony down so he
wouldn’t go anywhere, groaning as the last bit of pleasure was wrung out of him.

“Tony.” He choked out when he could finally breathe. “Tony—“

The kiss they shared was sweet but uncoordinated, neither of them lucid enough to do anything
properly, Steve sagging against the wall with Tony still wrapped around his waist, their combined
release cooling on their stomach and down their thighs.

“Mmm.” Tony was the first to shift away, lifting his head from Steve’s shoulder and offering the
Alpha a cheeky smile. “Was your walk as good as my walk?”

“Oh my god.” Steve ran his clean hand through Tony’s hair and kissed him again. “Tony, honey that
was amazing. You are incredible.” Another kiss, his tongue soothing the marks where Tony had
nearly bit through his own lip.

“So sweet for me. I’ve been thinking about you, dreaming about you since the day we met and now
—“ he bumped their noses together affectionately. “I never thought you’d say yes to me. I’m going
to treat you so right, Tony. Gonna take such good care of you, I swear, you won’t need anything,
won’t have to want for anything, I’ll take care of—“

“One thing at a time, Sheriff.” Tony teased and covered Steve’s mouth with his hand. “Lets see if I
can stand before you start spouting ridiculous things.”

“Oh right.” Steve smiled sheepishly, biting his tongue so he wouldn’t keep talking. “Sorry.”

He helped Tony down onto the ground and looked around for the discarded trousers, turning his
back to put himself away, and to give Tony a minute to collect himself.

Apparently it was a minute too long, because when Steve turned back around, Tony was standing
with his arms folded, a carefully neutral expression on his face.

“This was adequate.” He said with a little smirk, none of his earlier sweetness in the words. “Thank
you. I’m sure I’ll see you in town tomorrow?”
“Um—“ Steve hesitated, unsure of how to deal with the sudden switch back to Tony’s usual behavior. “Tony, I thought we could—wait, I’m sorry did you say adequate?”

“Don’t look so put out Sheriff! ” Tony was already heading up his stairs. “I’m not complaining about it! Thank you for the walk! Good night!”

“Um—!” Steve was still stammering, still confused when Tony shut and locked the door to his quarters, the lamp in the window extinguished almost immediately.

Steve couldn’t do anything else but start walking back to town, trying and failing to understand exactly what had just happened.

Adequate? Steve was speechless over their moment together, his Alpha restless in his chest, roaring to go back and claim the Omega as his and the Omega thought he had been adequate?

Tony’s scent was perfect, his body was perfect. The way he smiled and teased and oh god the way he tasted.

Perfect.

Adequate?. He sighed as he unhooked Nomads reigns from the post at the Sheriff’s station. “This Omegas going to make me work for it, isn’t he?”

The big horse only nickered at him, and Steve’s mouth lifted in a half smile.

“I could handle a challenge.”
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

This chapter is hilarious

Remember, nice comments make updates happen faster!

“Morning Sheriff.” Sam looked up from the coffee pot when Steve walked through the door the next morning. “Bucky’s already here. Why are you so late?”

“Morning’ Sam.” Steve reached for a cup of his own. “Just took Nomad for a ride, it’s a beautiful morning, felt like a shame to miss out on it.”

“Um—” Sam shot a look over at his mate and Clint made a show of bending to peer up at the sky through the window. “A beautiful morning?”

“It’s raining cats and dogs out there Sheriff. Our versions of a beautiful morning must be very different. Clint took Sam’s cup of coffee and took an enthusiastic drink before making a disgusted face over the sugar. “Sammy, why do you add sugar to my coffee? I hate that. You know I hate that.”

“Wonky Omega.” Sam sighed and swapped out mugs, pressing the purple one into Clint’s hand. “It’s because you are drinking my coffee, just like you do every morning right before you complain about it.”

“Maybe you should make my coffee first like a decent Alpha and I wouldn’t have to steal yours.” Clint scoffed and when Sam snagged him close for a sweet kiss, Clint added, “And maybe I take a sip of yours because I know you like how I taste with sugar on my lips. Isn’t that nice of me?”

“Mmm.” Sam rumbled deep in his chest, a coaxing sound that had his Omega purring in response, urging Sam back to rub their noses together. “I do like how you taste with sugar lips. You are being awfully affectionate this morning, my mate.” Sam sat on his desk and pulled Clint between his legs. “Something particular on your mind?”

“Well now that you mention it, Alpha—” Clint tugged at Sam’s collar playfully. “You did get out of bed awfully early this morning and it was such a shame because I had fully planned on—”

“Both do you stop that.” Bucky ordered, coming in from the back room and cutting Clint off mid-sentence. “Last time Clint was feeling affectionate you guys made a mess on my desk and I had to burn it. Cut it out.”

“You didn’t have to burn it.” Clint protested, tilting his head so his Alpha would scent down his neck. “I told you I would wash it for you. Sanitize it. All of that sort of thing. It would have been good as new.”

“It would not have been good as new, and definitely had to be burned.” Bucky said flatly. “Stevie, why aren’t ya sayin’ something about these two? They’re getting gross again.”

“I think it’s sweet.” Steve was very obviously not listening, clutching his coffee to his chest and
staring out the window at the rain. “Leave them alone.”

“Uh… what?” Bucky’s mouth fell open. “What?”

“Did he just say he thought we were sweet?” Sam palmed over his mate’s ass, nipping at his ear lobe. “Maybe we will get away with destroying Bucky’s desk again.”

“As tempting as that is, Steve must have come down with a case of the crazies if he’s not snarling at us for being grabby with each other, Sheriff, you feeling alright?” Clint ignored his mates huff of annoyance and pulled away, crossing the office to put his hand to Steve’s forehead. “You don’t feel warm. Did you sleep okay? Feel a little woozy or anything?”

“I slept fine.” Steve bent and rubbed noses with the Omega, a distinctly fond motion, and one he rarely did. “Thank you for asking. Sweet Omega.”

“I’m scared.” Clint muttered, backpedaling into Sam’s arms. “He thinks our kisses are fine, he just booped my nose and called me a Sweet Omega, I mean what the hell is going on? Are we absolutely sure that’s Steve? Does he have an evil twin? Or a–” Clint shrugged helplessly. “A good twin?”

“I don’t know….” Sam said slowly just as Bucky blurted, “He got laid!”

“He what?”

“You WHAT?”

“I uh–” more incredible than the Alpha ignoring the mated pairs antics, more unbelievable than Steve nuzzling noses with Clint or riding Nomad in the rain—Steve blushed, his cheeks filling with a dull red that spread across his face to the very tips of his ears.

“I–I was joking.” Bucky’s jaw dropped and Steve started smirking. “Stevie, I was joking, but you really– oh god was it Tony?”

“What?” Sam’s eyes narrowed and Clint cleared his throat overly loud. “You and Tony did what exactly?”

“I asked him to go for a walk the other night.” Steve’s smirk turned into a full blown grin. “And he turned me down like he always does, but then after what happened at the Keener’s–”

“Horny little Omega couldn’t resist a show of strength huh?” Sam started laughing and Clint elbowed him viciously. “Ow! Come on, Clint, you know you are weak for when I get growly and righteously angry and all that!”

“Of course I do, but that doesn’t mean that Tony just up and accepted a date with Steve because the Sheriff knocked some asshole out.” Clint argued back. “I’m sure there’s more to the story than just that.”

“There uh– there really isn’t anymore to the story than that.” Steve admitted. “He told me he wanted to go for a walk, and when I walked over to pick him up…”

Both the other Alpha’s waited with raised eyebrows, Clint with an annoyed frown.

“…well. His idea of a walk and my idea of a walk were very different.” Steve wet his lips. “And now I’m in a very good mood.”

Bucky dropped his head back and outright howled, Sam banging on the table for emphasis, both of
them calling for details, ribbing Steve for being a dog, a predator, and all sorts of general Alpha-things that Clint apparently disapproved of.

“I’m not listening to this.” Clint pushed away from Sam and grabbed his jacket off the hook. “I can’t listen to Alpha’s talk about my friend like that simply because he’s an Omega. It’s disrespectful and arrogant and I won’t stand for it.”

He stalked out the door in a huff, slamming it behind him as he went.

“Oh shit.” Steve ran his hand over his face. “Sam, please apologize to your mate to me, I didn’t mean any disrespect, and I shouldn’t have said anything about–”

“Stop.” the other Alpha put his hand up. “You know Clint better than to think he’s upset over a little cat-calling. Also, if you look out the window, you will see his adorable ass hightailing it down the street directly towards the schoolhouse, hustling to get there before the students come in so he and Tony can talk dirty about you.”

“What?” Steve twitched the curtains aside, and sure enough, Clint was jogging down the street in the pouring rain, jacket held over his head, tracking a path to the school. “Well, what do you know? There he goes.”

“Sheriff, I’m telling you.” Sam reached into his desk and pulled out a half empty bottle of whiskey, pouring a few shots and handing one to Bucky, the other pushed across the desk towards Steve.

“I’m telling you, that the way those two Omega’s talk make Alpha conversation sound like grade-school teasing. Nothing you can say right now is going to be half as dirty as what Tony tells Clint.”

“Yeah?” Steve picked up the shot of whiskey, glancing at the clock that still read seven am. “And this conversation requires alcohol before working hours?”

“You tellin’ me that after a night with Tony ya don’t feel like a celebratory bit’a whiskey?” Bucky challenged, tossing his own back and motioning for another.

“I do.” Steve admitted, picking up his own glass gingerly. “But why are you two drinking?”

Sam waited until Steve had started sipping at the drink to answer, “Just following orders, Sheriff. If you’re drinking, your deputies should be following in your foot steps, huh?”

Steve raised his glass in a silent salute and pounded the rest of it before sliding into the chair across from Sam, a goofy sort of smile on his face.

“Alright. So I went to the school house to pick him up for the walk–”

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“–and I didn’t want to go for a walk.” Tony continued wiping down the chalkboard without turning to look at Clint. “So I suggested that kissing might be more fun, and that was all there was to it.”

“No no no.” Clint shook out his jacket and hung it up to dry, stepping around the puddle he had created near the door. “I didn’t just run down the street in the pouring rain for you to tell me the abridged, school child appropriate version of this story. I want details and I want them now.”

“Clint–” Tony rolled his eyes and shook his head. “There isn’t anything else to the story.”
“You’re a horrible liar.” Clint snagged a peppermint from Tony’s candy jar and hopped up onto his desk. “Tell me everything. Who kissed who first?”

“Who kissed whom.” Tony corrected and when Clint just looked at him, he sighed and dusted the chalk from his hands. “I—I kissed the Sheriff first.”

“I knew it!” Clint’s eyes lit up eagerly and he made grabby hands so Tony would come closer. “Tell me everything. Was it a peck? A full blown smooch? Did you kiss him like you kiss me, or like I kiss Sam?”

“More enthusiastically than I kiss you.” Tony was starting to blush and Clint’s grin grew to silly proportions. “But I don’t think anyone kisses as messy as you and your mate do so—”

“I dunno about that.” Clint argued and tugged at Tony’s belt loops. “You and I kiss pretty enthusiastically sometimes. You might have to show me how you kissed Steve. I’m more of a hands on learner.”

“Horny Omega.” Tony mumbled but leaned in and pressed a kiss to Clint’s mouth, stroking along the other Omegas jaw until Clint opened with a quiet purr and Tony could deepen the kiss, running his fingers through Clint’s hair for a long minute before pulling away.

“That was nice.” Clint licked his lips when they parted. “But I’m sure your kiss with Steve was much more exciting.”

“Well.” Tony wrinkled his nose and busied himself with sharpening pencils for the children. “If by exciting, you mean that I all but threw myself off a step and into his arms to kiss him? Then you’d be right.”

“Wait wait.” Clint started laughing. “You jumped him? Big Alpha like that? Did he at least catch you?”

“Of course he caught me!” Tony flicked a sharpened pencil at his friend. “How much do you think I weigh?!”

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“His weight nothing at all.” Steve tipped back another drink with a confident smile. “Basically fell into my arms and holding him was the easiest thing in the world. He loved it. I could tell.”

“Yeah, yeah Omegas are weak for being held like they don’t weigh nothin’.” Bucky agreed. “So after you picked him up, what?”

“At least tell me you had the decency to suggest a real walk.” Sam cut in with a wave of his hand. “Because just assuming Tony meant sex is sorta—”

“Of course I asked.” Steve said irritably. “I was a perfect gentleman. I made sure he knew that I had only planned on walking with him, but then he kissed me and tried to get his hands in my pants and —”

“What? What a HORNY LITTLE OMEGA!!”

“I KNEW HE WOULDN’T BE A PRUDE!!”
“He’s definitely not a prude.” Steve knocked on the table so Sam would refill his glass. “And once he started pulling at my pants—“

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“I mean, I gave him a choice.” Tony had moved on to marking out the lesson plans for the day. “We could go on the walk or we could keep kissing. He chose to keep kissing.”

“Alright but how did you give him the choice?” Clint wanted to know, flipping idly through a text book.

“What do you mean?”

“You know damn well what I mean.” He tugged at Tony’s hair affectionately. “Did you back off and calmly suggest a walk? Or did you give his knot a grope and then suggest a walk?”

“First of all—” Tony’s face turned an unhealthy shade of red. “I did not grope him.” Clint raised his eyebrows and Tony added, “then. I didn’t grope him then. And sure I suppose putting a hand on his thigh wasn’t exactly playing fair but you know, he made the right decision.”

“Yeah?” Clint leaned forward, blue eyes sparking. “Did he pick you up? Did you melt over his arms? He’s got good arms.”

“I might have melted a little bit.” Tony bit at his lip so he wouldn’t smile so hard. “He has nice arms.”

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“We ended up outside.” The two Alpha deputies groaned in quiet agreement, knowing there was nothing quite as primal and satisfying as being with a partner beneath the stars. “Up against the schoolhouse.” He added and Bucky whistled low, impressed. “It was incredible.”

“An Omega willing to roll around in the grass with you?” Sam nodded in approval. “He’s a keeper.”

“Oh, you don’t have to tell me twice.”

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“Oh god.” Tony gave up trying to pretend he was busy and just hopped onto the desk next to Clint. “Clint. His arms. He held me up like it was nothing, I had my legs wrapped around his waist and he was grabbing at my butt and—”

“Yeah, no way he could resist this booty.” Clint patted at Tony’s ass with an appreciative leer. “Got your pants off?”

“Got to to his knees in front of me.” Tony’s eyes fluttered closed and Clint whined a little, the idea of an Alpha kneeling too much for the Omegas to handle. “Got on his knees and pulled them off.”

“Wait so that means he saw—“
“I’m never going to be able to look at him in those pants again.” Steve’s laugh was a little shaky. “Not now that I know he feels under them and what he wears—“

“What do you mean what he wears?” Bucky blurted.

“Got to see some lace, huh?” Sam cracked a grin and when Steve sent him a startled look, he shrugged. “Clint and Tony are messy, alright? I’ve had to pick up things Tony has left behind when he’s slept at our house.”

“Well then you know.” The Alpha couldn’t stop the growl dragging his words. “I didn’t even know I liked that sort of thing but—“

“Did you let him knot you!?”

“Clint! What kind of Omega do you think I am!”

“A slutty one!”

“Rude!”

“So.” Sam put the nearly empty bottle away, the alcohol making his voice mellow. “So did you discover our little school teachers innermost secrets?”

Bucky, who was a happy drunk, started giggling over Sam’s play on words and Steve, who could handle his liquor much better than the other two, simply rolled his eyes.

“No, Sam, I didn’t discover his innermost secrets. After I saw his uh— wardrobe choices— it didn’t take real long for us to finish anyway.”

“Hey.” Bucky elbowed Sam. “When does the long, patient arm of the law become a minute man?”

“Oh oh, I know this one. Is it when the Omega is wearing lacy knickers?”

“Hell yeah!” Sam and Bucky burst into laughter and Steve started blushing again.

“Thanks for that.”

“You know I don’t really like Alphas.” Tony was whispering into Clint’s ear, practically sitting on his lap now, their arms around each others waists as he re-told the details of his night with the Sheriff. “But the way he sounded when he said he was gonna come—“
“Jesus, Tony.” Clint muttered.

“I know.”

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“**He was so sweet when he came.**” Steve thunked his head onto the desk. “**I can’t stop thinking about it. How tight he held on to me, the way he said my name– I’m lost, guys. I can’t get him out of my head.**”

“But you didn’t–” Bucky made a rather vague but definitely crude motion. “**Not inside him?**”

“All over him.” Steve mumbled without lifting his head. “**Wish we would’a been inside so I could see him covered in me.**”

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“So your panties are ruined?” Clint said mournfully. “**The ruffle ones were my favorite!**”

“Completely ruined.” Tony leaned his head into Clint’s shoulder. “**Not only were they soaking wet but it’s basically impossible to clean silk, especially when an Alpha has finished against them so—**”

“Jesus, you let him come all over you?” Clint whispered. “**I thought he came on your thighs or—**”

“**Some of it got on my thighs.**” Tony mumbled, then yelped when Clint bit at him. “Ow! **What!**”

“**Dirty Omega. Letting an Alpha make a mess of you like that.**”

“You’re just jealous.” Tony finally looked up he could kiss Clint properly. “**Aren’t you?**”

“**Probably.**”

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“Did you stay the night? Is that why you were late?”

“Ah, no.” Steve sighed and shook his head. “**No, after we were done, Tony was pretty quick to leave.**”

“**Leave?**” Sam frowned. “**He’s usually a cuddler.**” Alarmed looks from both Steve and Bucky, so he explained, “**When he stays the night, he and Clint are basically glued to each other. I’ve never been more unwanted in my home in my entire life, I swear.**”

“So if he’s a cuddler, why’d he leave so quick?” Bucky countered. “**Steve’s a great cuddler!**”

It was Sam’s turn to look alarmed and Bucky shrugged. “**Look at him, Sam. He’s practically a teddy bear. You wouldn’t want to cuddle that?**”

“**Anyway!**” Steve cleared his throat loudly when Sam started snickering. “**Anyway, he left pretty quickly, so I came straight home. I just slept in a little this morning, that’s all.**”
“Did he say anything?” Sam pressed. “Anything about why he didn’t want you to stay or—?”

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“So, let me get something straight.” Clint narrowed his eyes at Tony, waiting until the other Omega started blushing to continue. “Sheriff Steve Rogers, an Alpha that is so pretty that OTHER ALPHAS have actually propositioned him, picked your ass up, pinned you against a wall- which is super hot by the way- and proceeded to give you the best orgasm of your life-—”

“I didn’t say it was the best!” Tony objected.

“Right, right. You said you might have blacked out a little though. That’s completely different.”

“DO YOU HAVE A POINT!?!”

“Yeah Tony, I do. There’s probably scorch marks in the building from where you two were heating things up and you told him he was adequate? Damn, you probably gave him a complex!”

“What else was I supposed to say?” Tony cried defensively. “I was polite! Said thank you and that I would see him later! It wasn’t like I was rude to him!”

“I don’t want to tell you how to talk post sex.” Clint rolled his eyes. “But I can guarantee I’ve never turned to my mate and said ‘wow, Sam, that was adequate, thank you.’”

Tony winced. “Alright, yeah that sounds bad, doesn’t it?”

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“HE SAID YOU WERE ADEQUATE!” Bucky fell right out of his chair laughing, landing on the floor with an ooph and a cackle. “Oh my god!”

“Alright alright.” Sam was wiping tears away from his eyes, turned from Steve so he wouldn’t have to see the horribly affronted look the Alpha was wearing. “So you finish, he’s all trembly and sweet, you’re promising to take care of him and he says—”

“That was adequate, thank you.” Steve repeated. “I don’t see why that’s so funny to you.”

“Stevie. Stevie.” Bucky hauled himself back into his chair and tried to calm down enough to breathe. “I dunno if you know this? But you’re sposed t’leave an Omega shaky and speechless, ya know? Not coherent enough to give ya a passin’ grade and a thank you note!!”

He and Sam lost their minds laughing again and Steve ground his teeth together so hard he thought they actually might crack.

“It is not.that.funny.”

That just set the other Alpha’s all over again and Steve snatched his hat, jamming it on his head and mumbling about asshole Alpha’s before stomping out the door and into the slowing rain, heading for the schoolhouse.

“Oh man we hurt his feelings.” Bucky managed over a few more chuckles. “Poor fragile ego of his and all.”
“Really though.” Sam gasped a breath. “Really, have you ever been with anyone and they used the word adequate to describe you? EVER?!!”

“Maybe Steve isn’t as blessed as we are.” Bucky suggested, tugging at the front of his pants meaningfully. “I mean, he was a small guy back in the day. Maybe the growth spurt didn’t extend past his waist.”

Sam stared at him for a few seconds, and then cracked up again, nearly screaming with laughter.

“ADEQUATE!”

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“You’re lucky you’re pretty Tony.” Clint sighed in exasperation. “Any other Alpha wouldn’t ever talk to you again for calling him adequate, but our Sheriff is a stubborn, determined sum’bitch and he’s not going to let you get away.”

“What do you mean by that?” Tony frowned at him, straightening the last few things in the classroom. “He’s not going to let me get away?”

“I mean he’s walking up to the door right now and is looking awful determined.”

“What!”

“Love you, bye!” Clint smooched a kiss to Tony’s cheek, and skidded around Steve as the Alpha opened the door to the schoolroom. “Well heya Sheriff, fancy running into you here!”

“Clint.” Steve tipped his hat at the Omega before turning back to Tony. “Mr Carbonell. Do you have a moment we could talk?”

“Ah Sheriff.” Tony cleared his throat awkwardly. “My students will be here in about fifteen minutes so–”

“It won’t take more than a few minutes.” Steve assured him, and just as Tony was opening his mouth to offer another excuse, he caught sight of Clint in the window, vigorously nodding yes and flashing thumbs up signs.

“Very well.” Tony waved Steve through the door. “What can I do for you today, Sheriff Rogers?”

“Well, I–” Steve snatched his hat off his head, smoothing a hand through his hair. “I thought I should drop by and tell you how much I enjoyed our evening last night.”

“That’s very kind of you.” Tony was fighting to keep a smile off his face, watching Clint’s enthusiastic antics through the window. “I enjoyed it as well.”

“You seemed disappointed with how the evening concluded.” Steve continued and Tony felt himself start to blush. “So I was wondering if you had any preferences for how our next date might go, so I can leave you feeling more than adequately–” he raised an eyebrow and Tony wanted to die. “–satisfied with our time together.”

Our next date? Damn it.

“Sheriff Rogers, I have no intention of having a second date with you.” He said quietly, but firmly. “Our evening together was perfectly nice, and you were very sweet to me when I needed you to be,
but I think I made it clear before that I am not looking to be matched with an Alpha at all, and I am sorry if you took what happened last night to be anything more than a one time thing.”

“A one time thing.” Steve repeated. “I see. So you aren’t in fact, wanting to be courted? Or called upon? Or anything like that?”

“Nothing like that at all.” Tony murmured. “And I’m sorry if you felt like I was leading you on, it wasn’t my intention. Apologies, Sheriff.”

“No apologies needed.” Steve assured him and Tony was struck by how confident the Sheriff suddenly looked. “Since we aren’t bound by courting protocol and manners, is there a chance I could be frank with you?”

“Um, please.” Tony said, thrown by the change in the Alpha’s demeanor. “By all means, frankness and honesty are traits that I prefer in my--”

“Tony.” Steve was suddenly in his space, leaning down to rumble in Tony’s ear, his voice just a notch above a growl. “Next time we take a walk together, I fully intend to have you speechless, shaking in my arms and too weak kneed to stand on your own. Purring because you are so very very satisfied, unable to even remember what the word adequate means, do you understand?”

“I–I understand.” Tony stammered, holding onto every inch of his self control so he wouldn’t whimper when Steve’s blue eyes slid to red.

“And if you happen to be wearing a little something pretty,” Steve continued. “A little something lacy– I am going to make my very best effort to ensure that you can never wear something like that again without remembering how I felt between your legs.”

“Oh--” Tony reached behind him to grab the desk as his knees went weak, and Steve straightened with a polite, charming smile.

“Have a wonderful day, Mr. Carbonell. I’m sure I’ll see you around the town.”

“G-G-good day, Sheriff Rogers.” Tony squeaked and watched shamelessly as the Alpha strutted away, tipping that stupid hat to Clint, who was still hanging around.

“Uh Tony?” Clint peeked his head back inside the schoolhouse. “Alright?”

“Clint, be a darling and stay here to greet the children, would you?” Tony stood up straight, a falsely calm expression on his face. “I need to step up to my quarters for just a moment, I’ll be right back down.”

“Did he make you wet?” Clint was already laughing. “You randy thing, did the Sheriff growl for you and now you mussed your panties?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Tony snarled, and Clint snarled right back, grabbing Tony close for a teasing kiss. “Just give me a minute.”

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“You look proud of yourself.” Bucky noted when Steve came back to the station. “Why do you look so proud of yourself?”
“No reason.” Steve said with a cocky grin, setting his Stetson on his desk. “No reason at all.”

He was already formulating a plan for his next walk with the pretty school teacher.

_Adequate? He thought with a snort. We will just have to see about that._
A knock on the schoolhouse door had Tony looking up from the lesson in annoyance, the children taking the interruption as the perfect opportunity to start chattering about anything and everything, the classroom going from quiet and well behaved to out of control just that quickly.

“Children!” Tony raised his voice. “Certainly you didn’t think that a simple knock means that you can wreak havoc during school hours!”

“But I want to loose the dogs of war!” Peter cried, leaping off his desk and raining various sized paper-crafted projectiles down on Harley’s unsuspecting head.

“Excellent Shakespeare reference.” Tony couldn’t help his smile because damn it Peter was a good kid. “But if you don’t stop loosing the dogs in my classroom you will be picking up every single piece of scattered detritus from the floor on your hands and knees for the next seven recesses, do you understand?”

“What’s detritus?” Peter was still perched on his desk, a wadded ball of paper still raised uncertainly as he contemplated whether or not that had been a threat. “Is it… is it bad?”


“Thank you, Ms. Jones.” Tony said lightly. “Mr. Parker, off the desk please and thank you. Mr. Keener, don’t you dare throw that slate, I am well aware that the attack was unprovoked, but in times of war what do we do?”

“Attempt to find a diplomatic solution.” Harley muttered, lowering his slate back to his desk and glaring at Peter.

“And in the spirit of Ms. Jones’ impromptu vocabulary lesson, our diplomatic solution will be looking up detritus in the dictionary and copying the definition ten times each while I speak with our visitor.” Tony clapped his hands. “Thank you!”

The children grumbled and Tony said louder, “Thank you!”, waiting until they had settled down before finally making it to the door.

“Oh, Sheriff Rogers.” He blinked up at the Alpha in confusion. “I wasn’t expecting to see you today. What brings you to the schoolhouse?”

“Nothing in particular. I just thought it was a good time to bring these around.” From behind his back, Steve produced a big bouquet of flowers wrapped in a swatch of pretty paper. “Am I interrupting anything?”

“My class.” Tony said bluntly. “You’re interrupting my class. A vocabulary lesson, to be exact.”

“I’ll make this very quick then.” Steve smiled politely. “Do I mind if I take these inside?”

“Sheriff Rogers.” Tony glanced back to make sure the children were alright, and then stepped out onto the front porch, closing the door halfway behind him. “These flowers are beautiful, and I—” he flushed a little pink and the Alpha had hard pressed not to growl over it. “I love them, I do. But I thought we had agreed that I am not looking to be courted in any way, shape or form and while I appreciate the gesture, bringing flowers while I am working is highly inapp—”
“Oh, you think the flowers are for you?” Steve interrupted. “No, Mr. Carbonell. You were very clear about not wanting to be courted. Why would I be bringing you flowers? That’s completely absurd.”

“Well, I–” Tony huffed a little, not sure what to think of Steve’s attitude. “Who else would you bringing them for?”

“It’s RiRi’s birthday today.” An absolutely winning smile from the Sheriff, and Tony’s heart– traitorous thing– sped up a few beats. “Or didn’t you know?”

“Well!” The Omega suddenly looked equal parts surprised and annoyed and Steve loved every second of it. “Of course I was aware that it’s Ms. Williams birthday! I have a cake waiting to be shared with the class after recess!”

“Well then. I hope your frosting matches the flower I bought for her.” Steve moved past Tony easily, pushing open the door to the classroom and delivering the flowers right to a furiously blushing, pleased but embarrassed RiRi. Liz was practically swooning over the Alpha Sheriff being so sweet, Peter and Harley staring in disgust, Tony just staring.

“Happy Birthday Ms. Williams.” Steve said quietly. “I’m sure if your Papa was here he would want you to have these.”

“Thank you Sheriff Rogers.” RiRi buried her nose in the flowers. “He’s going to try and come home next week.”

“Make sure you tell him to come and see me.” Sheriff smiled down at her one more time, and waved to the rest of the children before heading out the door.

“Sheriff Rogers.” Tony snagged the Alpha’s sleeve. “Why would Mr. Williams need to come see you?”

“Because working the gold mines in California is difficult on his family.” Steve said matter of factly. “And Wildrock has grown enough that I could use another deputy, and with his background in the military, Mr. Williams would make an excellent addition to my team.”

“You– you want to give her father a job.” Tony said blankly. “To make life easier on her family.”

“Yes.”

“After bringing her flowers.”

“Yes.”

“Huh.” Tony narrowed his eyes. “Why?”

“Because I’m a good man.” Steve let his voice deepen a touch until the Omega’s eyes sparked in interest. “And a good Alpha. And I take care of the ones that matter to me.”

“Oh.” Tony squeaked, and couldn’t do more than stand there with a foolish smile while Steve tipped that stupid hat and swaggered on his way.

“Oh.” he said again, a little breathless at the thought of such a strong Alpha being so considerate. “Oh my.”

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“What are you doin’, Stevie?” Bucky paused in mid step, frowning over at his friend. “Are you– Are you fixing a bar stool?”

“Sure am, Buck.” Steve had his bottom lip caught between his teeth as he concentrated on smoothing the edges of the new seat. “Why do you ask?”

“No particular reason.” Bucky narrowed his eyes. “Except that the last time you tried to fix anything you ended up putting a nail through your thumb and I had to use you as a door knocker. Remember that?”

“First of all,” Steve growled in annoyance. “You didn’t have to use me as a door knocker–”

“Nope, I sure didn’t but seeing you crying against the door because there was a three inch nail through your thumb was too funny to pass up and your head made such a lovely thunking noise when it hit the door so–”

“Second of all, that happened when I was fifteen–”

“You literally hit your hand with a hammer last week.”

“–do you have a point!?”

“Yeah, Stevie, I do. I love ya but you’re worthless with this sorta thing.” Bucky threw his hands up in exasperation. “What the hell are you doin’?”

“Valkyrie needed it fixed and I offered to do it for her.” Steve explained, reaching for his hammer. “It’s the Sheriff’s job to help out around town, and Valkyrie has always kept a spot open in her tavern for us and to show my appreciation–”

“You’re courting Tony..” The other Alpha interrupted. “Aren’t you?”

“I am doing no such thing.” Steve denied. “Mr. Carbonell made it painfully clear that he is in no way interested in being courted.”

“You’re courting him by doing nice things for the people he loves!” Bucky crowed. “You sly dog! Trying to pull a fast one on the school teacher!”

“I’m not trying to pull a fast one.” Steve cursed when he hammered his hand, cursing again when he heard Bucky snort over it. “It’s the Sheriff’s job to help out–”

“–around the town. Right right.” Bucky’s eyes twitched red mischievously. “If you wanted, I could chuck a rock through the school window and then you could help around the town in plain view of the Omega, huh?”

“I cannot condone you breaking windows, Buck, you’re a Sheriff’s Deputy.” Steve set the stool upright and eyed it critically. “But it is Tuesday, and I need to get this stool back to Valkyrie’s, so if you’d like to accompany me–”

“Right. And you just happen to be returning a stool to her on the day that Tony always has dinner there? Convenient.”

“It’s a little convenient.” Steve answered vaguely. “Do you want to go with me or not?”

“Just tell me somethin’, Stevie.” Bucky hefted the stool over his shoulder and followed Steve out the door. “Are you sweet on our school teacher? Or jus’ looking to get your knot wet again? Cos this is
an awful lot of work for one more night, huh?”

“For the last time, I’m not courting him.” He insisted. “Simply doing some good work around town and if Tony happens to notice, then all the better.”

“Ah. Already in love with him, huh?” The Alpha smirked when Steve turned bright red. “Don’t worry. He’ll learn to love ya even though you’re a doofus.”

“I’m not courting him, Buck.”

“Nah. A’course you’re not. Not at all.”

Mr. Carbonell.” Steve held the door to the post office open for Tony since the Omega had his arms full of packages. “How are you today?”

“I’m well, Sheriff Rogers.” Tony could barely see over the stack of boxes in his arms, all new books for his students since the schools little library was sorely lacking in the classics. “And you?”

“Well, thank you.” Steve tipped his hat to a young mother as they passed her on the street. “Books for the children?”

“That’s right.” Tony tripped and nearly fell, barely holding onto his packages, and quirking an irritated eyebrow when the Alpha didn’t even blink in his direction. “I had several boxes in storage back home, and I wired and asked that they be sent this way. Whatever isn’t appropriate for the children I will keep for myself.”

“Do you own many inappropriate books, Mr. Carbonell?” Steve still wasn’t looking at Tony, but he still caught the rather embarrassed flush that climbed the Omega’s cheeks.

“I hardly think that’s any of your business.” Tony said stiffly.

“Of course not. My apologies. What sort of thing you read in your free time is no ones business but your own.” Steve raised his hand to wave to another couple. “Well, I will leave you to your packages, Mr. Carbonell. Have a good rest of the day.”

“Um–” Tony’s mouth fell open when Steve turned and walked away abruptly, unable to believe that the usually over-polite Sheriff hadn’t even offered to help with his boxes, unable to believe the Sheriff had insinuated that Tony read those kind of books, unable to help his blush because one of the boxes was in fact entirely those types of books and good Lord wasn’t that embarrassing?

Then annoyance, hot and sharp with an uncomfortable tinge of jealousy when he saw the Alpha take a hat box from the hands of Ms. Everhart, a pretty Omega with gorgeous blond hair, who giggled and tittered and batted her eye lashes as the Sheriff offered his arm to accompany her down the street.

“Rude.” Tony muttered, and went on his way.

Monsoon season brought the heavy rains, thunder and lightning and downed trees were inevitable, so when one of the giant cottonwoods came crashing down and nearly destroyed the mercantile, all
the available men came running with their axes and saws to take it apart, chopping it into firewood to
give out to whomever needed it.

Naturally, it was mostly the Alpha’s out there working at it, and naturally the Omega’s were
gathered around to watch, especially once the Sheriff’s department chipped in to help, Steve and
Bucky stripping off their shirts to tackle the huge tree, Sam keeping his shirt off—he had a mate after
all— but working just as hard.

Clint went running for Tony, dragging him out of the schoolhouse and away from grading papers so
he could watch as well, promising, “It’s worth it Tony, come on. Just come look at the Alpha’s with
me, they are so pretty it’s like one of those risque shows you only get to see after dark in the cities,
come on.”

Tony fussed the entire way—“Clint, you wacky Omega, this is ridiculous, I am not going to watch
the Alpha’s of the town chop firewood. Outrageous. We never did thinks like this back East. This
town needs entertainment if this is what passes for interesting on a Thursday afternoon, my
goodness, who on earth needs to watch—”

He quieted when they turned the corner and caught sight of all the Alpha’s working at it— all of them
well muscled, most of them shirtless, big arms flexed, shoulders and backs glistening in the sun,
pants riding low on their hips—

“Oh Christ.” Tony grabbed Clint’s hand, who squeezed it right back. “Look at that.”

“Say what you want about Alpha’s but look.at.all.that.candy.” Clint whistled quietly. “Look at my
Alpha swinging that ax. Good god I am going to wreck him tonight.”

“Clint.” Tony wanted to roll his eyes, or even laugh but it wasn’t like Clint was wrong, Sam looked
incredible hacking away at the tree trunk and— “Can I come too?”

“Oh I’ll make you come, baby.” Clint said with a soft growl and Tony whimpered a little when the
other Omega’s hand landed on his ass. “You want to spend the night with us? Been a while since
we’ve done that.”

“If you don’t think Sam would mind?” Tony fit his hand into Clint’s back pocket and leaned a little
closer, sighing when Clint mouthed at his neck, tugging at his earlobe lightly. “I’ve been lonely
lately.”

“Come over then.” Clint nudged Tony back against one of the support beams for the shop, fitting a
thigh between his legs and rocking into him. “Sam won’t mind, he never does. Besides, you know
he knows we’ll be all worked up after watching this whole display— there isn’t much that gets an
Omega’s blood rushing faster than seeing an Alpha puttin’ on a show, huh?”

“Yeah, not a whole lot at all.” Tony laughed breathlessly when Clint’s hands slipped beneath his
shirt. “In fact the only thing hotter than this might be—”

He stopped talking abruptly, staring over Clint’s shoulder and the other Omega turned around to see
what had caught his attention.

“Catch, Stevie!” Bucky was calling, and heaved a log at the Sheriff, who not only caught it easily,
but then braced it over his knee and— rrrrrrrrrrip!— tore it right down the middle, tossing the
pieces aside as if they weighed nothing at all, the muscles in his chest and abdomen jumping and
tensing with the movement.

“Holy shit.” Clint’s mouth fell open and when he turned back to Tony, the Omega’s whiskey
colored eyes were glazed over in shock and a hefty amount of \textit{want}.

“Um, change your mind about spending the night with Sam and I?” Clint teased. “Hm?”

Tony watched Steve stack up several pieces of the wood in his arms, carrying it over the Widow Dugan’s wagon and putting them in the back for her with a smile.

“I–I–” He cleared his throat, more than stunned not only by the show of strength but by the thoughtfulness the Sheriff was showing by giving the widow the first pick of fire wood. “I will be staying home tonight, yep.”

“Aw.” Clint play-pouted, but gave Tony a kiss anyway. “What on earth are you going to do by yourself though?”

“I uh– I have some new books. To– to read.” Tony had yet to drag his eyes away from Steve, who had gone back to chopping wood as if unaware he was being watched. “Yep. Books. Reading. That’s–that’s what I’m doing.”

“Right.” Clint kissed him one last time before moving away. “Reading.”

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“How goes the courting, Stevie?”

“I’m not courting him, Buck.”

“Which is why the school house has new stairs?”

“That’s right.”

“And why you chopped wood for two solid hours?”

“Did he watch me the entire time?”

“Yep.”

Steve finally smiled and Bucky flung a boot at him.

“You are dumb, Stevie.”

“He doesn’t want to be courted, Buck. So I’m not courting him.”

“DUMB!”

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“So then, he just showed up with Bucky to fix my window!” Tony leaned over and stuck his fork in Clint’s noodles. “I don’t even know how the window \textit{got} broken and before I can even ask the students about it, Sheriff Helper Bug and his faithful Number Two show up to fix it.”

“And this is…” Clint raised his eyebrows. “This is terrible? \textit{Why}? ”

“Did you just call Steve Sheriff Helper Bug?” Sam interjected, butting into their conversation to kiss
his mate and to steal a bite of their food. “What’s wrong with him helping out?”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell him.” Clint snagged Sam before he could get too far, pulling the Alpha down onto the couch with him. “He’s acting as if it’s a personal affront to his well being that Steve is doing a few things around town.”

“Tony, I know you haven’t been around all that long, but it’s not uncommon for Steve to do work for the town, especially the women, especially the single mothers.” Sam put his arm over Clint’s shoulders, holding his Omega close. “It’s coded into him as an Alpha to help those who need help, it’s reinforced by his position as Sheriff. There is nothing secret or underhanded about him replacing a window for you.”

“Right.” Clint scooted right over into Sam’s lap, cozying up to his Alpha until Sam laughed quietly and nuzzled over his neck. “It’s not as if Steve is purposefully manufacturing ways to help out just so he can impress…you…” Clint cocked his head curiously. “Actually–”

“Actually nothing of the sort is going on.” Sam cut in hurriedly, pinching the Omega to shut him up. “Because that would be crazy. Absolutely crazy.”

“Hm.” Tony was too busy stealing more noodles to notice the horrified look Clint sent his mate. “I suppose I’m being ridiculous. And you’re right, I haven’t been around him very much. It’s perfectly valid. I suppose I’m a little paranoid.”

“Why are you paranoid, Tony?” Clint was still glaring at Sam. “Did Steve do something to upset you?”

“No, no it’s not that.” The Omega took a long drink before answering hesitantly. “I told him I didn’t want to be courted, and he is respecting that but he is also ignoring me and I don’t like that. Has my emotions sort of unpredictable to go from him paying so much attention to me and then no attention at all.”

“He’s not ignoring you.” Sam objected. “He’s just busy doing his job. And if you didn’t want to be courted, than aren’t you glad he’s giving you space?”

“He should be glad.” Clint waggled his eyebrows at Tony. “But he’s such a horny little Omega that he wants the big strong Sheriff to pick him up and bend him over a–”

“THANK YOU FOR DINNER, I’M LEAVING.” Tony jumped to his feet, wiping his mouth and tossing his napkin. “Have a good night you two!”

“Bye Tony!” Sam waved at him and turned to kiss Clint, but got a faceful of scowling Omega instead. “Uh– what’s wrong, babe?”

“What do you know, Samuel Wilson?” Clint demanded. “What plan are you Alphas concocting?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Sam insisted, threading his fingers into his mate’s hair to coax him close for a kiss. “Alphas never concoct anything. It’s you Omegas that are always scheming and making plans to trap us.”

“My mate.” Clint purred low in his throat, nibbling over the Alpha’s bonding mark, smoothing his hands down Sam’s sides to his belt. “My Alpha, tell me. Please?”

“Mmm.” Sam let his head drop back on the couch, shifting his hips as his mate curled closer. “I love when you’re cuddly, Omega. Let’s stop talking and do this instead. I know we decided last time that this couch isn’t strong enough to hold us up, but if we–eep!” he shrieked a little when Clint’s teeth
dug into his shoulder hard.

“Ow! Omega! I normally love your bite but that was–”

“You will tell me what you and that ridiculous Sheriff and goofy side kick have planned for Tony.” Clint threatened, a growl rumbling his the words, and if Sam wouldn’t have been slightly scared for his life– or at least for his knot– he would have cooed over how adorable the Omega’s growl was.

“Love of my life.” Sam tried to deflect by nibbling along Clint’s ear lobe, digging his fingers into the vee of Clint’s hips just the way his mate liked. “Why are we talking about other Alpha’s when I’m all the Alpha you need right here?”

“All the Alpha I need?” Clint snorted. “Have you met the toy I keep in my top drawer? I keep you around only for your cooking skill and because you carry me places.”

“You wound me!” Sam burst out laughing and wrestled Clint down onto the floor, pinning him there long enough to kiss the Omega pliant. “You would trade me in for your toy because I don’t share Alpha secrets with you?”

“In a heart beat.” Clint was still trying to growl, but it was more of a purr now, lifting his hips to rub languidly into his mate. “Tell me what’s going on with Tony.”

“Steve is attempting to woo him by being a good Alpha for the people Tony cares about.” Sam started working on the buttons of Clint’s shirt. “Since Tony doesn’t want an Alpha to officially court him, Steve’s idea was to make Tony come to him.”

“Like when he laid out Mrs. Keener’s boyfriend and Tony jumped him.”

“Exactly.” The Alpha palmed over Clint’s ass, swallowing his mate’s pleased gasp with another kiss. “You know it’s hard to resist an Alpha when he is not only in a position of power, but also using that power to be all strong and sweet towards people who need help.”

“Oh trust me, I know. That’s why I cream over your deputy’s uniform.”

“And that’s exactly why I don’t take it off until bedtime.” Sam sat up and started stripping out of the afore-mentioned uniform. “Now why don’t I take my mate to bed and you can show me how much you cream for my–”

“Wait wait.” Clint bit his lip in thought, even though he was undoing Sam’s belt with one hand, stroking carelessly over Sam’s hardening cock with the other. “So Steve is going to have Tony fall in love with him without noticing it? By being the perfect Alpha but also playing hard to get?”

“Right.”

“And Steve is just… looking for extra work to do?”

“Sort of?” Sam clicked his tongue a little impatiently. “Why?”

“Well, I have a whole list of things he could do. The roof needs reshingled, the back fence needs new posts placed, the stable could use a loft–”

“Clint, I am planning on doing all those things.” The Alpha frowned up at his mate. “I don’t like the idea of another Alpha taking care of my Omega.”

“Don’t think of it like that.” Clint shrugged it off and started pushing Sam’s pants off his hips.
“Think of it was you getting free time with me because Steve will be working hard to impress Tony. I mean technically, we are doing our friend a favor, right? Helping him earn Tony’s admiration?”

“By re-shingling our roof?”

“Exactly.” he nodded in satisfaction. “Practically a public service.”

“My devious Omega.” Sam brought Clint to his feet, scooping him up and carrying him to the bedroom. “I love you.”

“I prefer to think of myself as extraordinarily helpful.” Clint insisted, spreading his legs invitingly and motioning for his mate. “And I love you too.”

*****************

Steve was doing something nice for someone else again– this time going around with Happy and helping to reinforce the locks on the doors upstairs in Natasha’s establishment, making sure the girls felt safe at all times.

Tony ate his dinner with Valkyrie– it was Tuesday, after all– and made a valiant effort not to watch.

“Sheriff’s sure been good to us these past few weeks,” Valkyrie said admiringly. “He does this, you know. Spends some time every season making sure everything is all taken care of around town. A good man. Good Alpha, that one.”

“If Alpha’s are your type.” Tony shrugged her comment off and took another bite of his pot roast. “I suppose.”

“Don’t you lie to me, you bratty thing.” Valkyrie flicked some flour at him as she rolled out a crust for pie. “When are you going to give our Sheriff a break? He’s trying so hard to court you and–”

“I don’t want to be courted.”

“Ah right, because you are an independent Omega who don’t need no knot!” She laughed out loud when Tony turned red. “You don’t have to mate with the man, but give the rest of us a break from the tension, eh?”

“What tension?” Tony dipped his finger in the berry filling. “There’s no tension on my end.”

“Oh please.” She smacked his hand away when he tried for another taste. “The amount of time you two spend acting as if you aren’t looking at each other is disgusting. Not near as subtle as you think you are.”

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore!” Tony announced. “New subject!”

“Alright then.” she dusted her hands off on her apron. “Are you going to the barn raising tomorrow?”

“Yes, of course.”

“And when our Sheriff asks you to dance, are you going to say yes?”

“Is he going to ask me to dance?” Tony squeaked.
“He asks every single Omega and Beta to dance.” she answered confidently. “Sheriff says that no one should be left out of the dance simply because they aren’t bonded.”

“God, he’s nice.” Tony thumped his head on the bar counter. “Why is he so nice?”

“And tall.” Valkyrie added.

“And handsome as hell.” Tony mumbled.

“You like him, don’t you!” She crowed. “I knew it!”

“I don’t want to be courted.” Tony insisted. “I don’t!”

“Sure you don’t.” Valkyrie slid the pie in the oven and winked at him. “But you don’t have to be courtin’ to go for a walk, yeah?”

Tony snuck a look at the Alpha, who was currently helping a little boy lace his boots.

A tall, strong Alpha being sweet enough to help a little one with their boots? It just wasn’t fair.

“Right. A walk. I could handle a walk.”
Chapter 7

Everyone loved a good barn-raising, and the entire town of Wildrock as well as most of the people who lived on the outskirts came to help Farmer Jensen put together his massive new barn.

The Alpha and Beta men, as well as several of the stronger male Omega’s showed up with their horses and wagons loaded down with tools to help with the actual building, the women spent the day cleaning up after them, making sure nails got picked up so none ended up in someone’s foot, boards were painted as needed, and once noon came around, they started setting out food to feed the hungry workers.

With the entire community helping, the barn went from blueprints to standing before sundown, and then the real party started– hammers being traded for instruments, the newly laid floor filling with dancers, table after table of food and desserts set up around the walls, juice and tea for the children set up front, the whiskey for the grownups closer to the back.

Tony was late to the dance, strolling in as the sun was starting to set and managed to slip through the door fairly unnoticed, snagging a drink and posting up in a back corner to watch the festivities.

The children were playing jacks and marbles in the corners of the room, cheeks stuffed with as many sweets as they could possibly fit, enjoying the opportunity to be greedy with the desserts.

The adolescents, most just barely presented as their secondary gender, were gathered in small groups, the Omegas shyly watching the Alpha’s, the young Alpha’s posturing and preening under the attention. It was awkward and adorable, and Tony couldn’t help but smile over it.

All the women from Natasha’s establishment had come out– a tad more buttoned up than usual since there were children about– and the men of the town were whirling the girls around the dance floor, shouting and laughing to the music.

Natasha herself was standing next to a very flustered looking Bucky, who kept looking down to smile at her, then turning bright red when she smiled back, and Tony thought the big Alpha might actually melt when she slid her tiny hand into the crook of his elbow. Apparently the odd courtship between the Sheriff’s deputy and the Omega Madame was one that had gone on for years, and Tony thought it was about the sweetest thing he had ever seen.

Happy had cleaned up spectacularly, and despite his usual avoidance of snooping, Tony found himself scanning the room and wondering who on earth could have dragged the blacksmith from behind his forge and out of his heavy, dirty aprons to get him into a clean, pressed shirt and obviously new trousers.

He made a striking figure tonight, one of the biggest, well dressed Alpha’s in the room, but he looked nervous enough to choke on his lemonade and it was both hilarious and a little sad all at the same time.

“Mr. Carbonell.” Steve appeared next to him, and Tony tried not to jump in surprise, having been too focused on Happy and the others to even notice the Sheriff heading his way.

“Sheriff Rogers.” he said coolly, but not impolitely. “How does the evening find you?”

“Well, thank you.” Steve looked Tony over, a light of interest in his blue eyes and Tony told himself not to react to it. “But tell me, what on earth are you doing hiding away in the corner during a dance?
You must have a dozen different Alpha’s trying to catch your attention and you’re content to sip at iced tea by yourself?"

“A dozen different Alphas?” Tony raised his eyebrow. “I’m sure you’re exaggerating, Sheriff.”

“Exaggerating.” Steve repeated. “Alright then. What say we take a spin around the dance floor and see just how many of these Alpha’s are suddenly red eyed and drooling with jealousy, hm? You might think you are invisible here in this back corner but I know for a fact that any eye that isn’t on Natasha’s girls is firmly concentrated on you.”

“What a shame.” Tony remarked, lips twitching in a smile at the Alpha’s not-subtle-flattery. “And here I thought I was perfectly camouflaged against the barn wall. I even wore brown to try and blend in better.”

“You sure did.” Steve’s gaze moved over Tony’s outfit again. “It makes your eyes look like whiskey when the sun filters through it just right. Sure is pretty.”

“My eyes–” Tony wheezed a little on the next inhale. “Oh my. Um, Sheriff Rogers–”

“Don’t worry, Mr. Carbonell.” Steve winked down at him. “I say things like that to everybody right before I ask them to dance.” He held out his arm in an obvious invitation. “What do you say to a square dance or two?”

“Oh.” Tony was not disappointed that the compliment hadn’t been more heartfelt. He wasn’t.

“Thank you, Sheriff Rogers, but no thank you all the same.” He said stiffly. “I don’t dance.”

“Another time, then.” Steve raised his bottle in a salute and ambled away just that easy, and Tony watched as he approached a pretty Beta female, murmured something that made the girl smile, and then walked her out onto the floor, falling right into step with the beat of the music, mixing with the other dancers easily.

They moved together well, and looked perfect together- two blonde heads and tall frames spinning through the crowd. There was an almost nonchalant ease to their steps that spoke of several dances together and Tony– Tony wasn’t jealous.

He wasn’t.

He didn’t dance anyway.

He kept watching the floor, not watching Steve and the Beta, but seeing all the other couples as they went past, grinning when he saw Sam and Clint tearing it up together, Clint already tipsy, and Sam as patient and steady as ever, doing everything he could to keep his mate smiling and laughing.

They were beautiful together, beautiful and happy and secure and all the things Tony had always hoped to find in a mate bond.

“Mr. Carbonell.” Mayor Thompson interrupted his musing and Tony sighed out loud before turning with what he hoped was a benign smile.

“Mayor Thompson. I haven’t seen you in weeks. How does the time find you?”

“Well, thank you.” The Alpha Mayor wasn’t even looking at him, and Tony narrowed is eyes in annoyance, waiting for the Mayor to at least ask how he was doing, but the obnoxious Alpha had no such inclinations.
“My son has been out of school long enough.” The Mayor stated after another moment. “He will be returning to school and taking his studies back up as of Monday.”

“Oh, do you think so?” Tony took a sip of his tea and waited for the Mayor to stop choking on his beer over is impertinence. “Because I was being very honest when I told you before that Flash is not welcome back in my school until he learns to treat all the students, but especially the Omegas, with respect.”

“Mr. Carbonell–” The Mayor cleared his throat loudly. “I have raised my son to–”

“To be an asshole, yes.” Tony interrupted and the Mayor sputtered a few times. “This bullshit mentality of Alpha’s will be Alpha’s does not fly in my classroom and if you haven’t learned yet–” he raised an eyebrow. “–It doesn’t fly in interactions with me, either.”

“Mr. Carbonell–!”

“Mayor Thompson.” he said blandly. “You will instruct your son to be no less than a model student in my classroom, otherwise you will have to entrust the running of your cattle ranch and various businesses to a son who never made it past level six maths, do I make myself clear?”

“You would refuse to teach him?!”

“If it meant shielding my other students from his menace?” Another sip of his tea. “Without question.”

Frustrated silence from the Mayor, both of them watching the dancing, listening to the music for a few moments until, “I can personally assure you that my son will be on his best behavior for the duration of his attendance in your schoolhouse.”

“Then I look forward to seeing him on Monday.”

“Cheers, Mr. Carbonell.” Mayor Thompson lifted his beer. “Enjoy the dance.”

“Always a pleasure, Mayor Thompson.”

The Mayor had just barely walked away when Steve came back to Tony’s side, eyeing the Mayor as he moved across the room.

“Mr. Carbonell. Everything alright?”

“Sheriff Rogers.” Tony tried not to be so pleased that the Sheriff had come to check on him. Swoon worthy protective Alpha indeed. “I think you are well aware that I can handle an irritating Alpha, Mayor or not.”

“I am well aware.” Steve grinned. “But I’d have to ask anyway. I’m the Sheriff, after all, and I can’t have the Mayor harassing everyone’s favorite school teacher at the barn raising, can I?”

“Everyone’s favorite school teacher.” Tony finally smiled and the Sheriff’s eyes flickered red when he saw it. “Sheriff Rogers, you flatter me.”

“I’d rather dance with you.” Steve said bluntly. “I know you said you don’t like to dance, but I can tell from across the room how badly you want to, so why are you saying no?”

“I don’t–”

“I promise I won’t even step on your toes.” Steve held up his hand like he was taking an oath.
“Scouts honor. I’m lighter on my feet than I look.”

“I’m actually more worried about having my eyes poked out by your giant hat.” Tony raised his eyebrows toward the beige Stetson. “I like my eyes.”

“I like your eyes too.” Steve’s voice had an edge of a rumble to it, and Tony forced away a shiver. “What if I dance with my hat off? Then you’d be perfectly safe from any eye gouging and toe stepping and have no reason to worry.”

“Tempting.” Tony smiled again, smiling bigger when he caught the sharp intake of breath from the Alpha.

“Tempting.” he said again, slower, looking up from beneath his lashes in time to catch the blue eyes flickering again. Good Christ is it tempting. “Thank you, Sheriff, but—”

“Perhaps Sam or Clint, then.” Steve said, disappointment in the words. “Since you have no interest in dancing with me.”

“It has nothing to do with dancing with you.” Tony blurted before he could stop himself, flushing over the spark of hope in the Alpha’s eyes. “It has nothing to do with dancing with you and everything to do with dancing in general. I don’t— I don’t dance. Ever. I don’t even like to dance, as a matter of fact.”

“You’re not as good a liar as you think you are.” Steve murmured. “But I won’t push it. Do you mind if I stay here and share a drink with you, at least?”

“I’m sure there are far too many people waiting for a chance to dance with the Sheriff for you to be standing here drinking next to me.” Tony worked to keep his voice even, touched by Steve’s willingness to not force things. “I heard you dance with every unbonded person in the room at all of these things, I’d hate to disappoint them by keeping you off the floor one second longer than necessary.”

“If it’s all the same to you,” Steve leaned back against the wall and folded his arms. “I’d rather stay here and listen to the song.”

“It’s all the same to me, Sheriff.” Tony tried not to smile so big, his Omega wanting to preen over the unexpected attention from the Alpha. “I like this song anyway.”

They stood in companionable quiet for the most part, tapping their foot to the beat, smiling and waving when someone called out to them, Steve pointing out people that Tony might not know, Tony adding in a comment or two about the children if he knew them, and neither one of them said anything when standing together for one song slid into standing together for two songs and then three.

“Did I thank you for fixing the stairs to the school house?” Tony asked sometime through the second song, and when Steve replied with a quiet, “You sure did, Mr. Carbonell. Bout the most politely worded thank you note I’ve ever received.” Tony turned a little red over the reminder of how stilted and impersonal his note had been.

He had rewritten the note at least six times, trying not to gush over how much it had meant to him that the Alpha would fix the school house, trying not to come across as if he had expected the work to be done, trying to strike the proper balance between appreciative and yet not so nice that the Alpha would get any ideas about courting or anything else along those lines.

The end result had been a stiffly worded note of thanks, signed Mr. Carbonell, Schoolteacher, and
left on Steve’s desk for the Sheriff to find.

Not Tony’s best moment, and he was still embarrassed over it.

Later, scrambling for something to say to fill the silence, “I noticed you fixed Mrs. Keener’s railing on her porch.” and Steve’s reply, “Yes. She finally decided to tell Mr. Moll to never come back, so I stepped in to fix it for her. Just because she doesn’t have a man around doesn’t mean that her house should be falling apart.”

“You’re a good Sheriff.”

“It’s my job, Mr. Carbonell.”

“Well.” Tony ventured a glance up at the Alpha. “You’re very good at it.”

The Alpha wet his lips before answering, “Well anytime you need something done, you just let me know.”

It was too innocent a phrase to mean anything at all, and yet it sounded like it meant everything, and Tony found himself wishing for another drink just so he had something to do besides try not to stare at Steve’s profile.

They didn’t speak again until the third song began, and this time it was Steve, “Could I get you another drink? Or are you going to keep staring down at an empty cup as if it’s going to magically refill itself?”

“I only drink iced tea.” Tony held up his cup ruefully. “And it’s all gone, so–”

“You don’t drink whiskey?” Steve whistled softly. “Tequila? Scotch? Is our mild mannered school teacher really that mild mannered? I expected more from a man who can stare down the Mayor.”

“I drink whiskey when there’s no one around to see me.” Tony admitted. “I uh– I’m a lightweight, I suppose. No one likes a sloppy drunk, right?”

“I’m sure you’re never sloppy a day in your life, Mr. Carbonell. I’d imagine you even wake up lookin’ perfect.”

“Are you…are you flirting with me, Sheriff Rogers?” Tony ventured, a little thrown by the Alpha’s change from practically ignoring him, to talking about what he would look like waking up. “Is that what you’re doing?”

“Of course not.” Steve denied instantly. “Why would I flirt with an Omega who has no interest in being courted? Seems like wasted effort on my part, don’t you think?”

“Um–well, uh–” Tony cast about for an eloquent answer, but before he had a chance to reply, a little girl no more than five came up and stood shyly in front of the Sheriff.

“Sherrif Wogers?” she asked quietly, and Steve handed Tony his drink before crouching down so he was eye level with her. “Will you dance wi’mee?”

“Well, shucks little lady.” Steve grinned down at her. “I think I’d be right honored to dance with a pretty girl like you! Thank you so much for asking me!”

He winked at Tony and took her hand out on to the dance floor, directing her to stand on the toes of his boots before enthusiastically– and carefully– two stepping away with the music, twirling her
around the other dancers.

It was about the sweetest thing Tony had ever seen, a big strong Alpha dancing so gently with a child and he coughed to clear his throat, thinking he should stop staring, but not wanting to look away.

The only thing better than watching an Alpha work and provide for someone, was to see an Alpha be sweet with a child and Alpha Sheriff Steve Rogers had proven several times over the last few weeks that he was happy to do both of those things without even being asked and Tony— Tony was noticing.

In fact that only issue Tony could find with the Alpha’s actions lately was that he had been nothing but unfailingly polite, almost dismissive of Tony, apparently taking the not interested in being courted thing to mean that Tony wasn’t interested at all and if he were admitting things, Tony would admit that he was interested in the Sheriff.

More than interested, maybe, especially with the Alpha’s words from the school house still ringing in his ears:: Next time we take a walk together, I fully intend to have you speechless, shaking in my arms and too weak kneed to stand on your own.

Oh my. Tony didn’t manage to hide his shiver, tightening his hand around the cup until his knuckles turned white.

He was definitely interested.

When Steve finished his dance with the little girl, he posted right up next to Tony again, handing the Omega a glass of half lemonade/half iced tea– “There wasn’t enough for a full glass, but I thought this would be refreshing.”

“Thank you, Sheriff Rogers.” Tony took an experimental sip of the drink and made an agreeable noise. “But don’t you think coming back to stand by me will cause people to talk? I hear these dances are a veritable breeding ground for gossip.”

“Breeding ground–” Steve inhaled some of his own lemonade up his nose at Tony’s choice of words. “Yes well, we have to give the busy bodies of the town something to talk about. It’s been weeks since we’ve done more than pass each other on the street, I’m sure they’ve all but given up on us as a source of entertainment.”

“Damn shame that.” Tony remarked teasingly.

“Damn shame.” Steve echoed. “Whatever shall we do about it?”

“Well.” the Omega cleared his throat once, then one more time to find his voice. “It is an awful long walk back to the schoolhouse, my living quarters being clear on the other side of town and all. Seeing as how it is your duty as Sheriff to serve and protect and all that, you wouldn’t let the school teacher walk home by his lonesome, would you?”

“I think…” Steve took a long drink, hummimg thoughtfully. “I think that would be terribly reckless of me. The schoolteacher is a necessity in our community, as well as someone that several people in town care for, and if any harm were to befall him it would be terrible. I would be lax in my duty not to accompany you, for safety reasons.

“My thoughts exactly.” Tony agreed. “For safety reasons, we should take a walk.”

“For safety reasons.” the Sheriff tossed back the rest of his drink. “I have a few more dances to claim
before the night is over, and then I am happy to walk you home, Mr. Carbonell.”

“My thanks, Sheriff Rogers.” Tony returned, and smiled to himself when he heard the growl the Alpha didn’t quite manage to smother.

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“So tell me.” Steve pushed aside a low branch so Tony could pass in front of it. “Who do you think Happy was trying to impress by dressing up tonight?”

“My god, I was hoping you could tell me.” Tony laughed a little and shoved at Nomad’s nose when the big gelding snuffed at his hair. “I’ve never seen him that clean before, and I mean it lovingly, of course, but sometimes it’s difficult to tell the man from his forge he’s covered in so much black.”

“He hasn’t mentioned anyone that he is courting.” Steve chuckled when Nomad tried to breathe in Tony’s hair again. “And he isn’t the type of Alpha to want another Alpha, or even a Beta, you know? Happy has always loved petite little Omegas that are small enough to—” he coughed. “Ah, you know what? Never mind.”

“Small enough to treat like they’re breakable?” Tony finished. “Yeah he seems like the type to want a tiny mate, just so he can always protect them. Not a power thing, just a protective Alpha thing.”

“Uh– yep.” Steve looked a little closer at Tony, peering at him in the moonlight. “I thought the idea of an overly protective Alpha would bother you more. You seem to have an issue with that sort of—”

“I have an issue with Alpha’s who use their size and their biology to assert themselves over others.” Tony interrupted. “I have zero issue with an Alpha who uses their size to pamper and coddle their mate, to protect them or others.”

“I see.”

“Like Sam.” Tony continued, finally giving in and scratching Nomad’s ears when the horse came back to him yet again. “He’s big enough to almost scare me, but he’s so sweet and frankly ridiculous with Clint that his size is more comforting than anything.”

“Sam’s a good Alpha.” Steve agreed. “And Clint is a perfect mate for him, all sass and sweetness wrapped up in about the scrappiest Omega I’ve ever met. They are a beautiful pair, perfect mates.”

“Sheriff Rogers, that was a surprisingly nice thing to say.” Tony tried to see around Nomad’s big head to the Alpha. “You don’t strike me as the type to notice that sort of thing.”

“What sort of thing is that?”

“To notice how well a mated pair matches.” Tony clarified, finally just ducking under Nomad’s neck so he was walking next to the Sheriff instead of trying to talk through the horse. “Most unbonded Alpha’s only want a mate to satisfy the urge to claim, they could care less if they match well or not.”

“Mr. Carbonell, I don’t think you know as much about unbonded Alpha’s as you think you do.” Steve put a hand at Tony’s back to guide him around a patch of rocks. “All your information about us seems to come from a book, and if I didn’t know any better, I might be offended by it.”

Tony wrinkled his nose. “be offended all you want. I think these so called books give me all the information I need about Alpha’s, thank you.”
“I’d like to disagree.” Another light touch to avoid a rough patch. “Certainly a progressive teacher like yourself believes in hands on lessons, right? Field trips. Control groups for experiments, charts for data-tracking?”

“Charts for data-tracking.” Tony said blankly. “Are you being serious with this?”

“I don’t know if it has to be charts, exactly.” Steve shrugged. “I’m sure you keep a diary, don’t you Mr. Carbonell? We can use that data to see exactly how hands on your learning about Alpha’s should be.”

_Damn it._ Tony couldn’t stop his laughter over that comment— the Sheriff was much better at this battle of wits than Tony had thought he would be.

“I do like your laugh, Mr. Carbonell.” Steve commented, his eyes shading the barest hint of red in the moonlight. “I don’t get to hear it very often. It’s pretty.”

“I laugh all the time.” Tony argued before he could help himself. “You just aren’t around to hear it.” and then after a minute, “It’s not a pretty laugh though. Clint says I laugh like a donkey.”

“That’s only because Clint has such an obnoxious snorting laugh when he gets going that he can’t hear anything else over it. Of course he thinks you sound like a donkey. He sounds like a donkey.”

Tony laughed harder than he should have, because the Alpha Sheriff was absolutely right, and even though he loved Clint to pieces, the other Omega’s laugh was atrocious. “Yes, well Clint is a character, isn’t he?”

“Tell me, Mr. Carbonell.” Steve changed the subject abruptly as they stepped out of the more wooded path and started crossing the field that would lead to the back end of the school house. “Did you notice your student Peter talking to Liz?”

“Of course I did.” Taking the shift in conversation in stride, Tony broke off a piece of wheat grass, nibbling at it absentmindedly. “Peter has been in love with her for as long as I’ve been teaching here, and probably even before then. I think Liz is sweet on him as well, but she is too focused on her studies to think about anything like that.”

“That’s probably for the better, right now.” Steve reached out to catch him when Tony stumbled over a hidden hole, wrapping a thick arm around the Omega’s waist to steady him. “The world is changing, but same-gendered relationships are still looked down on. An Alpha-Alpha couple is considered powerful but odd, and Omega-Omega couple is looked at as if they are incomplete, as if they are still missing an Alpha and that’s too bad. Liz and Peter will have a rough journey ahead if they pursue this.”

“Um—” Tony glanced down at the hand resting at his waist, the Alpha holding him securely, but loose enough that he could pull away if he wanted.

“That is an astute observation, Sheriff Rogers.” he finally said, and his next step brought him a little tighter into the Alpha’s side. “Hopefully by the time they are ready to make their feelings official, that sort of mentality will have fallen by the wayside. Right now they are just two people navigating young love, and they shouldn’t have to worry about whether or not the world disapproves.”

“Mmmm.” Steve rumbled quietly in approval, his nose brushing Tony’s hair, tightening his arm around Tony’s waist. “What did the Mayor want to talk to you about?”

“He was informing me that Flash would be returning to school on Monday.”
“Informing you!?”

“Yes, that was about my reaction.” Tony grinned and shifted even closer, fully enjoying the long line of the Alpha against his side, the heat pouring off of Steve, the way he could feel the deep voice vibrating through his chest.

Being this close to the Alpha after so many weeks of watching Steve do all sorts of sweet things for other people, watching him chop wood and repair buildings around the town, watching him dance with the little girl this evening before being perfectly happy to stand and listen to the music since Tony didn’t want to dance—

God, he wanted to tilt his head back and purr over it all, but that would be a little ridiculous, so he settled for bumping his nose against Steve’s shoulder and inhaling the Alpha’s heavy scent with a quiet sigh.

“Tony.” Apparently his sigh hadn’t been all that quiet, because Steve’s hand slipped from his waist to his hip, squeezing possessively. “Tell me—” he cleared his throat and Tony felt like purring again knowing how he affected the Alpha. “Tell me what you said to Mayor Harrison.”

“I told him that as long as Flash was on his best behavior and learned not to act like an asshole, he was welcome back to my classroom. I also told him that if Flash didn’t correct his behavior, the Mayor would be leaving his business holdings to a son who never passed level six maths because he wasn’t allowed back in the school.”

“You feel very strongly about this, don’t you?”

“Of course I do.” Tony took a chance and put his arm around Steve’s waist as well, the two of them nearly hugging as they walked. “It’s not only about the physical safety of my Omega students, it’s about the classroom being a safe place mentally as well. The Beta’s shouldn’t have to be distracted by an asshole Alpha posturing and talking out of turn any more than the Omega’s should be distracted by an Alpha making crude comments. My class needs to be safe for all the students, and if Flash is a detriment, then Flash isn’t welcome.”

“I love how much you love the children.” Another rumble, making Tony shiver. “You’re so good with them, but I think there’s another reason why you are so protective, hm? I don’t really know anything about your past, but I would wager that part of your issue with Flash and his dad is—”

“I would wager this is too short a walk to talk about that sort of thing.” Tony cut in, motioning towards the school house that was much closer than either of them had realized a moment before. “And I’d hate to end this walk on such a boring note.”

“Mr. Carbonell—”

“Tony.” He turned so he was walking backwards, linking his and Steve’s hands when the Alpha’s arm slid from his waist. “I think we’ve been polite enough for the evening, don’t you? Call me Tony.”

“Tony.” Steve amended, smiling when the Omega bit at his lip shyly. “I can promise I don’t find anything about you boring, but you’re right about ending this walk on this note. I’ve gotten you safely back home, I’ll say good bye for the night, and maybe we can pick this up another time. It’s been a real pleasure talking with you.”

“I’m sorry, what?” Tony hesitated, mouth pulling down into a frown. “You aren’t– you’re leaving? I thought you would stay. Why aren’t you staying?”
"You asked me to walk you home." Steve pointed out. "Because it was a long way back, and you were alone. So I did, and here we are."

"You thought– you thought–" Tony shook his head. "You thought I meant an actual walk?"

The Alpha looked confused, and it would have been adorable if Tony wasn’t getting so irritated. "Well, yes. That’s what you said, isn’t it?"

"Well yes, that’s what I said!" Tony cried. "But I didn’t mean it! I figured you would know that I meant that kind of walk we had last time! I assumed you would read between the lines!"

"I’m just a simple Sheriff in a small town, Tony." The Alpha’s smile was entirely too smug and Tony realized that the Sheriff knew exactly what he was doing. "Perhaps next time you should just use your words and say what you want from me."

"Irritating Alpha." Tony huffed, offended that Steve would even tease him like this. "Considering how flirtatious this entire walk has been I would think you would know how I wanted it to end!"

"Oh but I thought we established earlier that I wasn’t flirting with you." The Alpha protested earnestly. "This was nothing more than friendly conversation between two adults who happen to inhabit the same town!"

"You were practically holding me!" Tony’s voice rose a little. "You had your arm around my waist!"

"I was afraid you would fall." Steve bared his teeth in a mocking smile. "And when you kept leaning on me, I figured you were afraid you would fall too. Purely a safety precaution."

"A safety precaution?!" Tony threw up his hands in disbelief. "So, you would walk that way with any other Omega?"

"Of course not." A quick shake of his head. "If I was courting the Omega, the night would be ending very different, but since I am not courting you in any way, shape or form, I assumed all walks from here on out would be actual walks." the Sheriff said cheekily. "Perhaps you should make what’s between the lines a little more obvious if you want things to change between us."

"Read between these lines." Tony snapped, his index, middle and ring finger on both hands held up prominently. "Hows that for a little more obvious!"

"My my, Mr. Carbonell." Steve tsked in disapproval. "Do you teach the children sign language like that?"

Tony was left speechless on the steps of the school house, staring at the back of the Alpha Sheriff as he walked away, whistling into the night air, Nomad plodding alongside him obediently.

"Who the hell– what on earth– why would he just– did he really–UGH!"

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Clint opened the front door, almost twenty minutes later, rubbing at his eyes and peering out into the night. "Tony? What are you doing here? It’s after midnight."

"You are not going to believe what that stupid Alpha just did!" Tony was seething, pacing on the front porch, muttering to himself angrily. "He just–! I can’t even–! Why the fuck–!"
“Oh god.” Clint yawned. “Alright, come in and we’ll talk about it. Sam, be a dear and start some coffee?”

“I’m on it.” Sam sighed and started digging for some snacks.

It was going to be a long night.
“I’m sorry, you did what?” Clint stopped mid way through a bite of sweet tart and stared at Tony in disbelief. “You held up three fingers and said what?”

“Read between these lines.” Tony mumbled, and ducked his head when Clint’s mouth dropped open. “I wasn’t feeling amazing, alright? I wasn’t exactly expecting him to turn me down and I didn’t react the way I wanted to!”

“You’re joking, right?” Clint was still staring. “I mean, you’re joking. Steve acts the perfect gentleman, walks you home, flirts with you, is completely sweet to you– I mean, he told you your eyes looked like honey whiskey when the sun shines through it for fucks sake– and you flip him off? TONY! What the hell is wrong with you?!”

“I’m sorry!” Tony cried, cheeks flushing dark red. “I’m sorry. I told you I was caught a little off guard! Do I look like I am completely put together right now?!”

“No, you look like frustrated little Omega who didn’t get knotted like he wanted so now he’s horny and cranky and ridiculous.” Clint pointed a finger at him. “I’m right, aren’t I? You’re just horny and cranky and ridiculous. Admit it.”

“Well excuse me.” Tony took an angry bite of his own sweet tart. “I didn’t exactly plan to be bitching to you right now, I had sort of planned on coming my brains–” He shut up abruptly when Clint started cackling gleefully. “You’re the worst friend in the world.”

“Poor horny Omega!” Clint could barely speak through his laughter. “If you like Steve, why don’t you just say something about it! You’re making yourself crazy and honestly making all of us crazy while you’re at it. There’s no reason for this mess!”

“If I tell him I like him then he’ll want to court me.” Tony groused. “And I have no interest in–”

“–being courted.” Clint finished. “Yep. We’ve all heard you say it. Over and over again. Everyone knows you don’t want to be courted, just like everyone knows you’re a prissy little shit who somehow manages to both turn down the best Alpha in the world and then be irritated because he has the nerve to treat you like a gentleman instead of bending you over and fucking you stupid like you really want.”

“I–” Tony took an overly long drink of his coffee so he wouldn’t have to answer right away. “I mean–”

“You mean what?” Clint got up to refill their cups. “Use your words like a good boy.”

“I hate you.” Tony groaned and ran both his hands through his hair in frustration. “Yes, I like him, alright? Steve is– he’s incredible. He’s a good Sheriff and he’s a good Alpha and when he doesn’t wear that stupid hat he’s gorgeous. He’s gorgeous, Clint. Every time he flexes his arms I think I cream a little bit, but I can’t– I can’t–”

“Hey, listen.” Clint crouched down in front of him, pressing their foreheads together and trilling coaxingly. “How about instead of talking about all of this right now, we take advantage of having the living room to ourselves and get naked?”

“What an eloquent proposition.” Tony said dryly. “My god I’m so flattered I don’t even know what to say.”
“Well then don’t say anything and come here and put your mouth on my dick.” Clint yanked Tony off the couch and they fell onto the floor in an uncoordinated heap, trading messy kisses and breathless laughs as each scrambled to get the other undressed.

“Why do you wear so many clothes?” Clint demanded, much happier getting naked than he was talking about the Alpha Sheriff. “You’ve got pants and underpants and a vest and a shirt and an undershirt—ugh!”

“You on the other hand are always shockingly easy to get undressed.” Tony unbuttoned Clint’s pants and trailed his fingers across a bare hipbone, down through wiry curls to wrap around the base of an already hardening cock. “I wonder why that is?”

“Have you seen my mate?” Clint pushed Tony’s vest off his shoulders but left the undershirt on, knowing the other Omega was self conscious about his chest. “Wouldn’t you be skipping layers if you knew Sam was the one waiting to take your clothes off?”

“I would be skipping layers if I knew Sam was the one taking my clothes off.” Tony agreed over a laugh as Clint hopped up only long enough to shuck his pants and to help Tony wiggle out of his. “Your mate is gorgeous.”

“My mate is gorgeous, and I’m not even talking about his—Jesus I love these.” Clint interrupted whatever he was going to say about Sam and stretched back out over Tony, grabbing big handfuls of his ass and palming across the lacy briefs. “Do you order these through a catalogue? Make them by hand? Where on earth do you find such pretty things to wear?”

“Come on now.” Tony sat up to crush a kiss onto Clint’s lips, urging him down to the floor with him again, spreading his legs so Clint would lay closer. “An Omega has to have some secrets, right? I can’t give them all away.”

“The hell you can’t.” Clint started working his way down Tony’s body, nuzzling over the tight undershirt, bumping his nose into Tony’s navel, heading for the lacy covered cock just straining to be touched. “As many times as I’ve got you in compromising positions and heard all those funny noises you make—ow!” he shrieked when Tony pinched him. “—I meant sexy! Sexy noises!”

Tony growled and Clint growled right back, leaving a sharp bite in the crease of Tony’s hip bone before rubbing his nose over Tony’s cock, mouthing at him through the lace. “You make sexy noises, baby, and I know all of them, so I’d say we don’t really have any secrets between us, huh?”

“I don’t know about that.” Tony threaded his fingers through Clint’s hair and tugged lightly. “Come here so I can touch you too, huh? You know I’m useless after coming—”

“I’m well aware—” Clint muffled a laugh in Tony’s thigh as he carefully slid the lace briefs down Tony’s legs, careful not to snag or tear it. “—well aware that you are perfectly useless after coming. It’s adorable. You get all loopy and smiley and fall asleep real fast. Like a kid who had too much sugar. I love it.”

“Alright, you might think it’s adorable but it makes me feel like a worthless lover.” Tony tugged harder. “Come here and swing around so I can at least do something. Give you an open hole to use or—”

Clint was half way to turning so his hips were over Tony’s face, more than ready to have some mutual fun, but stopped mid motion to send Tony a scandalized look from between his legs. “An open hole? Tony, give me a little credit, I’d never call you that!”
“Just get up here!” Tony laughed and yanked on Clint’s hips to bring him closer, flicking his tongue out to taste a drop of the bittersweet liquid at the tip of the other Omega’s cock. “There, isn’t that better?”

“Tony.” Clint’s breath caught when he finally got situated and Tony started spreading his cheeks, rubbing his thumb over the Omega’s entrance. “What we were talking about? Secrets? Or something? You gonna spill some of your secrets?”

“Oh I’ll be spilling something alright!” Tony’s snarky answer turned into a yelp when Clint bent and swallowed around his cock, taking him nearly to the root in one go. “Clint!”

“Shut up and open your mouth.” Clint was laughing again. “And I don’t mean to talk and even though I’m not going to call you an open hole, I’d appreciate if you acted like one so–”

Tony snarled teasingly and arched his back so they rolled and he was on top, licking and lapping over Clint’s length, relaxing his throat so Clint could roll his hips and slide between his lips, humming enough to make Clint gasp.

The hum turned into a strangled sort of moan when Clint licked a broad stripe over his entrance, working at the tight rim until Tony was sagging above him, whining and mewling and rocking back into Clint’s grip, asking for more.

“I got ya.” Clint murmured, and circled his index finger around Tony’s hole before sliding in to the knuckle, feeling Tony’s throat tighten around his cock as the Omega tried to cry out. “Come on and let loose for me, I got ya.”

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It had been quiet in the house for almost fifteen minutes before Sam figured both the Omega’s had fallen asleep talking – which happened at least once a week– and left the bedroom to gather up half empty coffee cups and whatever crumbs were left from an entire tray of sweet tarts.

He stopped abruptly though, when he first ran into a wall of thick Omega arousal scent drenching the air, and then second, caught sight of his mate and Tony on the floor nearly naked, writhing and panting together, Clint’s pants flung over the easy chair, a lacy pair of somethings draped over the arm of the couch, vests tossed here and there.

Normally one to fuss over a mess, Sam couldn’t care about this particular one, because right now Tony was licking lines of come from Clint’s thighs and Clint still had his tongue stuck in Tony’s entrance, holding the Omega tight by his hips as he worked him towards an orgasm.

Sam had walked in near the end of it all apparently, and the Alpha went from sleepy to rock hard in his shorts as Tony came with a low groan, pulsing onto Clint’s chest and collapsing nearly boneless against him.

“Good, baby?” Clint’s voice was low and rough, that sexy lazy drawl that only came around after a heart stopping orgasm, and god Sam loved it. “You alright?”

“I can’t move.” Tony moaned, resting his cheek on Clint’s thigh. “I’m sleeping here.”

“You can stay here, baby.” Clint thunked his head back on the carpet. “There’s room in the bed for all three of us, and it’s Sunday tomorrow so the Sheriff won’t care if Sam and I are a little late coming in. You don’t have school so you can spend half the day in bed and–”
“Oh, I meant right here.” Tony clarified. “On the floor, on top of you. Don’t you wish you would have been on top now?”

“Oh my god.” Clint gave Tony’s butt an open-handed swat, the smack sounding loud in the quiet room. “Get your lazy ass off of me or I’ll scream and wake Sam and then we’ll really be in trouble.”

“You’re already in trouble.” Sam said loudly, and both the Omega’s jumped, Clint scrambling for a blanket to cover their middles. “You could have at least put a tie on the door so I knew you weren’t just in here talking. I thought you’d fallen asleep and was going to come carry you to bed!”

“And Clint.” The Alpha folded his arms. “Nice try, but the blanket doesn’t change the fact that the room reeks of Omega. Even if you weren’t mostly naked and covered in Tony’s slick—” Clint licked his lips guiltily, and Tony turned bright red, bringing the blanket up higher to cover his face. “And even if Tony hadn’t just been licking your come up, I would still know exactly what had happened.”

“A tie on what door?” Tony objected, “It’s not like you were outside!” just as Clint protested, “Alpha, it’s not like you haven’t seen this before!” and Tony added, “There’s no way you would have actually seen me licking anything!” and Clint cried, “This could be my slick!”

“Do you hear yourselves?” Sam was obviously fighting a smile. “I couldn’t possibly have seen you? That could be Clint’s sick all over his own face?”

“Not our best excuse.” Clint admitted, and Tony just eeped quietly and covered himself further with the blanket.

“Honestly, I have no idea why anyone would want two Omegas.” Sam sighed loudly and stepped over them, heading towards the kitchen. “Every Alpha talks about having two Omegas as if it’s an ultimate fantasy and they are wrong. Not only are you perpetually horny, but you’re loud and high maintenance and messy and—”

“You could come and play.” Clint said quietly, and Tony added, “If you aren’t too upset with us, I mean.”

“Sweet smelling, generous—” Sam whipped around and came right back, pulling his shirt off and working at the clasp of his belt. “—beautiful, darling—”

Clint was giggling as his mate scooped him up in his arms, and held out a hand for Tony. “You coming along, school teacher?”

“Did you think I was going to sleep on the floor?” Tony snorted and wrapped the blanket around his waist before taking Sam’s hand. “Give me a break.”

“Brat.” Sam tugged him close and pressed a feather light kiss to his lips. “Come on.”

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Later, once Clint was firmly knotted on his mate, and Tony had come again thanks to Sam and Clint’s hands, the three of them lay together in the bed as they tried to come down, Sam snuggled up tight against Clint’s back, Tony pressed to Clint’s front trading kisses and reaching around the Omega to hold hands with Sam.

“Tell him about your walk with the Sheriff.” Clint hummed against Tony’s mouth, weaving his fingers through the thick brown hair. “Ask his opinion about what happened.”
“What happened with the Sheriff?” Sam kissed the back of his mate’s neck, and squeezed lightly at Tony’s hand. “I saw you two talking, and then you left together? What happened?”

“Um, we had a very nice walk.” Soothed by two spectacular orgasms, Tony wasn’t half as huffy about his lack of naked times with the Sheriff. “We talked about— about all sort of things.” he bugged closer until his and Clint’s foreheads were touching as he started to get drowsy. “He thinks you two are a beautiful couple, perfectly matched.”

“Well, he’s right about that.” Clint wiggled his ass back on Sam’s knot and the Alpha groaned, flexing his hips forward. “We are a perfect match.”

“Mmm I love you.” Sam growled and Tony smiled to himself over the sweet display. “My gorgeous mate. All mine.”

“All yours.” Clint turned his head as best he could to try and kiss Sam before snuggling back with Tony. “And that’s nice Tony, but now tell Sam what else happened.”

“Ugh.” Tony buried his face in Clint’s shoulder. “No, let me sleep. We talked about this. I’m useless after an orgasm, remember?”

“We know you’re useless, Tony.” Sam laughed at the huffy Omega. “But tell me what happened with Steve anyway.”

Still trying to hide his face, and not even faking how tired he was, Tony mumbled out the whole story, from how Steve had surprised him by being happy to stand there and listen to the music, to how adorable he’d been with the little girl, and the way they had sort of snuggled as they walked, how surprisingly intuitive the Sheriff was about relationships, and of course, the embarrassing ending.

Sam almost howled with laughter when Tony said, “Read between these lines.” and Tony reached over and smacked the Alpha on the arm when Sam laughed harder over Steve’s, “do you teach the children that sign language?”

“God, Tony.” Sam shifted in the bed and Clint whined when the thick knot pulled inside him. “I don’t know any other pair that could mess things up the way you two do. I mean, has it occurred to you to just accept his court like a normal Omega?”

“No, that hasn’t occurred to me.” Tony snipped. “I don’t want to do that!”

“Okay, so what are you going to do then?” Clint stretched as far as he could to get the blankets, pulling them up around their shoulders as the room finally cooled down. “Because you know this is crazy, right? I mean, you know this is crazy.”

“I know it’s crazy.” Tony admitted, scrunching down into the pillows. “I can sleep here, right?”

“Of course you can, you wacky Omega.” Sam felt around for a towel and slid it between himself and his mate to catch the mess as he tugged his knot free. “You can sleep here anytime—Clint!” he jumped when the Omega clenched down tight around him, too sensitive to really enjoy it, and Clint waggled his eyebrows evilly.

“Brat.” a quick swat on his mate’s behind, and Sam pulled the rest of the way free. “Really, Tony. What are you going to do?”

“Tie him down and have my wicked way with him.” The Omega grumped, closing his eyes so Sam could clean up in privacy, smiling when he heard Sam murmuring to Clint to scooch over so he
could clean him up as well.

God, they are sweet together.

“That might work.” Sam came back to the bed, but this time he crawled in between the Omegas, opening his arms so one curled up on each side of him, both of them settling with the scent of a satisfied Alpha so close. “Or you could use your words and just tell him you want him. The Sheriff is a good guy, a good Alpha. He’s going to accept your boundaries whether you are courting or not, and I can promise you, he’s not going to risk offending you or scaring you by doing something physical with you.”

“Scare me?” Tony echoed. “What do you mean scare me?”

“You know what I mean, Tony.” Sam kissed his forehead gently. “I know you think you hide it all, but Steve sees more than you think. He knows you have issues with Alpha’s and he’s trying to be careful.”

“…oh.”

“So you’re going to have to make that boundary very clear for him.” Sam continued. “If hooking up is alright, let him know. Tell him you don’t expect or even want courting gifts and flowers, but kissing and naked times is fine.”

“Naked times?” Tony poked the Alpha. “Sometimes you sound an awful lot like your mate.”

“I love that we’ve been together long enough to sound like each other.” Clint leaned up and kissed his Alpha for a long minute. “And he’s right, Tony. Use your words. Or at the very least, grab that Alpha by the knot and let him figure the rest out.”

“Good christ, do not grab him by the knot!” Sam shouted, and both the Omega’s collapsed into laughter. “That is the worst idea ever! Don’t do that! It’s not sexy!!”

Once the laughter died down and Sam had stopped shouting about knots and pain and completely unsexy ideas, Tony sighed. “I’ll use my words with him. If I have to.”

“Good plan.” Sam stretched and yawned. “Besides, it’s not like Steve has some dastardly master plan to seduce you, Tony. When you asked him for a walk, he was probably thrilled just to walk with you. He might come across like a Lothario, but the guy’s a goofball.”

“At least I can expect our next walk to be—” Tony froze mid sentence, and popped upright in bed. “That son of a bitch. He owes me a better walk!”

“Uh– what?” The mated pair frowned as Tony leapt from the bed and started searching for his pants. “Tony, what?”

“That Alpha prick promised me a walk that would leave me speechless and weak kneed and all that shit and he didn’t give it to me! He owes me a better walk!”

Tony was out of the bedroom before they could say anything else, the door to the bedroom slamming shut behind him.

“What’s he yelling about?” Sam pulled Clint back to the pillows and gathered him close. “A better walk?”

“I’m not all the way sure, but after their first date? Steve sorta barged into the schoolhouse and
whispered something to Tony about the next time they go on a walk? And I dunno exactly what he said, but Tony had to go upstairs for a change of pants and a shot of whiskey, so you know… take that as you will.”

“God, those two need to go somewhere and just hump it out.” Sam rolled in bed, tucking his mate into his side. “Save us all the heartache and stress.”

“But it’s so entertaining.” Clint was yawning but he still wriggled his ass against the Alpha invitingly. “What would we do without them to gossip about?”

“Start a family?” Sam suggested, pressing forward into the curve of Clint’s ass. “Hm?”

“I’m gonna need a nap and a tall drink before we have that conversation.” Clint laughed. “Easy, Alpha.”

“Sleep then.” Sam lay kisses down Clint’s jaw. “We’ll talk about it later.”

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The next day was Sunday, and per usual, any of the Wildrock residents not in Sunday morning church were gathered in Valkyrie’s saloon, most attempting to cure their Saturday night hangover or at least get a head start on the Sunday drinking, others just hanging out to play early morning cards and eat as much steak and eggs as they could.

Sam and Clint were late, and not one person gave them grief about it because Clint’s smile was soft and silly after a late night and then early morning with his Alpha, and Sam was walking with a strut and a smirk that nearly screamed satisfied.

Bucky rolled his eyes at them when he kicked a chair out for Clint and the Omega chose to sit on Sam’s lap, and Steve looked up with a knowing smile before going back to his cards, elbowing Happy and telling him to hurry up and place a bet.

“Are you gentleman casting wager’s on the Lord’s day?” Valkyrie tsked in mock disapproval as she sat a huge plate in front of Steve and an even bigger one in front of Happy. “I can’t condone this in my place of business.”

“Valkyrie, you were the one who broke my dollars for change so I could bet.” Happy stabbed his fork into a hunk of steak and took a bite. “Don’t act like you disapprove. Sunday morning business is just as good as Friday night’s thanks to us heathens.”

“You heathens indeed.” She smirked and bent to kiss Clint’s forehead. “Pretty Omega. You look all sorts of happy this morning.”

“I am all sorts of happy this morning.” Clint preened under the compliment from the beautiful Beta. “Thanks to my mate.” He leaned back for a kiss with his Alpha, who growled affectionately and held him tight.

“You two are sweet.” She wrinkled her nose at them and disappeared to get some more food for the table.

Steve was relaxed as he ate his eggs, playing a slow game of poker with Happy, watching Sam and Clint snuggle and smile at each other, talking with Bucky whenever the big Alpha looked up from his plate long enough to say a word or two. Despite the unorthodox ending to his night before, he
had enjoyed the dance, had enjoyed talking with Tony, had enjoyed the walk that let him hold the Omega close for at least a few minutes.

It was a good Sunday in Wildrock.

Slow and easy and familiar.

A good Sunday.

And then the double doors to the tavern swung open and Tony strolled right in wearing fawn colored trousers that were pushing indecently tight, a soft green shirt that was open to nearly his navel with a black lace inset, his hair arranged to look as if he had just stumbled from bed, dark eyes sparkling as he crossed the tavern and headed towards Steve.

“Oh god, just once I would like an Omega like that to walk through the door and be looking for me.” Valkyrie breathed, and both Happy and Bucky groaned something in agreement, Clint mumbling something to Sam that sounded like, how do we get that outfit on the floor of our room?

“Sheriff Rogers.” Tony stopped next to Steve’s chair, looking down at the Alpha with a deceptively neutral gaze. “How does the Sunday find you?”

“Um– well?” Steve’s voice cracked over the word and even though Bucky’s mouth was hanging open too far to give him hell for it, he managed a swift kick beneath the table into Steve’s shin.

“Wonderful.” Tony glanced at the card game and raised an eyebrow. “Well, if you are so inclined to finish your card game at a reasonable pace, I’d like a word.

“Um, I’m inclined to finish–” Steve started stammering. “Inclined– I could be done. Right now. I could be done right now. Uh– you want to talk? Yep. Game done right now.”

“Take your time.” With that, Tony turned on his heel and walked marched sashayed strutted over to the bar, and popped his perfectly pert little ass up on a stool, propping his chin in his hand and waiting.

“Why the fuck are you still sitting here?!” Happy snarled and kicked at Steve’s chair so hard the Alpha almost splatted out of it. “Get over there and see what that Omega wants!”

“I’m going!” Steve barely managed to get to his feet. “I’m going! Um, play the game without me.”

“My god.” Bucky groaned, tossing his own cards onto the table in defeat. “How is an Alpha supposed to focus with somethin’ that pretty showing off at the bar!”

“Maybe if you had an Omega that loved you like my Omega loves me, you wouldn’t be panting after the schoolteacher.” Happy said disapprovingly, and both the Alpha’s and the Omega at the table turned to look at him.

“Um, you don’t have an Omega who loves you.” Clint said slowly. “So I don’t know what you mean by that but–”

“The hell I don’t.” Happy took another chomp out of his steak. “You fools don’t know nothin’ bout me. Too busy being dumb and mooning after each other or running circles for that bratty school teacher. You don’t know nothin’.”

“Oh my god, you’re serious.” Sam sat up further and stared at the black smith. “You really have an Omega? Are things serious? You’re going to bond with them?”
“With her.” Happy corrected. “Yes, eventually, and when that day comes I’d appreciate if you jerks got me a present. I’d like a new hat, mine’s ruined from the forge and she doesn’t like it.”

“Um— sure?” Bucky nodded. “Sure, we can get ya a present. Ya know, if your Omega doesn’t like this one. Bonding present, Yep.”

“Good.” Happy started in on his eggs. “Now someone try to listen in on what’s happening with Sheriff Dumbass over there.”

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“Mr. Carbonell.” Steve thought it might have taken years to get to the stool that Tony sat on, and when he did finally get there, it was a damn miracle that his voice even worked. “How are you this morning?”

“Oh there’s no need for small talk.” Tony waved off Steve’s polite enquiry. “I just have a quick question for you, just the one and then you can go back to your card game.”

“S-sure.” Steve hadn’t taken his eyes off the black lace that filled in the vee of Tony’s shirt. “Card game. Yep.”

“My eyes are up here, Sheriff Rogers.” Tony said mildly and when Steve’s head snapped up, cheeks flushing red, he continued, “You’re an honest man, aren’t you, Sheriff?”

“I pride myself on my honesty.” Steve kept his eyes firmly on Tony’s face even though it was taking most of his self control not to look down at the way the trousers pulled across Tony’s thighs when he crossed his legs. “Why do you ask?”

“Hm, I see.” Tony nodded as if thinking the answer over. “And lying? You pride yourself on that too?”

“I beg your pardon?” That certainly got Steve’s attention. “Mr. Carbonell, I try very hard to never lie, why would you even say something like that?”

“No particular reason.” Tony studied his nails nonchalantly. “But I could have sworn you promised me that the next time we went for a walk, you would leave me breathless and speechless and all that sort of thing. And the funny thing is—” he raised an eyebrow when Steve grimaced. “I distinctly remember inviting you for a walk, and I distinctly remember you leaving without doing any of those things.”

“Mr. Carbonell—”

“No no.” Tony held his hands up, shaking his head. “I’m just saying. How am I supposed to respect a Sheriff, and how can I encourage the children to respect a Sheriff that can’t even keep a simple promise?”

“I—” Steve’s jaw clenched as he ground his teeth together. “Mr. Carbonell, I—”

“I have no interest in being courted.” Tony slid off the stood, stepping very close to Steve and tilting his head back to look up at the Alpha. “But I am very interested in the sort of walk you proposed the last times, do you understand?”

“Oh I understand.” Steve’s voice went rough, his blue eyes sliding to red. “I understand completely.”
“Wonderful.” Tony wet his lips just to hear the Alpha growl over it. “You’ll pick me up tomorrow night then?”

“Right as the sun’s going down.” Steve promised and Tony grinned.

“Looking forward to it, Sheriff.”

“Oh, not as much as I am, Mr. Carbonell.”
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Holla for good communications and respecting boundaries, giddy-up for Steve being just a little bit in love with Tony already, and yee-fucking-haw for some smutty smuttness.

(Also, I worked really hard on this chapter to get the vibe just right so say nice things)

“Evening, Sheriff.” Tony was waiting at the top of his stairs when Steve rode up on Nomad, watching the Sheriff dismount and tie the horse to the hitching post before adding, “Right on time, I see.”

“Mr. Carbonell.” Steve tipped his hat politely and started up the stairs. “Now what kind of Sheriff would I be if I was late for something like this, after you insisted so strongly on it?!”

“I did insist, didn’t I?” Tony leaned back against the railing when Steve made it to the top step, blinking up at the Sheriff with a teasing smile on his face. “I’d be so disappointed if I’d had to wait on you. It might even force me to do something drastic like vote for a different Sheriff next time around, or maybe even find another Alpha to walk with.”

“Heaven forbid either of those things ever happens.” Steve took his Stetson off and combed his fingers through his hair in an attempt to fix it before bending down and placing a light kiss on Tony’s lips. “You’re sure pretty when you smile, Tony.”

“I’d like to think I’m pretty all the time.” Tony retorted and curled his fingers into Steve’s collar to bring him back for a longer kiss, his mouth opening soft and warm beneath Steve’s to encourage the Alpha closer.

“God, you are pretty all the time.” Steve’s voice was rough and Tony shivered over it. “But since you’re so insistent on this not being courting, I figured I should save most of the sweet talk, hm?”

“Courting or not, sweet talk will pretty much always get you into my pants.” Tony bared his teeth in a playful snarl and Steve left a sharp bite on his bottom lip in revenge, swallowing Tony’s shocked squeal with another kiss.

“Where are we walking tonight?” he asked gruffly, rubbing slow circles over Tony’s hips with his palms, not wanting to assume he could touch lower, but impatient to get there all the same. “On your bed? Up against the wall like last time? Do you want to go for an actual walk and be out under the stars? Tell me what you want.”

“Why don’t we start with going inside.” A little reluctant to let go, because somehow he had forgotten how good it was to be held up against the Sheriff’s broad chest, Tony felt around behind him for the doorknob and pushed the door open. “Do you mind?”

“No, I don’t mind.” Steve’s hand lingered just a second too long at Tony’s waist as if he was was reluctant to let go as well, and Tony made a quiet, pleased noise. “But it’s a beautiful night and we could–”
“I don’t like all the fresh air out here.” Tony countered. “Burns my nose. Gives me freckles. Smells like grass. Crisp night air is really just cold night air and I’m not really a fan.”

“Not a fan.” Steve repeated over a laugh. “Mr. Carbonell, how on earth did you ever end in a place like Wildrock if you don’t like fresh air?”

“You wouldn’t believe the story if I told you.” Tony said dryly. “Come on, Sheriff. Welcome to my humble abode.”

Steve felt maybe a little odd walking into Tony’s living space, if only because this interaction was decidedly different from all their other ones.

It had taken weeks, after all, weeks of stilted conversations and bland smiles and outright rejections for Tony to take an interest in Steve the first time. The night of the Keener incident, when Steve had held the Omega up against a wall and rubbed into him until they were both exhausted and sated, had been a complete surprise, as had Tony’s behavior afterwards.

And now it had been weeks more of Tony barely even glancing in his direction and now here they were in his apartment, both of them aware that this wasn’t just a casual meeting, that each of them had every intention of getting the other naked before the night was over.

And it was maybe a little odd to see the softness in Tony’s eyes, the relaxed body posture, the absence of the snark and sarcasm that highlighted so many of their moments together, but Steve loved it, loved getting to see the side of the Omega that he knew no one else–

“You’re staring around as if you’ve never been up here, Sheriff.” Tony cut into Steve’s musings by handing him a glass of wine. “And silly me, I thought you would know this place inside and out since you obviously make a habit of seducing all the schoolteachers in this darling little town.”

The absence of most of the snark and sarcasm. Steve amended his previous thought. The absence of most of it.

“And are you going to tell me about these dreams?” Tony wet his lips, smirking when the Alpha’s blue eyes dropped to watch. “Wouldn’t you feel weird, hearing about a dream that someone else is in?” Steve raised his eyebrows when Tony choked on his swallow of wine. “My apologies, did you think I was dreaming about you? I thought we’d been clear that I am not attempting to seduce or court you at all, or have you changed your mind about that?”

“Cheers, Sheriff.” Tony raised his glass in a begrudging salute. “You win this round.”

“I win, huh?” Steve finished the rest of his wine and set the glass carefully in the sink, shrugging out his jacket and heading towards the Omega with a look just barely short of predatory. “Why don’t you come a little closer so I can get my prize?”

“Yeah, I’ll be sure and get you a ribbon.” Tony held up a hand before the Alpha got too close. “But before we start handing out prizes, we should talk about a few things, yeah?”
He sounded *nervous* suddenly, cocksure attitude disappearing as he bit at his lip, even took a step away from Steve to keep some distance. “Can we just talk about a few things first?”

“Wait, you want to talk?” Steve kept his tone light, but he backed up a step as well, his heart hurting just a little bit when he saw Tony relax more the further away he moved.

*Ouch, Omega.*

“You want to *talk*?” He asked again, cocking his head and smiling so Tony knew he was only teasing. “But the last time *I* wanted to talk when *you* wanted to walk, you flipped me off and then accosted me in the tavern and accused me of lying to you or something. I feel like this is a double standard.”

“Oh it’s definitely a double standard.” Tony bit his lip so he wouldn’t laugh over the Alphas petulant expression, thankful that the Alpha wasn’t making this any harder on him. “But we have to talk *now* because I’m basically useless after I come and I—” He squeaked when Steve’s eyes shaded red over the thought of Tony *coming*. “—this is *important*, Steve. I really need to say this.”

“Alright.” Steve shook his head to clear his head and grabbed a chair to sit in, raising his eyebrows and making an encouraging motion with his hands. “I suppose if you’re going to be useless later—”

an entirely salacious wink. “—let’s talk now. Let me hear it.”

“‘Kay.” Tony swirled the wine around in his glass, staring down at the dark liquid as he tried to find the right words. “Listen, I um—I uh—”

“Just say it, Tony.” Steve softened his voice into something soothing and low, not liking how *tense* Tony had become when this was supposed to be a fun night. “Whatever it is, it’s fine. I’ll be fine with it.”

“You can’t knot me!” Tony blurted all in a rush. “You can’t knot me, and I don’t take my shirt off, and there is no way in hell I’m letting you bite me, so let’s clear that up right now.”

Steve opened his mouth to answer, but Tony kept right on talking, the words coming almost faster than Steve could keep up.

“The knotting thing— it’s a pregnancy issue and an intimacy issue, and since I’m not going to start taking birth control so you can get a knot off, that’s just not up for discussion. Oh and the shirt thing—I just– I’m not as pretty as you are shirtless and let’s leave it like that, yeah? I’ll probably always be wearing one and if I’m ever not, please just don’t ask about it, because I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Biting– I feel like I shouldn’t have to explain that one at all. If I’m not looking to be courted I’m *definitely* not looking to be bonded which sort of goes hand in hand with the whole *not knotting* thing, and trust me, it’s not that I don’t think you have a great knot because I’m sure it’s great but—”

Tony turned bright red when Steve’s jaw dropped, but he still met the Alpha’s gaze steadily.

“If you—if you aren’t alright with any of these, I can’t do this. We *can’t* do this. Do you understand?”

“Alright.” Steve took a deep breath, rubbing his hands down his thighs as he thought over what Tony had said. None of the demands were outrageous, even if the shirt one was a little unexpected. After the last time together, he was somewhat prepared for the *no knotting* one as well, and no biting—of course Tony didn’t want to be bonded right now. Perfectly understandable.

“I can handle all of that.” he said finally, and Tony blew out a quick breath of relief. “But can I ask a
few questions of my own? Not about why you have any of these boundaries, but just… other questions? To clarify things?"

“That’s—that’s fair.” Tony nodded and put his wine glass down, folding his arms and trying not to look so anxious. “Go ahead.”

“Am I allowed to kiss you?” Steve asked first. “Is that alright?”

“Well yeah.” Tony smiled hesitantly. “I like kissing, and I like kissing you, that’s perfectly fine. Kissing is always fine.”

“Oh good.” Steve stood to his feet and closed the distance between them, cupping Tony’s jaw and giving him a sweet kiss. “Thank you for being so upfront with me, I felt like last time I was scrambling to keep up with what you needed and this makes everything a little clearer.”

“Oh.” Tony was surprised by the thank you, but lifted his mouth for another kiss, secretly thrilled that Steve hadn’t had more difficult questions. He had fully expected the Alpha to turn around and walk out the door after he had listed his boundaries, but not only was Steve staying, but it apparently hadn’t dampened his interest at all so–

“Can I touch you like this?” Steve interrupted Tony’s thought pattern and wrapped an arm around his waist, bringing the other hand through Tony’s hair and down to draw his thumb down the line of Tony’s jaw. “Is this alright?”

“That’s good, yeah.” Tony swayed a little closer and Steve’s arm tightened accordingly. “That’s—I like that.”

“What if I do this?” A coaxing sort of hum as the Alpha bent close and fit his nose to the soft patch of skin behind Tony’s ear, exhaling on a rumble that made Tony’s knees weak. “Do you like this?”

“Yes.” A little stunned by how quickly he had gone from feeling anxious over their talk to nearly melting in the Alpha’s arms, Tony forced out a coherent, “Yes, yes I like this.”

“You said you didn’t want to be bit, that you didn’t want to be bonded.” The barest scrape of teeth over Tony’s pulse and a quiet moan broke from the Omega, echoed louder by the Alpha as he shifted even closer.

“But you taste so sweet, honey, what if I just nibble right here?” A kiss with just a hint of a sting on Tony’s ear lobe, a slick tongue flicking out to trace the shell. “Or right here?” catching the tip of Tony’s finger in his mouth in a sharp press. “Here?” gathering as much of Tony’s rear into his palm as he could and lifting, bringing Tony up onto his toes and squeezing at the sweet curve in his hand. “What if I left the tiniest mark here?”

“Shit.” Up on his toes like this, Tony could rub his forehead against Steve’s, bumping their noses together. “You can’t mark me anywhere the children could see. But—but maybe I’d be open for some non-mating bites.”

“Mmmm.” Steve sighed, kissed Tony for a long minute, dragging it out until the Omega was shifting and rubbing against him languidly, a steady whine building in Tony’s throat as pleasure built between them.

“For the record,” Steve nuzzled at Tony’s cheek. “You can bite me anywhere, Tony. I don’t care if other people see the marks. Bite me.”

“You sound like you’re asking me to hurt you.” Tony nudged up for another kiss from the Alpha.
“Don’t tempt me, Sheriff, I’m sure there’s a place or two you don’t want my teeth.”

“You can bite me almost anywhere.” Steve amended, blue eyes flaring wide with mock fear and Tony giggled at him. “Almost anywhere.”

“I’ve never been much into that sort of thing.” Tony admitted, walking them backwards towards the couch so they weren’t feeling each other up in his kitchen. “But we could experiment I suppose. I wouldn’t mind marking you up a little bit, Sheriff.”

“I can’t wait.” When they reached the couch, Steve pushed at Tony’s waist lightly until the Omega dropped back onto the cushions, and then Steve went to his knees in front of him. “I can’t wait. I bet you have the sweetest little bite, sweetheart, I’d love to feel it.”

*Oh.* Tony blinked over an unexpected shiver at *sweetheart.*

*Oh, I like that.*

“Tony.” Steve was dotting kisses everywhere he could reach, in Tony’s hair and across his forehead, down his cheek, coming back over and over to his lips for longer and longer kisses. “*Mmmm,* sweetheart, I–”

There it was again, another shiver over the endearment and this time the Alpha rumbled in agreement, Steve pulling away to look into dark eyes, brushing his knuckles over Tony’s cheekbone as he thought about what he wanted to say.

“Tony, listen–”

“I think we’re done talking.” Tony laughed a little shakily and gave Steve’s shoulder a playful push. “Don’t you think? Got all of our questions answered and boundaries set and you’re *kneeling* in front of me and that’s about making me lose my mind, so why don’t we stop with the chatter and get to the naked?”

“There’s that snarky schoolteacher I like so much.” Steve grinned when Tony whined impatiently and started plucking at his shirt. “But I have one more question. You said I can’t knot you.”

Tony froze, his heart sinking. *I knew this was too good to be true.* “Yes. It’s not like the biting thing, I don’t have any–any wiggle room on this.”

“I wasn’t asking that.” Steve shook his head, kissed the corner of Tony’s mouth so he would stop frowning. “But I am asking if I can use my fingers in you.”

Tony *eeped* partly in shock, mostly in want, his legs falling open automatically to make more room for the Alpha, an instinctual reaction he didn’t even *try* to control. “Um–um–um–”

It wasn’t what Steve had *wanted* to say, but the welcome light in Tony’s eyes had faded just a bit when he had paused, the Omega obviously knowing Steve was about to mention feelings or something along those lines, and not wanting to deal with it.

So Steve pushed it away and instead, trailed his fingers up Tony’s thighs, humming in approval when Tony mewed enticingly and spread his legs further.

“Would you let me use my mouth?” Steve murmured, as if he hadn’t been dreaming about how Tony would taste for *weeks.* “My tongue isn’t as big as my fingers but baby, I’d make you feel so good, I *swear.*”
“F–fuck–” Tony stuttered out a curse, slouching down into the couch and making grabby hands at the Alpha. “Steve, don’t make me wait, we’ve talked plenty, come on–”

“How important are these pants to you?” Just as eager to be done talking as Tony, relieved that the Omega had come back entirely from being so nervous, Steve grabbed at Tony’s ass, yanked him forward on the couch until he could rub his nose into the vee of the slim hips. “Because I can smell you through them and it’s making me insane. You smell so sweet, honey, I can’t wait to get my mouth on you.”

“Jesus Christ.” Tony’s moaned a little, but he still managed to be sassy with a breathless, “I can assure you that if you tear these pants they will be the last pair of my pants you ever get into.” Steve pinched his knee and Tony shrieked a little but added, “I want you, Sheriff Rogers, but I draw the line at ruining my clothes. I have to have some sort of respectability, don’t I?”

“Well then please god, stand up and take them off.” Steve was begging and didn’t even try to hide it, tugging at Tony’s trousers to coax him up off the couch. “Be as respectable as you want, Mr. Carbonell, but please–”

Tony tried not to blush, biting at his lip as he stood up and wiggled out of his pants, but he wanted to preen when the Alpha’s made a desperate sort of noise at the sight of the satin shortie shorts he was wearing, and he outright purred when Steve started to grab at him but stopped himself short.

Instead, the Alpha rocked back onto his heels, a hand over his mouth and the other pressing over his hardening cock, growling deep in his chest as Tony peeled the damp panties down his thighs and kicked them off his toes.

Tony felt maybe a little foolish standing there half naked, his shirt still on and covering the mess that was his scarred chest, but he felt less foolish when Steve’s eyes flickered over his body and then blurred dark red with want, and even less foolish when he sat back down and Steve shoved forward to crush their mouths together, coaxing Tony to open for him with teasing licks and gentle nips until he could dip inside and taste every corner of the Omegas sweet mouth.

“Come here like this.” Steve urged Tony sideways and then down lengthwise onto the couch, pushing blankets and pillows aside to make room, cradling Tony’s head so he wouldn’t fall too quickly onto the cushions.

“You have my pants off, you know.” Tony hnnngh’ed when Steve bent and licked over his hip bone. “You don’t have to be quite this sweet, I can handle–” a squeak when the Alpha parted his legs. “– I can handle a little rough–ah!” he threw his head back and cried out when a thick finger swiped through the slick on his thigh and touched just lightly over his hole. “– I can handle–ohhhhh.”

Tony went limp on the couch at the first touch of Steve’s tongue at the tip of his cock, hot and wet and careful as his lips slid down the hard length then back to the top, mapping the ridges and veins with his mouth, a hand on each side of Tony’s hips to hold him still and secure.

“Steve…” hardly even a word, Tony’s eyes wide with disbelief as the Alpha hummed in interest and rubbed his cheek against Tony’s thigh before starting again, up and down Tony’s cock, circling the base with his index finger and thumb and holding tight enough for Tony to pulse and twitch against his tongue, a bead of liquid pooling at the top sucked into Steve’s willing mouth.

“Oh god.” Tony’s hands went to Steve’s blond hair at the next pass, when Steve shifted onto his knees and took nearly all of Tony’s cock between his lips, bobbing his head and hollowing his cheeks until his nose was brushing Tony’s stomach and holding there, keeping the Omega held in a
warm, _willing_, seal until Tony was starting to thrust his hips up helplessly and Steve had to break away to breathe.

Tony’s cock hit his stomach with wet sounding slap as Steve pulled off with a _pop_, and if Tony would have had any coherent thought in his head, he might have said something snarky.

As it was, his mouth was hanging open watching the Alpha lick his lips, the dark eyes never once changing from red, no indication that Steve hadn’t fully enjoyed that, that he hadn’t wanted to–

“You’re looking at me like an Alpha’s ever done that for you.” Steve lifted one of Tony’s legs up over his shoulder, turning his head to plant a kiss on Tony’s knee where it rested near his ear. “And I _know_ that can’t be true, not with as pretty as you are Tony.”

“Steve, I–AH!” Tony bit his lip hard enough to make it bleed when Steve ducked down and started licking across his entrance. “Steve!”

“_Mmmm_ you taste sweet.” The Alpha mumbled from between Tony’s legs, breathing in deep of heated _Omega_, spreading round cheeks and thumbing over Tony’s hole as his tongue danced and flicked across the tight rim. “Tony, you taste so good, oh my god–”

A groan that ended in a _growl_ and Tony felt it clear to his core, grabbing on to the couch cushions tight when Steve opened him up further, slurping noisily at the wet that was starting to flow thick, sucking and pulling at his entrance with his lips, pulling away only to press a hint of teeth into Tony’s hipbone, his upper thigh, a rough palm sliding down the leg resting over the broad shoulders, down further to squeeze at the plump rear, moaning something about _soft_ and _perfect._

Tony was starting to feel sloppy and loose, wet and open and just as he was getting used to it, ready to fall back into the pillows to let his pleasure build against the slow touches, Steve stroked over a spot inside him that had sparks rushing up Tony’s spine and bursting behind his eyes, surprising himself with a shout.

“Oh, _fuck_ that’s good sweetheart, say my name again.” The hand disappeared from Tony’s thigh and behind the growing rush of arousal, Tony vaguely registered Steve doing something below the couch cushion, vaguely heard the clink of a belt and then the Alpha was growling and panting, pulling his fingers free and leaving Tony to cry out over the empty for just a few seconds before they were back.

In a burst of clarity, Tony realized the Alpha was using _his_ slick as lubricant for his own cock and that was—that was–

Another pass deep inside him, three fingers now, stroking and pressing over that bundle of nerves, Steve’s tongue still twisting around his rim and as deep inside as he could reach and Tony couldn’t have held still if he _wanted_ to.
The Omega was rolling his hips up onto Steve’s wrist, against his face, dragging a hand through his own hair so he wouldn’t pull at Steve’s, not even realizing he was begging, calling for the Alpha until Steve was saying, “I got you, Tony, got you baby, come on and come for me, let me feel you come around my fingers and all over my tongue—

Tony pleasure broke high and sharp, body stiffening, clenching down, and Tony tried to muffle his scream against his arm, shoving himself desperately onto the three fingers still inside him, rocking on the couch as he tried to wring every last bit of everything he could from the moment.

Steve stroked himself with his free hand, sitting up enough to press his forehead to Tony’s soft stomach as the beautiful Omega tried to come down, whispering Tonytonytonytony over and over until he was coming too, pouring thick and white onto the floor, squeezing at his knot until he couldn’t take it anymore, jolting forward to grind against the couch, shaking through every little wave and spark of pleasure for long minutes.

Steve didn’t even realize he had blanked out, didn’t realize he had closed his eyes and all but collapsed onto Tony until a hand in his hair and a teasing, “Did I lose you entirely, Sheriff?” had him startling, opening his eyes and going to pull away.

“Oh you don’t have to leave yet.” Tony murmured, the words soft and lazy, ringed with a sweet sort of vulnerability. “Stay here just for a minute.”

Steve breathed a shaky sigh of relief and lay a little harder against the Omega, pillowing his face against Tony’s tummy and trying to get his heartbeat back under control.

“Mmmm.” Tony was shifting beneath him languidly, his hips working in small circles and Steve realized with a start that his fingers were buried between Tony’s thighs.

“Sorry.” he whispered, and Tony hissed and whined when he pulled them free, so Steve kissed his bellybutton in a silent apology, easing Tony’s leg off his shoulder as well so the Omega wasn’t in quite such an uncomfortable position.

“We should clean up.” Tony said after another minute, and Steve nodded reluctantly until Tony added. “But I don’t want to move.”

That got a smile out of the Alpha. “I think I’ll take that as a compliment, Mr. Carbonell.”

“Please do, Sheriff Rogers.” Tony grinned down at him, still petting through his hair affectionately before yawning big enough to crack his jaw. “Oh god, I told you I was useless after this sort of thing. Aren’t you glad we talked before hand?”

“Very glad.” Steve kissed Tony’s stomach again, rubbing the scruff at his cheek against the soft skin before easing away slowly. “But you’re right. We should get cleaned up.”

“Mmmph.” Tony made an unimpressed noise and stayed sprawled on the couch as Steve went to small bathroom to clean up.

He was already half asleep when the Alpha came back with a damp rag, and Tony took it with a wry smile, wiping at his stomach with a distasteful sort of expression. “Next time let’s do this on a towel, hm?”

“Next time?” Steve clicked his tongue in embarrassment over the mess on the floor, but Tony waved it off and pointed him towards some cleaning supplies.

“Are you planning a next time?” Steve asked as he bent to pour a little cleaner on the wood and
wiping at it quickly. “That seems awfully presumptuous of you.”

“You think so?” even post sex and feeling useless, Tony was a snarky little shit and kicked out at Steve’s shoulder. “Is it presumptuous to assume you want to do this again?”

“Not at all.” Steve returned the cleaning supplies and tossed the soiled rag in the laundry bin, waiting for Tony to at least retrieve his satin shorts before joining him on the couch, hauling the Omega up and into his arms. “I think one of my boundaries will have to be cuddles afterwards though. I wasn’t exactly a fan of how you snatched your pants and scurried off last time.”

“Well, I’ll suffer through the cuddles as long as you put me to bed after.” Tony was yawning again, curling up on Steve’s lap and leaning into his chest. “I wasn’t joking about the useless thing.”

Steve smiled, swamped by a wave of affection for the Omega. “Can I ask one more question?” quietly, almost nervously and Tony was too lazy to look up, so he just snuggled closer and nodded. “I know this isn’t courting, and I’m assuming you want it to stay at least somewhat private—”

“—which is impossible in this gossip mill of a town—”

“Right. But um— are we— are we only walking with each other?”

“Sheriff Rogers.” Tony shifted on his lap to try and get more comfortable, winding his arms around the Alpha’s waist. “Are you asking if you’re the only Alpha seeing my lacy unmentionables?”

“That’s exactly what I’m asking.” Steve smoothed an unruly lock of hair from Tony’s forehead and kissed him gently. “I was just trying to be more subtle than that.”

“Oh I’m pretty sure we’ve decided you’re not great at subtleties.” Another yawn, Tony going a little boneless against Steve as his exhaustion caught up with him. “But yes, other than Clint, and I suppose Sam when he cleans up after us, you are the only one I walk with.”

“You and Clint and Sam—” Steve hesitated. “It’s not my business, but—”

“It’s just two Omegas having fun together.” Tony interrupted. “And I’m not going to stop doing it just because you and I are doing this. Clint is my closest friend and if I want to kiss him or be naked with him then I will. It’s just a way for the two of us to connect, a way to keep me on an even keel since I’m not mated. You know Omega’s are needy little shits, I need to be cuddled, Clint’s there to cuddle to me, that’s all it is.”

“I’m not asking you to stop.” Steve objected, running his hands in soothing circles over Tony’s back. “I was just curious.”

“Sam and I kiss sometimes.” Tony admitted. “And the three of us have played together, but never just he and I. It’s always he and Clint, and Clint and I. Sam and I don’t— not like you and I do. He’s mated, you know? Doesn’t really want me anyway, not attracted to other Omega’s beyond an initial sort of thing. Sam’s safe, he’s an Alpha I can trust in any and all circumstances and he and Clint both are special to me.”

Steve was quiet, but pressed at Tony’s waist gratefully and Tony smiled over it.

Steve had no reason or right to be possessive, and he knew the Sheriff was just checking their boundaries… but it was still nice.

“You know you’re safe with me, right Tony?” Steve asked then. “I know that Sam is safe, especially with being mated and all that. But you know I’m safe too, right?”
“Well, as safe as a guy who wears spurs and giant hats can be.” Tony retorted and when Steve pinched him, he huffed and shoved the Alpha away, clambering from Steve’s lap awkwardly. “Now see what you did? We were having a nice cuddle and you had to get all irksome. Go away.”

“I thought I was required to carry you to bed!”

“What, so you can pinch me again?” Tony put his nose in the air. “Hardly.”

“Of course, I don’t know what I was thinking.” Steve laughed and snagged Tony back for a quick kiss. “Will you walk me out?”

“Nope.” Tony kissed Steve back and then turned to head towards his bedroom. “There’s only one door to this place, try not to get lost. Lock up on your way out, will you?”

Steve sighed to himself, but locked the door on his way out anyway, making sure it was shut tight before heading down the stairs.

He had just made it down to Nomad when the door opened again and Tony stepped out in his night shirt, looking so adorable and soft in the moonlight that it took most of Steve’s self control not to just run back up the stairs and start it all over again.

“Steve?”

“Everything alright, Tony?”

“Much more than adequate.” Tony waggled his eyebrows mischievously. “Just in case you were wondering.”

“Well, I am sure am pleased to hear it.” Steve swung up onto Nomad and tipped his hat in farewell. “Sweet dreams, Mr. Carbonell.”

“The sweetest, Sheriff Rogers.”

Tony watched the Sheriff ride away, waiting until Nomad was nothing more than a dot in the distance before going back inside and shutting the door.

A glance at the couch made him blush, the vivid memory of the Seriff on his knees to bring him his pleasure–

“Oh.” Tony whined a little, thunking his head back against the door.

Never once had an Alpha ever done that for him. Sure that’s how he and Clint played together, but never an Alpha.

Getting down on the floor, kneeling in front of a lover—those were things Omega’s were supposed to do and Tony had never once had an Alpha be so intent on giving him pleasure that they were willing to only use their hand to find their own.

He hummed to himself as he headed back to bed.

Normally he’d be itching to tell Clint everything that had happened, but for some reason he wanted to keep a few of the moments private.

Just a few though. Clint was definitely hearing about Steve’s tongue.

Oh yes-sir-ee.
“Oh well, look who’s breakin’ curfew..” Bucky poked his head out of his bedroom long enough to send Steve a sharp look. “And where exactly have ya been, Sheriff?”

“At the schoolhouse.” Steve said mildly, hanging his hat up and unhooking his holster. “Spending some time with Tony.”

“Oh yeah?” Bucky didn’t look impressed. “Well did he at least give you a passing grade this time?”

Steve knew his grin was goofy but he couldn’t help it. “We had a good time, yeah.”

“Dumbass.” Bucky shook his head. “Well, did you at least tell him you want to court him? That you’re all batty over him an’ all that?”

“Uh, no.” Steve shook his head, frowning a little. “No, I didn’t. We talked before hand, but I didn’t–didn’t say that, Buck, there just wasn’t a good time.”

“Well why not?” Bucky frowned. “That stubborn Omega is going to think you’re alright with just messing around and we both know that’s not true.”

“That’s all Tony wants to do.” Steve shrugged and tried not to look so morose. “So that’s all I can do.”

“And you’re alright with that?” the other Alpha said doubtfully. “You gonna be okay jus’ doin’ this sorta thing?”

Steve’s eyes got a little wistful. “For now.”
“Pretty Omega.” Valkyrie ran her fingers lightly through Clint’s hair and kissed his forehead. “How are you this morning?”

“Hi Valkyrie.” Clint flushed under the sweet attention from the fierce Beta and reached out to hold her hand. “I’m good, but I’d be better if you called me pretty again.”

“High maintenance.” Valkyrie said instead and flicked him on the ear, grinning when he yelped. “Where’s your boss, hm? He was supposed to come by and talk to me early this morning about a few unsavory individuals who have been meandering in and out of my tavern and I haven’t seen him yet.”

“Oh, he wasn’t in when I got to the office.” Clint shrugged. “Probably just overslept? I dunno, it’s not really like our fine upstanding Sheriff to be late for anything ever, but I suppose he’s allowed a pass or two. Bucky isn’t in yet either so maybe he and Steve went for a—”

“Hey Clint.” Bucky bumped into the Omega’s chair purposefully as he passed, nearly jostling Clint right out of it. “Mornin’, Valkyrie.”

“Bucky.” Valkyrie eyed the big Alpha, smirking over his neatly pressed shirt and clean boots, the way he kept glancing up the stairs to where Natasha lived and ran her business. “You know damn well Nat ain’t up yet, not keeping the hours she does. Sit down and have some breakfast and quit staring around like a dummy.”

“Charming as always.” Bucky said dryly and flopped into the chair opposite Clint. “What are you two yammerin’ about?”

“Wondering where Steve is.” Clint said around a swallow of coffee. “He was supposed to come and see Valkyrie this morning, and I thought maybe the two of you were just coming in late but—”

“He wasn’t at the house when I woke up.” Bucky interrupted. “Nomad was gone, figured he just came in early. You haven’t seen him, either?”

“He’ll turn up.” Valkyrie brought Bucky a cup of coffee. “He’s a grown ass Alpha and we’re over here fussing like he’s a lost child. What’s the worst that could happen?”

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“What’s the worst that could happen, Tony?” Steve asked teasingly, setting Tony up on the desk and pushing between his legs, wrapping a big hand at the base of Tony’s neck and dragging him in for a long kiss. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

“The worst that could happen?” Tony gasped against Steve’s mouth, yanking at the buttons of Steve’s shirt to get to skin beneath. “My students could walk in—”

“But an hour before school starts?” Steve sealed his lips over the curve where Tony’s neck met his shoulders, tonguing over his pulse and growling sweetly when the Omega tilted his head back and mewed.

“And they could see—” Tony flattened his palms against Steve’s chest, slid his nails down to scratch
over a beautifully defined abdomen. “Um, they would see—”

“See what?” Steve slid the hand at Tony’s neck down the lean back, over his hips and down to squeeze at the wonderfully plump rear. “What are they gonna see, Tony?”

Tony made a soft noise that might have been a whimper, might have been a purr when the Alpha leaned further over the desk, coaxing Tony to lay back until his legs wrapped around Steve’s waist and they fit tight together.

“If you don’t take my pants off they’re going to see their teacher with a very noticeable stain on the front of his trousers!” Tony pinched at his side when Steve waggled his eyebrows. “Steve I’m not kidding! This is fun and all but—” Tony’s mouth went a little slack, his breath catching when Steve caged him in between thick arms and rubbed purposefully against him, the line of his cock hard and hot even with trousers between them.

“Ah shit.” Tony went pliant beneath him, hands wandering aimlessly up and down the Alpha’s sides, eyes fluttering closed. “Steve—”

“I’ll make this quick.” Steve promised, blue eyes lit with affection before they slid red with desire. “Don’t worry, the students won’t know anything even happened.”

“Don’t make it too quick, Sheriff Rogers.” Tony’s mouth lifted in a lazy half smile, tightening his legs around Steve’s waist. “I’d hate to have to tell everyone you’re a minute man.”

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“Uh, hey Sheriff.” Sam looked up in confusion when Steve came strolling into the department late on Wednesday afternoon, a goofy grin on his face and whistling happily. “What are you doing?”

“Sam.” Steve hung his hat up on the rack and then shrugged out of his jacket. “Why do you look so surprised? I told you I was going out to get a sandwich at the shop, why are you staring at me like that?”

“Because you left to go get a sandwich over an hour ago.” Sam pointed out. “Over an hour, Steve. How big was your sandwich?”

“It hasn’t been over an—” Steve started to protest, but then he caught sight of the hands on the grandfather clock and his mouth fell open. “Oh my god, I was gone for over an hour.”

“Can confirm.” Clint draped himself across his Alpha’s lap and took a big bite of his own sandwich. “You left before I did, and Macy said you definitely came in, got a sandwich and left. But I’ve been back for about fifteen minutes. Where you been?”

“Went out to the creek to have my lunch, must’ve just lost track of time.” Steve sat behind his desk and started rifling through papers. “Sorry about that, anything good happen?”

“No a damn thing.” Sam snagged some of his mate’s sandwich. “No harm no foul.”

“Alright then.” Steve burped and covered his mouth, making a face at the taste of burped up roast beef. “Let’s get back to work then.”

Outside the window, Tony passed by on the sidewalk, happily munching on what was left of half a roast beef sandwich.
He loved lunch breaks down by the creek.

“Mr. Carbonell fell asleep in class today.” Harley told May around a mouthful of noodles on Friday night. “He was real tired when class started, said something about bein’ all sortsa useless after lunch today, and then fell asleep during geography!”

“Well, geography is terribly boring.” May heaped more noodles on the teenagers plate and then turned to add some to Peter’s as well. “And I know if I was teaching you two and your pack of wild animals you call friends, I would need a nap too.”

The Alpha frowned then, pouring more milk for the boys. “It’s odd that he called himself useless though, isn’t it? I think Mr. Carbonell is being a little too hard on himself just for nodding off.”

“Maybe–” Peter cleared his throat. “Maybe you should invite him over for dinner. That would take some of the stress off him for sure.”

A swift kick into Harley’s shin, and the other boy piped up, “Oh definitely, Mrs. Parker, ma’am. Mr. Carbonell and you–”

“You boys are both darling and meddlesome.” she sent them both fond looks. “But I have no interest in the schoolteacher, and even if I did, Mr. Carbonell isn’t interested in me.”

“But you’re a pretty Alpha.” Harley piped up. “And he’s a real good lookin’ Omega. You guys are perfect.”

“Ah to be young again.” May laughed out loud at the simplistic reasoning. “When you are older, Harley, you will realize that it takes more than just good looks to make a relationship work. Much more. Trust me.”

“Good Christ, you’re pretty.” Tony licked a long line from Steve’s navel clear up to his nipple, flicking his tongue out and over the dark bud as it pebbled beneath his lips. “I mean honestly, Steve, it’s a little ridiculous. I’ve only seen pecs like this on the cover of my dirty books.”

“Read a lot of dirty books, do you Tony?” Steve exhaled loudly, forcing himself to keep his hands locked behind his head as the Omega shifted on the bed to straddle his waist, pretty pink lips moving hungrily over Steve’s collarbone and to his neck.

“I read enough of them.” Tony bumped their noses together playfully and Steve lifted his head for a quick kiss before laying back on the pillows.

“How many, Tony?”

“ Enough to know that the smut writers back east would use you as a model for their next hundred books or so.” Steve’s belt came undone easily, the Alpha lifting his hips so Tony could pull it all the way off.
“I mean, damn.” A quiet laugh, and Tony tossed the belt away, scooting down until he could get his mouth just at the top of the Steve’s hipbone, at the beginning of the vee that disappeared into his pants. “I didn’t think I had a thing for cowboys but Sheriff, you are proving me wrong.”

“I love how bold you are.” Steve sucked in a harsh breath when Tony left a sharp bite close to his navel. “You always say exactly what you’re thinking and I love it.”

“Oh yeah?” Tony switched sides, nibbling and mouthing along Steve’s ribs as his hands wandered lower and lower over that romance novel worthy body, heading back towards the Alpha’s pants to flick the top button open. “I’ve always been told I’m a mouthy little shit and that most Alphas don’t like that.”

“Whoever told you that has obviously never been in this particular position and at the mercy of your mouth.” Steve grinned down at him, thrilling over the sight of the Omega so comfortable against him, Tony’s eyes warm and his smile sweet and relaxed.

Two weeks now, they had been doing this together— clandestine meetings at Tony’s place, sometimes after Steve got off work, sometimes before he even went to work, falling onto the couch or pinned up against a wall or that one time over Tony’s desk— crashing together with messy kisses and quiet moans and heated touches until they were coming apart beneath each other’s hands.

It was fun. Easy. With no expectations of a relationships, Steve didn’t have to feel weird about just showing up and knocking in the door hoping for a hook up and Tony didn’t feel any shame about kicking Steve out the moment they were done, or changing his mind and dragging the Alpha back for cuddles.

They didn’t have to talk about work, about the school, they didn’t have to talk at all if they didn’t want to.

Sometimes Tony opened the door and was all over the Alpha immediately, other nights Steve had to coax a smile out of the Omega with sweet kisses and soft touches until Tony was purring and melting into his arms.

And today, today Tony had yanked Steve’s shirt off before shoving him down on the bed, cheeks flushing in excitement as he just looked.

When Steve had thrown his arms out wide, clearly inviting the Omega to explore as much as he wanted, Tony had bit his lip and did an excited little wiggle that almost had the Alpha howling over how adorable it was before clambering onto the bed and proceeding to drive Steve just about mad with every single touch.

Tony leaned in to press a long kiss to Steve’s lips just then, and Steve wrapped both arms around Tony’s waist to hold him close, lengthening the kiss until the Omega was starting to whine against it, fingers tightening in Steve’s sides eagerly.

“You’re beautiful, Tony.” Steve breathed when they parted. “I’d only want to be on the cover of a romance novel if you were the Omega I was holding.”

Tony’s eyes sparkled, a smile curving his lips as he said, “That was the dumbest thing you’ve ever said, Sheriff. I love it.”

“Well, why don’t you stop talking and come here and show me how much?”

“You trying to get me to be mouthy on a certain part of your anatomy, Sheriff Rogers?” Tony started tugging Steve’s pants down his thigh. “Because I have to say, it’s working very well.”
“Tony!” Clint banged on the door of the apartment above the schoolhouse. “Tony? You home, baby? Open up!”

“Hey.” Tony opened his door with a welcoming smile and motioned Clint in, stepping close to kiss the other Omega happily. “I haven’t seen you in a week! How are you?”

“I think the question is, how are you?” Clint tossed his jacket onto the table and scooped Tony back up for another kiss, trilling when Tony bumped their noses together. “Haven’t seen you in a week, haven’t hardly talked to you in at least two–what’s going on with you lately?”

“What do you mean?” Tony directed him towards the couch and started pouring some wine for them both, bringing the bottle with him to the sofa table. “I’ve been doing all the usual stuff I always do, nothing’s changed.”

“I call bullshit on that.” Clint snorted and took the glass of wine, nearly emptying it in one go. “You’ve obviously doing something else otherwise we wouldn’t even be having this conversation the way we are having the conversation at this very moment.”

“The way we are having–” Tony chuckled and refilled Clint’s glass. “Have you already been drinking? That didn’t make any sense at all.”

“It makes perfect sense.” Clint pointed at him. “Let’s count it off, shall we? Usually when we get a chance to be alone, you don’t leave my lap, and yet today you are apparently content to sit a full cushion over and drink your wine.”

“That’s not really–”

“You kissed me once.” The Omega held up one finger as if it had personally offended him. “Once! I had to take a second one, and I can’t remember the last time you didn’t try to suck my face off for at least a full minute.”

“Clint.” Tony rolled his eyes. “If you want another kiss–”

“Third!” Clint interrupted. “You haven’t stopped by the Sheriff’s station in almost a month. Not to mess with Bucky, not to sling vaguely worded insults that are kind of come-ons with the Sheriff. Not to ask if you can come over and spend some time with me and my Alpha, which frankly, hurts just a little bit because the last time we were together you ran out the door screaming about the Sheriff and walking and then you just drop off the map?”

“Yeah, I should apologize to your Alpha for running out like that, especially after he was so sweet to me.” Tony grimaced. “That wasn’t very polite.”

“No, it really wasn’t.” Clint downed a second glass of wine and set it aside, opening his arms hopefully. “And you still aren’t cuddling me so–”

“Have we told you that you’re high maintenance?” Tony finished his drink and poured another before scooting over and curling up on Clint’s lap, settling in with a quiet purr when Clint started petting through his hair, nuzzling at his cheek and down his neck. “Because you’re high maintenance.”

“I don’t think it’s high maintenance to demand a snuggle or two.” Clint countered. “But don’t
change the subject. Where have you been lately? What could you possibly find to keep your interest in this tiny little town? I tell ya.” He felt around behind Tony for his wine glass. “You’ve been sorta distant and the last two or three days Sheriff has been basically useless around the office, coming in late and day dreaming out the window and—”

Tony made a quiet pleased noise before he could help himself and first, Clint’s eyes widened and then his jaw dropped and then—”

“TONY!” Clint jumped to his feet and Tony acked in shock as he landed on the floor. “Are you and the Sheriff—?”

The Omega bit his lip, a streak of red painting his cheekbones and Clint’s mouth fell open further.

“Oh my god. You and the Sheriff? Are you serious?”

“A little bit.” Tony looked down at his feet but couldn’t hide his smile. “He came over yesterday.”

“Tell me everything.” Clint dove back for the couch, topping both of their wine glasses up almost to the rim and shoving at Tony. “Everything. Right now. I want to know it all.”

“Oh god, that was just the beginning.”

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Three hours and three bottles of wine later, the two Omegas were too wine drunk to even make coherent sentences, leaning into each other and giggling as Tony held up an apple to mime the size of Steve’s knot and Clint held up an orange because obviously his mate’s knot was bigger and they both collapsed into screaming laughter at the thought of any Alpha having a knot that big and laughing harder over the thought of the knot looking like fruit.

They were being so loud neither of them heard the knock on the door, and neither of them heard Steve call for Tony before opening it to peek in.

“Oh! Oh my god Sheriff Rogers!” Tony shrieked wen he caught sight of the Sheriff and Clint jumped and they both stared up at Steve with almost empty wine glasses, thoroughly tousled hair and silly smiles. “Look at you just sneaking in to see me!”

“Oh two nights in a row, Sheriff?” Clint raised his eyebrows— or tried to raise his eyebrows but after so much wine, the best he managed was a blurry, suspicious squint. “My oh my how the turntables— um—”

He stopped, confused, and Steve stared at him, confused, and Tony giggled himself half to death because he thought he maybe knew what Clint was trying to say, but he was pretty confused too and the whole situation was fairly hilarious.

“Oh alright, well.” Steve put the bottle wine he had brought down on the table since it apparently wasn’t needed, and crossed to the couch, bending down to lay a sweet kiss on Tony’s mouth. “You taste good with wine on your lips.” he whispered and Tony started giggling again.
“Come on, you.” It took no effort at all from the Alpha to scoop Clint up in his arms. “I’ll get you home to your mate, and if you’re sober enough to understand what I’m saying, feel free to come in late tomorrow, alright? No need to be working with what will definitely be a hell of a hangover.”

“I approve of you, Sheriff.” Clint said loudly and Steve clicked his tongue.

“Thanks very much. Listen, Tony—” He looked back over at the couch, but the beautiful Omega was already dozing off, curled up on the cushions, snuggled into a blanket looking sweet and soft and vulnerable and Steve’s breath caught just a little over the sheer domesticity of the scene.

Damn.

“Steve and Tony sitting in a tree.” Clint started singing drunkenly as Steve carried him down the stairs. “K-I-S-S-I-N-G. First comes love—”

“Easy does it.” Steve chuckled and set Clint on Nomad carefully before hopping up behind him. “Let’s get you home.”

“…then comes marriage…”

“Enough, Omega.” Steve laughed when Clint hiccuped. “Enough. Just close your eyes and before you know it, you’ll be warm in your own bed.”

“And you’ll be warm in Tony’s?” A bright blue eyes peeking up at him. “Hm?”

“Nah.” Steve said easily. “He’s already asleep. No use me going back.”

“That was the right answer, Sheriff.” Clint said decisively, if not a little slurred, and Steve only smiled and urged Nomad on.

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“I’m telling you, it’s the cutest shit I’ve ever seen.” Hangover be damned, Clint was chowing down on an unhealthy sized portion of Valkyrie’s famous steak and eggs. “Tony is all giggly and sweet over it, and Jesus you should have seen the look on the Sheriff’s face when he caught sight of Tony all curled up on the couch.”

“Well it’s about time they got together.” Happy grunted over a big bite of his own breakfast. “Started a few days ago, you say?”

“Yeah, Tony said Steve came over night before last and they had some—” the Omega waggled his eyebrows. “—some fun.”

“And then Steve was there last night too?” Sam asked, pouring his mate a cup of black coffee. “Two nights in a row?”

“I KNOW!” Clint said loudly, and then ducked his head when several people at the other table shushed him. “I mean, it’s taken them long enough to get together, and now they are hooking up two nights in a row? Methinks it’s moving quick. I wonder how long they will try to keep it quiet before telling everyone?”

“Who’s trying to keep what quiet?” Valkyrie came by with a second helping for Clint, an easy hand on Sam’s shoulder. “Happy, are you finally going to tell us about this secret Omega of yours?”
“Absolutely not.” Happy rolled his eyes. “We’re talkin’ about how Sheriff and the schoolteacher have finally started hooking up. Apparently just a few days ago.”

“A few days ago.” Valkyrie said blankly. “You’re joking, right?”

“Don’t be jealous.” Sam teased her. “You can’t keep all the pretty Omega’s for yourself.”

“Oh no, not that.” She shrugged as she gathered up a few dishes. “I mean, you’re joking that they’ve only been hooking up for a few days.”

“Who’s been hooking up for a few days, darling?” Natasha, who had come down the stairs without any of them noticing, her green eyes flitting around the table and then shading darker in disappointment when she didn’t see Bucky.

“Our sassy little school teacher and Sheriff Rogers.” Clint supplied, offering his cheek so the other Omega would bend down and kiss it. “After all these weeks of dancing around each other and pretending neither one of them is interested, they finally gave in. I’ll be honest, after the whole dance/walk debacle, I didn’t think Tony would give Steve the time of day again, but as of night before last, all is well in their world.”

“Pretty Omega.” Natasha smiled and Clint preened, always one to accept any and all compliments. “So adorable but so dumb.”

“What!” Clint sputtered and Sam growled warningly over the slight to his mate. “What do you mean dumb!”

“She means that Tony and the Sheriff have been hooking up for weeks.” Valkyrie explained and she and Natasha shared an amused look over the tables confusion. “And you all are too dumb to notice.”

“Weeks?” That even got a response out of Happy, who rarely looked up from his meal long enough to talk at all. “WEEKS!”

“Since the barn raising, by my calculations.” Natasha made a show of studying her nails. “And since my job is to notice when Alpha’s are lonely or not, I am very aware that neither Mr. Carbonell nor our illustrious Sheriff has been lonely for close to a month.”

“I’d say a month.” Valkyrie agreed. “And don’t look so surprised boys. They are pretty people, it had to happen eventually.”

“And frequently.” Natasha snorted when Happy choked on his meal.

“Loudly.” From the Beta and Natasha full on cackled over Sam’s expression.

“Lucky.” Clint muttered, and both the Alpha’s at the table sent him a horrified look. “Oh don’t do that.” he groused. “Sam if you were giving me good regular loving, I wouldn’t be breaking some commandment by lusting after the Sheriff!”

“Home.” Sam threw some bills on the table and snatched his Omega out of the chair. “Now. I’ll show you some regular loving.”

Clint laughed out the door, and what was left of the group just sighed and went back to their business.

“Weeks, huh?” Happy sat back in his chair so Natasha could sit on his lap, cuddling the tiny Omega close and smiling when she started purring. They had an odd relationship, but everyone had an odd
relationship with Natasha, and theirs included the Madame curling up on his lap whenever she felt like it, drawn to how safe he was. “You think?”

“Oh definitely.” Natasha took a dainty bite of his eggs. “Mostly because Tony came to see me to ask if I would order him a few lacy things when I ordered next for my Omegas. It’s been less than three months since his last order so—”

“The Sheriff is just a-ruining them panties ain’t he!” Valkyrie crowed and Happy choked again.

“Can we not say things like that please! I’m eating!”

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“Can we not say things like that, please?” Steve groaned as he slid his cock across the ruffles on Tony’s ass, smearing pre-come onto the slick material before tugging it aside so he could thrust along the underside of Tony’s ass, between those smooth thighs, under the Omega’s sac and into the front of the briefs, staining it with another spurt of wet as a jolt of pleasure went through him. “Or at least not right now?”

“God that feels good.” Tony reached down over the front of his panties so he could feel Steve’s cock bumping next to his own, the tight underwear nestling them close together. “But I’m serious—” he hummed when Steve withdrew, pulling all the way out to rub against the frills again. “—if you keep doing this, I’m going to start taking money right out of your paycheck. I swear I will. Like child support but for my wardrobe instead.”

“If I keep doing what?” Steve pressed his lips to the back of Tony’s neck, slid his hand around the narrow waist to connect with Tony’s fingers, drawing them up and down the Omega’s length. “Hm?”

“If you keep ruining my underwear by coming in them!” Tony snapped, but it wasn’t near as irritated as he wanted it to be, not when Steve fit back in from behind, the Alpha’s cock trapped between Tony’s hole and the thin but gorgeous material that made up today’s pair of unmentionables.

“But you didn’t have to describe it as child support.” Steve argued, groaning a little when Tony stood up on tip toes and pushed that pert ass snugger against him. “That’s a mood killer.”

“Is it?” Tony’s grip at the front of his briefs tightened when the head of Steve’s cock nudged up against his own again and the Alpha shuddered. “Because it seems to me that you are still very invested in what’s going on.”

“Trust me—” Tony didn’t have to see anything to know the Alpha’s eyes had gone red– the rumble in the deep voice was enough. “Trust me, Tony, I am very invested in what’s going on.”

“Oh good.” Tony braced himself on his elbows and bent over further, wiggling his butt enticingly. “Let’s ruin them now then, and we can talk about how you’re going to start funding my wardrobe later.”

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“You alright?” Steve ran his fingers through Tony’s hair lightly. “You’re quiet tonight.”
“M’fine.” Tony snuggled closer on the couch. “A little cold.”

“Come here, then.” Steve hooked an arm under Tony’s legs, and one under his arms and lifted the Omega right into his lap. “How’s that, better?”

“How many times have we done this?” Tony asked over a yawn, pressing his nose to Steve’s neck to breathe in the Alpha’s scent. “A dozen?”

“We’ve been together at least four times a week for about six weeks now.” Steve corrected. “Closer to two dozen.”

“Hm. A dozen of them must not have been all that memorable then.” Tony yawned again and Steve was too busy melting over the way Tony was purring to even mind the snark.

“Why do you ask?” The Alpha kissed Tony’s forehead, then his cheek and when Tony looked up in surprise, right on the mouth. “What are you thinking about?” Another kiss, trailing over Tony’s ear and down his jaw, Steve unable to help himself from touching the Omega when Tony was all soft like this.

“No real reason.” Tony’s eyes were warm, something unreadable but encouraging in the way he held Steve’s gaze. “Are you going to stay a little longer?”

“Of course I’ll stay.” Steve glanced down to where Tony was still half naked under the blankets, smiling as he thought about how well the evening had already gone. “As long as you want, Tony.”

“I was serious about you having to replace my lacy things.” Tony muttered as he drifted towards sleep.

“Just tell me which catalogue to order from, baby.” Steve whispered. “I’ll take care of you.”
Bucky didn’t mean to pass out on the couch after dinner, but Stevie made an amazing lasagna and after three whole servings, the big Alpha had fallen asleep half way through a glass of milk.

It was a good nap, and a shockingly long nap, because he woke when the clock chimed ten pm, bolting awake on the couch and staring wildly around the dark room.

“Easy there, Rip Van Winkle.” Steve was circling things in a catalogue at his desk. “You ate half a lasagna and drank about a gallon of milk before face planting on the couch, remember?”

“My stomach hurts.” Bucky groaned, rubbing over it gingerly. “You could have at least rolled me over so I wasn’t sleeping on it after eating so much.”

“You’re a grown ass Alpha, Buck. I shouldn’t have to roll you over when you fall asleep.”

“Punk.” Bucky started to growl but it petered off into another groan as he popped his back. “Alright, well, since it’s bed time an’ all, I’m gonna hit the hay. What about you?”

“I um–” Steve tapped his pencil on the desk. “I gotta finish this thing and then I’ll be turning in, yeah.”

“Whatcha lookin’ at so late?” Bucky reached down and plucked the catalogue away from Steve. “You ordering us some new gear? New pants? I told ya to jus’ give the tailor in town a chance, she didn’t mean to ruin your first pair of pants, ya know. Just cause the seam split down your ass don’t mean you gotta order everything through a–”

Bucky stopped talking when he saw exactly what page of the catalogue Steve was shopping on, and Steve turned a fairly unhealthy shade of red when his best friend sent him a highly judgmental look.

“Uh Stevie?” Bucky cleared his throat loudly, then cleared it once more for good measure. “What uh– whatcha doin’ lookin’ at bloomers and knickers and all that? All these ah— ladies underthings? Why ya lookin’ at that?”

“Bucky–”

“I’m not gonna judge ya or nothin’. ” Steve could always tell how uncomfortable Bucky was by how thick his almost non existent Brooklyn drawl came through, and right now he could barely understand him, a hard edge to every word coming from the Alpha. “M’ jus’ sayin’ ya got a real pretty Omega ‘bout trippin’ over ya an’ you’re here fappin’ to–”

“ALRIGHT!” Steve interrupted, snatching the catalogue back and shoving it to the far corner of his desk. “First of all, you can relax and quit talking all stupid because I wasn’t–” his face turned even more red. “– I wasn’t doing that, alright?”
“Mebbe not yet.” Bucky maintained, a direct glance down at Steve’s lap. “But you were gettin’ there, huh? Damn, Stevie I was on th’ couch, ya can’t do that in your own room?”

“Jesus.” Steve coughed and dropped his hands into his lap, because while he hadn’t been doing what Bucky thought he had been doing… it had been interesting to be flipping through that sort of catalogue looking at those sort of things so….

“No, listen.” he shook his head when Bucky started looking judgmental again, saying everything all in a rush so he could get it out before Bucky interrupted again. “Listen. Tony and I– we’ve been spending time together and I uh– I ruined a few pair of his undergarments and he told me I needed to replace them and I told him to just give me a catalogue and–” a sheepish motion. “And here we are.”

“You ruined some of Tony’s undergarments.” Bucky repeated. “And you have to replace them from this catalogue? This one?”

“Yeah, I had to get it from Natasha.” Steve was still blushing. “She says that Tony orders from the same catalogue as her and her girls so–”

“Wait, Natasha orders from this too?” Bucky snatched the catalogue back and started thumbing through it. “Because this is– all’a these are–” his eyes widened over a particularly racy pair– cut high over the models hips and real thin in the back, the fabric narrowing to little more than a string before disappearing between the model’s cheeks and Bucky sucked in a quick breath.

“Why do– why do some of these have stars drawn in?”

“Because I pretty much know what Tony wears, but Natasha wanted to be helpful and made a few suggestions based on what she likes to wear.” Steve said miserably. “I’ve been sitting here for half an hour trying to make valid decisions while having to picture–”

“Oh god.” Bucky made a desperate sort of noise, holding the catalogue so tight it was starting to tear, staring down at the different things Natasha had put a star by. “Oh my– uh Stevie–”

“I’m gonna turn in for the night.” Steve jumped to his feet and pushed past a still shell-shocked Bucky. “See ya in the morning.”

“Uh—” Bucky nodded dumbly. “Yep.”

**********************

In the morning, the catalogue was still sitting on the desk and neither Bucky nor Steve even looked at it as they ate their breakfast.

It was a small house, after all, and while Steve had remembered to put a pillow over his face as he vividly pictured Tony in all the things he had put on the order slip, Bucky wasn’t near as discreet as he had vividly pictured Natasha in the items she had starred—

—anyway. It was an awkward meal, and a quiet ride into town, and even though Sam and Clint kept shooting weird looks at the two Alphas, neither the Sheriff nor the Deputy had anything to say about it.

Natasha mailed Steve’s order when she mailed out the orders for herself and her Omega’s, and sent a note around to the Sheriff’s department that his package should arrive in about a months time.

Steve read the note and put it away, going back to his paperwork and not looking at Bucky, who was definitely not looking at him.
A month seemed an awful long time to wait for something so pretty, but Steve had a pretty good idea of how he was going to stay busy until then.

********************

“Tony.” Steve kicked at the door of Tony’s apartment, one hand full of flowers, the other holding a container of soup from Valkyrie. “Honey, can you get to the door? I know you aren’t feeling good but my hands are full so—”

“Steeb?” The door cracked open and one half of a very tired face peeked out. “Wha’ are you doin’ here?”

“May Parker stopped by the station and told me you caught a real bad cold from one of the kids.” Steve held up the flowers and soup cheerfully. “So I brought you something to make you feel better!”

“Leave’m on th’door step.” Tony mumbled. “I’ll get’em later.”

“I’m not going to leave it on the door step, Tony.” The Alpha said patiently. “Let me in for just a second and I’ll drop this off and go, alright?”

“But m’ugly when m’sick.” Tony whispered pitifully, and Steve’s heart squeezed in his chest. “Don’t want you t’see me.”

“Baby, I’m pretty sure you’re never ugly, but if you still feel self conscious, you know I’m not here for our usual sort of thing.” He held up the flowers again, smiling hopefully. “I just wanted to check on you. Why don’t you go get in bed and I’ll take care of this and then I can go?”

“M’kay.” The Omega disappeared from the door and Steve listened to the shuffling footsteps as they got farther away, waiting for the soft snick of Tony’s bedroom door closing before he entered the apartment.

The living room was a disaster– blankets piled around, empty boxes of tissues and an over flowing waste bin. A pot of half eaten, day old soup sat on the stove with a spoon in it as if Tony had huddled over the stove to eat so the steam would clear his sinuses.

“Poor, sick Omega.” Steve clicked his tongue sympathetically, then glanced guiltily at Tony’s door to make sure it was still closed.

He was always very careful to not call Tony ‘Omega’ when they were together, but it was getting harder and harder not to think of him as ‘Omega’.

Tony hated it because he thought the word stripped him of his actual identity, reduced him to his gender and nothing else, and Steve knew that had to be because of Tony’s past, whatever he had gone through that made him so wary of Alpha’s in the first place.

But wanting to call Tony ‘Omega’ wasn’t about reducing him to his gender and nothing more. It was a pet name, an endearment, something that Steve wanted to growl into Tony’s ear as they lay together, wanted to shout when he came, wanted to whisper it when they kissed and Tony purred and stood on his toes to get closer.

Steve wanted to attach a sweet in front of the word, a beautiful, a darling, a perfect, a my– My Omega.
Steve wanted all of those things and quite a bit more, but for right now–

He sighed and looked around the living room again.

For right now, Tony needed some warm soup and fresh blankets and some help putting his house back together, so that was exactly what Steve was going to do.

The Alpha set the soup warming on the stove, the flowers in a cup of water, and rolled up his sleeves to get to work.

*********************

“Steeb?” Close to an hour later, Tony reappeared with a blanket wrapped over his hair, around his body and dragging on the floor behind him. “You’re still here? Why?”

“Hey honey.” Steve dried his hands on the towel and smiled at him. “I was cleaning up a little bit. How are you feeling?”

“Libe deaf.” the Omega snuffled and tottered towards the couch. “Gremlin got me sick.”

“Which gremlin would that be?” Steve hurried to put a pillow under Tony’s feet, frowning when he felt how cold they were. “One of the little ones? Seasons changing, everyone catches colds. Tony, let me get you some socks, honey, your toes are freezing.”

“Was probably Flash.” Another loud sniff, and Tony slid his feet beneath Steve’s thighs flexing his toes so they would warm up. “I let him back t’ school and thib is how he repays me?” Sniff. “Brat.”

“I made some soup.” Steve tucked another blanket around Tony’s ankles and feet so they stayed warm when he moved to check Tony’s temperature. “Do you want to try and eat–” He frowned when Tony pulled away from him. “What’s wrong?”

“M’ugly when m’sick.” Tony repeated, ducking his head and closing his eyes. “Don’ look at me.”

“Oh sweetheart.” Steve leaned in until their noses bumped and Tony’s breath hitched a little as if he wanted to cry. “You’re not ever ugly, I don’t know who told you that, but if I ever meet them I’ll break their jaw, how does that sound?”

Finally, a teeny smile from the sick Omega. “Kay.”

“There you are, smiling for me.” Steve murmured and placed a gentle kiss on Tony’s cheek. “Do you want some soup? Valkyrie made it fresh this morning when she found out you were sick. Chicken noodle with whatever her secret ingredient is, which I’m pretty sure is just whiskey, but she swears by it so can I get you a bowl?”

“Kay.”

“Can I check your temperature, too? You look a little flushed. Let me at least feel your forehead.”

“Kay.”

“Okay. Food first.” Steve went back to the stove to dish up the soup, grabbing a clean spoon from the stack he had washed and putting a towel beneath the bowl so it wouldn’t burn Tony’s lap.

“Thank you.” Tony slurped at the soup noisily while Steve checked his temperature with the back of his hand, hmmming in disapproval over the heat. “You didn’t have to cleab up.”
“Don’t worry about it.” Steve headed towards the bathroom to fill the tub so Tony could wash up after he ate. “I needed a clean pot for the soup anyway, and you’re usually tidy so I’m sure it was bothering you, right?”

“Steeb.” Tony took another spoonful of soup. “Why are you doing it?”

“I’m just trying to take care of you, Tony.” Steve came back to the couch with a glass of water. “And before you get all huffy this isn’t—” he sighed. “—this isn’t an **Alpha** thing, or a **courting** thing. Clint would be doing the same thing, Sam would be doing the same thing— if I had been too busy to come check on you, Mrs. Parker would be up here probably ordering you into the tub and force feeding you soup. Isn’t me **suggesting** things much nice than being treated like a teenager who didn’t wash behind his ears?”

“M’glab it’s you.” whispered, Tony glancing furtively up from his soup. “Thank you.”

Warmth flowed through the Alpha at Tony being grateful for his care, even if it was just as friends–or friends with benefits–or whatever the hell they were.

Either way it made Steve smile, made his eyes flicker red in a touch of possessiveness, but he blinked it away in favor of pressing a kiss to Tony’s warm forehead. “Finish your soup, sweetheart. Then a long bath, yeah?”

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“This is very good.” Tony wrapped his hands around a cup of tea and breathed in shakily. “Thank you.”

“No problem.” Steve budged closer when Tony started shivering again. “I stripped your bed and remade it with a few blankets, I couldn’t find an extra set of sheets so you’ll have to sleep on a comforter but at least it’s germ free, yeah?”


“It’s fine, Tony.” Steve gave up on just sitting close and wrapped an arm around Tony’s waist and held him tight to keep the shivers down. “Honestly. You don’t have to keep thanking me, this is basic stuff, I didn’t even make the suit and tea is elementary, right? It’s not a big deal. Do you want me to carry you to bed?”

“**Mmmm.**” Tony abandoned his tea so he could curl into Steve’s warmth, tucking his head into the Alpha’s neck and breathing in as deep as he could with a plugged nose. “You smell good.”

“You’re such a sickie right now, you can’t smell anything.” Steve ran his nose over Tony’s still damp hair. “So how would you know if I smell good or not?”

“**Sheriff Robbers,** now isn’t the time to sass me.” Tony complained, with only a fraction of his usual snark. “**Rude.**”

“Sorry, Mr. Carbonell, I don’t know what I was thinking.” Steve stood up from the couch with Tony in his arms, holding the Omega’s slight weight easily, smiling over the little impressed noise Tony made. Omega’s were always weak for being carried by an Alpha and Tony was no exception.

Steve **loved** it.

He also loved when he set Tony down in the clean bed and the Omega instantly started shoving at
the quilts to make a rough nest, pushing at them tiredly until he was surrounded by a warm wall of blankets. And then, as Tony was shifting around and trying to curl up in the middle of it all, he stopped to hold out a hand for Steve. “Lay wib me?”

“Oh.” Steve hesitated, torn between being fairly certain Tony was too sick to know what he was asking, and forcing himself not to jump right onto the bed and gather the Omega close. “Tony, are you sure? I can just come by later and check on you. Or I can send Clint over if you want, or–”

“I’d want Clint to stay.” Tony sighed and went a little limp in the bed, too exhausted to keep his eyes open, making a weak grabby hand motion at Steve “And I’d ask Sam to stay. I might even ask Mrs. Parker to stay if I didn’t think it would give Peter the wrong idea.” Sniff. “Please?”

“Alright, then.” As if I was going to say no. Steve thought wryly as he stripped his jacket and vest off, shucking his boots and belt before climbing into the bed behind Tony. “Like this?”

“Libe dis.” Tony turned so they were facing each other, pushing closer and closer until Steve just rolled onto his back and pulled Tony up onto his chest, the Omega straddling his waist and hiding his face in Steve’s neck. “Thank you.”

“You don’t have to say thank you, sweetheart.” Steve said quietly, letting the words rumble through his chest and tightening his hold when Tony tried to get closer to the comforting sound. “You don’t ever have to say thank you.”

****************

Morning came and Steve woke up in Tony’s bed, the Omega still wrapped around him and snoring quietly.

A quick check on Tony’s forehead told the Alpha that the fever had broken sometime during the night, and when Tony opened his eyes they were clear and bright, a little uncertain over their current position, but not hazy with sickness anymore.

“Well good morning, beautiful.” Steve whispered, and Tony flushed a soft pink before hiding his face in Steve’s chest again. “Did you sleep alright?”

Quietly, “Yeah.”

“Good.” Steve lay back and closed his eyes again. “Want to keep sleeping? It’s still pretty early and I don’t have to be in the office until closer to lunchtime when Sam and Clint take off for the day. Get some more rest.”

Even quieter. “Will you– will you stay with me?”

“If you’re still sick I will.” Steve kept his eyes closed, running gentle hands up and down Tony’s back, smiling over how much easier the Omega was breathing after a long bath, some decent food and a good night’s sleep. “Are you still sick, Tony?”

A pathetic sniffle, not even close to convincing. “I’m still sick.”

“Well then I guess I better stay.” Steve turned them carefully until Tony was lying back in the pillows and looking up at him, all messy hair and sleep soft eyes, a shy smile on his lips. “Someone one needs to stay until you’re feeling better, right?”

Tony ran his hands up Steve’s bare chest to his shoulders and then around his neck, pulling him down until their mouths met first in a hesitant kiss, then in a longer one, coming back together again
and again until Tony was melting beneath Steve’s lips and the Alpha was panting quietly, a possessive hand at Tony’s waist, another at the base of his neck.

“I’m not sick anymore.” Tony admitted when Steve pulled away to kick out of his pants, sliding back beneath the covers to tangle their legs together. “Or at least not enough that I have to be taken care of. But I still want you to stay, will you stay?”

“Of course I’ll stay.” Steve muttered, the words lost behind a heavy growl when Tony leaned up to kiss him again. “Tony, sweetheart—” a quiet mewl from the Omega. “—of course I’ll stay.”

“Thank you.” Tony urged Steve tighter against him, wove his fingers through the short blonde hair. “You didn’t have to do any of this, not bring me soup or clean up or stay with me, but thank you. I mean it.”

“And I meant it when I said you don’t ever have to say thank you.” Steve nudged Tony’s thighs apart and settled between them, flexing his hips down when Tony lifted up into him. “Whatever we are calling this—” he pushed Tony’s night shirt up above his waist and they both groaned when skin met skin. “ Whatever we are calling this, you don’t ever have to thank me for taking care of you. I want to take care of you, honey, in whatever way you’ll let me.”

There was something fragile in Tony’s gaze then, fragile and scared and hidden so deep in the dark brown eyes that Steve thought his heart would break just seeing it.

But Tony shook his head quickly, anxiously, when Steve opened his mouth to say something, so the Alpha kissed him again instead, and set out to make sure that the only thing in the Omega’s eyes was pure pleasure, and sweet satisfaction.

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Steve was kind of ashamed for himself for letting their kisses get out of hand when Tony still needed to recuperate from being sick, but looking back, he couldn’t feel guilty over it at all.

It had been good between them, a layer of tenderness to the moments brought around by the intimacy of sharing a bed all night, the way Tony had trusted Steve to take care of not just him, but also his home.

Neither of them were willing to dwell on what it meant– an Alpha stepping in to take over like that, and an Omega willingly letting him– but both knew it meant something and every touch of their mouths and brush of their fingers had echoed it.

When they had come– first Tony, his breath catching and fingers digging into Steve’s biceps, mouth open in a quiet little cry, then Steve, burying a groan into Tony’s neck when the Omega’s slim fingers closed around his knot and worked him dry– Tony had collapsed back into the pillows and put an arm over his eyes to hide what he was feeling and Steve had whispered, “It’s alright, baby.” and held him until the trembling had stopped.

Scooting up Tony’s body to lay a kiss on his lips, to try and communicate with his touch that he was just as aware of what was happening between them, that he was a little scared too–

–Steve had found an Omega that had fallen asleep almost immediately, apparently being sick for a few days and then an orgasm taking every last bit of energy he had to spare.

“Tony?” A whisper and light nudge hadn’t woken Tony at all, so Steve kissed him anyway, then
went to clean himself up before cleaning the mess from Tony’s stomach as well and tucking him back into the covers.

Tony slept almost until lunch time and when he woke up, Steve was sitting on the bed next to him, reading a book.

“Sheriff Rogers.” Tony said groggily, peeking up at him sleepily. “You’re still here?”

“I didn’t want you to wake up alone.” Steve put a bookmark on his page and set the book aside. “How are you feeling?”

“Much better.” Pink cheeked, and Steve could have died over how shy Tony looked. “Apparently whiskey laced soup and some sleep and a walk is all it takes to get over a cold. Who knew?”

“And a walk.” Steve chuckled and slid down in the bed until they were nose to nose, closing the distance between them to kiss the Omega sweetly. “Adorable. Do you want to take another bath? We could both use one at this point.”

“Oh. Oh um–” Tony’s hand went to the collar his night shirt, glancing down at his chest uncomfortably. “Steve, I don’t think–”

“I won’t say anything, Tony.” Steve assured him. “I won’t ask any questions about your–” a vague motion to his own chest. “And I’m not trying to wind you up again, or trying to get you naked. I just thought we could take a bath together. It would give me a chance to hold you a little longer and I could wash your hair if you wanted–”

“No it’s not that.” Tony looked away, cleared his throat. “I’m just a hot water hog. Don’t share very well. That’s all.”

It hurt Steve’s heart that Tony was so obviously lying, but he let it go. “Well I’ll start one just for you, then.” Steve told him, and leaned in for one more kiss, rumbling happily when Tony pressed closer to lengthen it, flattening his palms against the Alpha’s chest and purring low in his throat when Steve’s arm went around his waist.

“I’m tempted to ask you to stay.” Tony admitted when they broke apart. “But then you’d be late for work. You said you had to be in by noon.”

“I’d be late if you wanted me to stay.” Steve whispered, brushing Tony’s hair back from his eyes, his knuckles across a cheekbone. “Ask me to stay, Tony.”

“But if you don’t go and play Sheriff–” Tony’s eyes twinkled mischievously. “–then the criminals get away with things and I’d be lying when I tell the children that crime doesn’t pay. Are you trying to make me a liar, Sheriff Rogers?”

“Mr. Carbonell.” Steve grinned down at him, relieved that Tony was back to his usual snarky self after being sick. “I wouldn’t dream of doing anything of the sort.”

“See that you don’t.” Tony laughed but it turned into a yawn and he burrowed back into his blankets, watching with unabashed interest as Steve got dressed, humming to himself watching the fitted pants come up over thick thighs, the shirt straining to be buttoned over Steve’s chest.

God, the Sheriff is a gorgeous Alpha.

“Well, thanks Tony.” Steve winked and bent down to kiss him. “You’re pretty gorgeous yourself.”
Mortified that he had actually said it all out loud, Tony eeped and ducked beneath the covers, listening to Steve laugh on his way out the door.

“I’ll see you later, sweetheart!” Steve called before he left.

“Bye…. honey.” Tony whispered to himself, then eeped a little quieter and hid his blush in his hands.

He’d been right the first time.

The Sheriff was trouble.

I could handle a little trouble.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

This chapter is… well its equal parts adorable and maybe sad and then yay for Honeybear. Also, Tony with pie is about the cutest thing I’ve ever written.

Life in Wildrock slowed down when the seasons changed and after the rush of summer, it was a welcome reprieve.

Fall brought red and gold and brown to the trees, readied the fields for harvest. Alpha and Beta males alike took to the woods for the hunt, bringing home elk and deer and anything else they could bag to make sure their families had enough meat for the winter, and enough left over to make sure the less fortunate in the town had enough to eat as well.

Valkyrie changed her menu from the lighter summer fare to hearty stews and hot sandwiches and casseroles, and every night the tables in her restaurant were full, the workday ending sooner now that the sunset was earlier, and everyone hungry for a bit of dinner before going home.

The children shouted in excitement the first morning they could see their breath in the air, and then grumbled every morning after as their mothers and fathers force- bundled them into warm clothes for their walk to school.

Tony started letting them out early so they could walk home while there was still sunlight, and graded his papers while sipping warm cider, usually snuggled deep into one of Steve’s long sleeves that had been stolen gone missing the last time the Alpha was over.

He also went around to the vegetable patches and bought out the prettiest pumpkins, lining them down the stairs of the schoolhouse and propping them in the corner of the school room, delivering one to Valkyrie with hopeful eyes, raised eyebrows and a coaxing purr as he asked the Beta for a pumpkin pie.

Valkyrie snatched the pumpkin, kissed the Omega on the lips and promised it would be done by the end of the day, and Steve was only slightly jealous of how happy Tony looked.

The Alpha had to work hard to get a smile like that off of Tony, and Valkyrie managed it with a kiss and a promise of a pie?

Damn, Steve needed to learn how to bake.

“This is terrible.” Bucky commented later that week, halfway through eating an entire apple pie, napkin tucked into his shirt, fork moving as fast as it could. “Stevie, honestly, who told ya you could bake? You should bake a few more for me to try.”

“I’m trying to make something for Tony.” Steve frowned down at what was supposed to be pumpkin pie but was actually more of a pumpkin disaster, ignoring the obvious sarcasm from his deputy.

“Valkyrie made him a pie the other day and when Tony took a bite, he made a noise that I’ve only heard him make twice, so—”
He stopped when Bucky snorted apple pie out of his nose, horrified at thinking that Tony made noises about pie like he did about his evenings with Steve.

“Aw hell, Stevie.” Bucky complained, wiping at his face angrily. “Why do you say shit like that? I almost died jus’ now. Ain’t right for a man to inhale apples.”

“Sorry, Buck.” Steve kept frowning at the pie, completely uncaring over Bucky’s predicament. “I just don’t understand why this didn’t work. I followed the recipe exactly, but it still looks like crap.”

“Maybe take your apron off and go knot th’ Omega like a real Alpha.” Bucky started chugging milk. “Do a good enough job and he won’t be thinking about pie at all.”

“Tony won’t let me knot him.” Steve said absentmindedly and this time it was milk coming out of Bucky’s nose, setting the big Alpha off all over again.

“God dammit Steve! I’m gonna be spitting milk and pie for days now!” He howled, coughing and snorting and trying to clean his face. “Damn it!”

“Language.” Steve said mildly, and then, “Oh. A tablespoon of butter.”

“How much butter did you put in there?” Bucky finished coughing and peered over Steve’s shoulder to look at the pie.

“Uh–” Steve held up the empty container of butter. “Well–”

“That’s half a pound of butter, Stevie.” Bucky blinked at him. “Half a pound. Why would ya think a half’a pound is–”

“I thought it just said butter!” Steve argued. “And I figured, if it just says butter, it must mean the container of butter!”

“Seriously.” Bucky swiped the ruined dessert off the counter and into the trash. “Stop baking and do somethin’ you’re good at. And maybe tell me why Tony won’t let you knot him, cause that don’t seem right. You tellin’ me you’ve been after that Omega for damn near six months now and haven’t once–?”

“For the record,” Steve started scooping out flour again for another attempt at pumpkin pie. “It’s only been about three since Tony and I started spending time together.”

“Oh that’s right. It took you almost three months to convince him to even give you the time of day.”

“Thanks for that.” Carefully measuring out exactly two tablespoons of butter. “But no, I haven’t knotted Tony at all in three months. It’s one of his boundaries so we just… we just do other things. And it’s fine. We have a good time together and it’s always satisfying, so–”

“But why?” Bucky interrupted, going back to his apple pie. “Why won’t he let you? All this time figured you were keepin’ him stuck on you but–”

“Don’t be crude, Buck.” Steve rolled his eyes. “And he hasn’t told me why, but I promised not to ask questions and–”

“Steve.” Bucky interrupted again, this time sounding concerned. “You’re tellin’ me that the schoolteacher has so many secrets that he won’t even let you be with him for real and he won’t let you ask why?”
“Uh–” Steve paused in adding pumpkin to the dish. “Well–”

“I mean, sure when ya were just messing around it was alright.” Bucky’s eyes flickered red in sympathy for the distress on his best friend’s face. “But everyone knows you and him are in love. *Everyone* knows. There’s a pool goin’ at Valkyries place for whether or not it’ll be a spring wedding.”

Steve started to smile, but Bucky continued, “You *love* him, Stevie. How you gonna love someone that keeps those kinda secrets from you? Secrets that keep you apart?”

“It’s just sex, Bucky.” The other Alpha finally said. “We get to be together in the ways he’s comfortable with and that’s enough for me.”

“You aren’t curious? Not even a little bit?”

“Well to be fair, I haven’t told him everything either. I haven’t told him about Peggy—”

“—who you fell in love with when you were all of twenty three, never even spent the night with, exchanged a few long letters over a few years and then let her break your heart. Big secret.” Bucky scoffed. “You don’t have real secrets, Stevie. No skeletons in your closet. But Tony obviously has secrets, and apparently he has no intention of sharing them with you.”

“Not all at once.” Bucky agreed. “But… he could tell you a few things at least. Doesn’t it bother you that he doesn’t seem to trust you?”

The muscle in Steve’s jaw clenched in frustration, the first time he had shown any emotion over the conversation. “Well to be fair, I haven’t told him everything either. I haven’t told him about Peggy—”

“–who you fell in love with when you were all of twenty three, never even spent the night with, exchanged a few long letters over a few years and then let her break your heart. Big secret.” Bucky scoffed. “You don’t have real secrets, Stevie. No skeletons in your closet. But Tony *obviously* has secrets, and apparently he has no intention of sharing them with you.”

“I’m sure when he’s ready, he will tell me.” Steve maintained. “And until then—”

“Until then, what?” Bucky’s pale eyes flickered red again. “What– you’ll be content to be with an Omega who insists on keeping you away? Who won’t let you be an Alpha around him? Doesn’t it bother you?”

“Yes, Bucky!” Steve voice rose, his own eyes snapping red in anger. “Yes! It bothers me, alright? If I had my way, Tony would already be mine! Marked and bonded and *mine*, but that’s not how it’s happening, is it? He’s got secrets and issues and I’ve got to— I’ve just got to deal with it if I want to be with him.”

A deep breath. “And *god*, Buck. I want to be with him. He’s meant to be mine, I can feel it in my bones, you know? I’d be alright with all this other stuff— that I don’t know hardly anything about him, that he has weird boundaries, that he’s hiding things— I could handle all that if I could call him *mine*. Doesn’t matter if I’ve only known him for six months, there’s something about Tony that calls to me already. Time will fix the rest, I know it will.”

“I know you want him to be yours, Stevie, I can see it on your face when you talk about him.” The big Alpha hesitated, then added, “And I can see it when Tony looks at you. He might be tellin’ you that you ain’t courting and all that, but he *wants* to. There’s just something keeping him from saying it all.”

Steve’s hand tightened on the counter top. “Maybe.”
“You gotta at least talk to him, yeah?” Bucky started working at his apple pie again. “At least see if he’s open to anything more. At least way you know if you’re wasting your time or not.”

“I know.” Steve swallowed hard. “I know I need to talk to him. Problem is, I think he could tell me he’d never want anything more, and I’d still be gone on him, you know? I don’t think there’s much of anything that could stop how I feel for him. It’s sorta scary. Never felt like this about anyone, and its not even someone who wants a real relationship.”

“It’s like you’re cursed, Stevie.” Bucky was almost whispering now. “First Peggy and now Tony— you keep fallin’ in love with Omega’s you can’t have.”

“Trust me.” Steve took a deep breath and tried to focus on the dessert again. “I’m well aware of that.”

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“What do you think?” Steve asked hopefully, watching as Tony took one bite, and then another from his offering of pumpkin pie. “Did I do alright?”

“Can’t talk.” the Omega grunted. “Eating pumpkin. Go away.”

“Go away?” Steve laughed, then laughed louder when Tony grunted again and kicked at his shin. “I bring you pumpkin pie and you’re going to tell me to go away?”

“Should’a talked to me before you handed me pie then.” Tony shrugged and took another bite. “It’s not as good as Valkyrie’s but she puts bourbon in hers and you put caramel in yours, so it’s not really a fair comparison, huh?” Another bite. “Go away so I can concentrate.”

“You kissed Valkyrie when she made you a pie.” Steve said softly, hopefully. “Kissed her and made a sweet little noise that about made my toes curl. Got anything like that for me?”

Tony sighed and set the pie pan aside very carefully, if not a little regretfully before wiping his lips and turning so he was facing Steve.

Then he scooted close, wrapped both arms around Steve’s neck and crushed their mouths together in a heated kiss.

“Oh.” Steve breathed out, a little surprised, more than a little pleased, and Tony bit at the Alpha’s bottom lip just hard enough to make Steve growl, before soothing it with his tongue, suckling at it lightly.

“Tony—” Steve started to pull away, trying to regain a little bit of control over the moment, but Tony only pressed closer, dropping one hand to Steve’s thigh and moving upwards in teasing circles until the Alpha groaned, and then Tony made the sweetest little noise Steve had ever heard— almost a purr but definitely a moan, something greedy but content all at the same time, ending in a little whine that had Steve jolting forward to scoop Tony up into his lap, winding both hands through the thick hair to start the kiss all over again.

“Oh sweetheart.” He gasped when Tony mewedled and wiggled closer. “Oh, make that noise again and I’ll give you anything you want. Anything, I swear—”

“Just let me eat my pie.” Tony said in exasperation, all sweetness gone as he escaped out of Steve’s grasp and got back onto the step, happily reclaiming his dessert and paying no mind to the Alpha that
was currently gaping at him, eyes wide and mouth open and entirely offended that he had been apparently deemed less interesting than pie.

“Alright, maybe I’ll come by later and see you.” he finally said and without looking up, Tony agreed, “Yep. Maybe later.”

“You look adorable, by the way.” Steve stood to his feet and brushed off his pants, willing his reaction to the kiss to ease. “I knew I was missing a long sleeve shirt, I just couldn’t figure out where it went.”

“Things left at my house will be worn.” Tony held up hands that were nearly covered by the ends of Steve’s sleeve, and then motioned to the pie. “Or eaten. Either way it’s mine now.”

“I’ll see you later, sweetheart.” Steve bent back down and kissed the Omega’s forehead. “Enjoy your pie.”

He was ninety-percent certain that Tony made a nom-nom noise as he walked away, but he knew better than to turn around and ask. Tony and his pie were not to be disturbed.

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Steve didn’t make it back to Tony’s until the next morning, not wanting to show up uninvited too late at night, and knowing he was always welcome for a morning coffee.

Sure enough, Tony called for him cheerfully to come in, and the moment Steve stepped through the door, the Omega was snuggling up into his arms, pressing close and humming happily when Steve kissed his head.

“How are you, honey?” Steve hung his hat up and tilted Tony’s head up for a proper kiss. “Sleep alright?”

“I had vague, pumpkin themed nightmares.” Tony admitted, shuffling over to the coffee pot to pour Steve a cup. “Scary enough to make me regret eating the entire pie, not so scary that I won’t go to Valkyries for another slice for lunch.” Tony took a sip of his coffee before asking, “I think the polite thing to do is to apologize for blowing you off yesterday, but I’m probably not going to do that.”

“Mr. Carbonell.” Steve grinned. “I’m surprised at you! How rude!”

“Yes, well if you’d seen me during fall before you wouldn’t have been surprised at all. I turn into a pumpkin gremlin every year.” Tony returned, and then looked a little crestfallen. “I didn’t expect to be here for fall, you know.”

“Why not?” Steve grimaced at the flavor of the coffee— he had no idea how Tony drank it black like this— and added a spoonful of sugar. “When you took the teaching position did you think it was just temporary?”

“I didn’t think the position was temporary.” Tony sipped at his own cup. “I just figured I’d be temporary. I thought by the time summer ended I’d be gone and yet here I am stockpiling blankets and stealing shirts from you to prepare for the winter.”

“I thought that was another one of my shirts.” Steve smiled over how tiny Tony looked in his dark
blue long sleeve, the hem falling nearly to Tony’s thighs, the sleeves covering his hands. “Keep it. It’s a good look on you.”

“Thanks.” Tony’s cheeks turned a little pink. “I was going to keep it anyway.”

Steve reached for Tony’s hand and pulled him to the couch, settling back and making room for Tony to curl up in his lap. “Tell me why you thought you’d only be here temporarily.”

“No particular reason.” Tony hedged, and pressed closer. “I just wasn’t expecting to be here for the winter, and am woefully unprepared.”

“I’ll get you set up for the winter, Tony, don’t worry about that.” Steve brushed his knuckles over Tony’s cheek, and rumbled quietly when the Omega leaned into the touch. “I’ll take care of whatever you need.”

“I’m tempted to take you up on that offer, Sheriff Rogers.”

“Please do.” A kiss to the top of Tony’s head, something cold settling in Steve’s core at the thought of Tony planning on leaving.

“Tony, can I talk to you about something?”

“Go for it.” Tony finished his coffee and slid his hands beneath Steve’s shirt to touch skin. “But make it quick, because I have to be at school in forty five minutes.”

“Uh, sure.” Steve took a deep breath, trying to find his words, and Tony snuggled closer again, humming quietly as he soaked up Steve’s warmth.

It was astonishing sometimes, how easily and happily Tony gave in to the moments between them. Sometimes all Steve had to do was smile and the pretty Omega was flushing and even purring as he moved closer.

Other times, even after they had finished coming together and were lying panting on the bed, even then Tony would look guarded, would stiffen under Steve’s hands, or slide away to get cleaned up sooner than he usually did.

It was happening less and less though, and times like this– where Tony acted as if they had always been together, as if there were no secrets between them, as if tucked into the Alpha’s arms was exactly where he wanted to be– times like this were becoming more frequent, and Steve’s breath caught over every single one.

Bucky was right.

He was in love with Tony.

And it was time to say something about it.

“Are you— are you—” he sighed and started again. “How do you feel about being here for the winter?”

“I don’t know.” Tony said truthfully. “I’ll admit that I didn’t expect to like Wildrock at all when I first came, but I love the children now, and have gotten used to the smaller pace and I suppose the Sheriff isn’t all that bad either—” a sly glance up at the Alpha and a squeal when Steve pinched him. “And since we are a few days ride from the nearest train, at least winter means no new visitors or anything, right?”
“That is sort of a weird thing to say.” Steve frowned. “But yes, winter means snow and if the train even makes it this far west, Wildrock is still a few days out from it. So no unexpected visitors. The only people in Wildrock will be townspeople, yeah.”

He wasn’t really sure why Tony seemed to relax after those words, but the Omega definitely went a bit more pliant in his arms, so Steve held him tighter.

“Then I suppose I feel fine about staying the winter.” Tony pressed a kiss to the underside of Steve’s jaw. “Why?”

“Tony, I–” Steve swooped another kiss onto Tony’s lips. “Baby, I want you to stay. I want you to stay here.”

“I won’t have much a choice once the first snow comes.” Tony kissed him back, but pulled away to see Steve’s expression. “But I don’t think that’s what you’re saying.”

“I want you to stay here in Wildrock.” Steve took a deep breath, took a chance, took a risk– “I want you stay with me.”

“With– with you.” Something flickered in Tony’s eyes that looked an awful lot like regret. “Steve–”

“Listen.” Steve pushed Tony lightly from his lap and went to his knees in front of the couch, holding onto Tony’s hands tightly. “Tony, listen. I know that we aren’t courting, and we aren’t matched or whatever. Whatever you want to call it, or not call it. But what if we… are? What if we did that sort of thing.”

“Steve.”

“Just listen.” He leaned in and pressed their foreheads together. “I can see it in your eyes Tony, the way you hold me, the way you smile when we’re together. I know you want to be more and I know you know that I want to be so much more, sweetheart. We are perfect together. You know we are.”

“It’s not you, it’s–” Tony started to say, and Steve shook his head.

“Let me finish. I know there are things you aren’t ready to tell me, and I can promise to give you time to sort that out. I know you have boundaries, and I’ll keep to those. You don’t want me to knot you? That’s fine. You don’t want to be naked with me? That’s fine, I can handle all of that.”

“Steve–” tears now, filling the Omega’s dark eyes and spilling down his cheeks. “Please–”

“I’m not asking for–” Steve placed his palm at the base of Tony’s neck, right over his pulse point, right where a bonding mark would go. “I’m not asking for something you can’t give me, Tony. I’m asking for a chance to take just the tiniest step in that direction.”

Silence, the Omega shaking where he sat.

“I’m not even saying you have to tell you you want me for anything more than getting off together and the package of unmentionables that I had the supreme discomfort of ordering through Natasha–” a tiny smile and encouraged, Steve murmured, “you don’t have to say anything at all, Tony. I know it’s only been three months, but this is right between us. I won’t pressure you for anything big, but just give us a chance to be something real. Please.”

“I–” Tony closed his eyes, leaned away and Steve followed him, getting back on the couch and gathering Tony close. “Steve, um–”
“Tony Carbonell!” Someone shouted from outside the door, then banged on it loudly, disrupting their moment. “Tony Carbonell, you open this door right now, or I’m coming in after you, I don’t care if your pants are down or not! I’ve seen your ass naked, I’m not afraid to see it again!”

“Um–” Tony’s eyes flew open wide. “What the hell?”

“Who the hell?!” Thoroughly pissed at being interrupted, Steve stomped over the door and flung it open. “I don’t know who the hell you think you are–”

“I don’t know who the hell you think you are.” The Alpha on the other side of the door was a few inches shorter than Steve but somehow completely intimidating in an army uniform, buttons gleaming, pants starched, a scowl on his face. “Or why the hell you’re opening my friends door but you need to–”

“Your friend?” Steve looked the soldier up and down. “I know all of Tony’s friends and you aren’t one of–”

“Son, you don’t know half of nothing about Tony.” the other Alpha scoffed. “So why don’t you step aside and let me–”

“Rhodey?” Tony’s voice was wavering, bordering on disbelief as he peeked over Steve’s shoulder, tears still bright in his eyes, cheeks red. “Is that you?”

“Hey Tones.” The soldier grinned. “Sorry I’m late.”

“Honeybear!” The Omega burst into tears again and Steve was shoved almost violently aside so Tony could fling himself at the new Alpha. “HONEYBEAR!”

“Uh–” Steve stared at the two of them blankly. “What the hell is a honeybear?”
“Wait.” Happy put his soup down and squinted at Steve. “So you and Tony were spending time together, talking bout your feelings and all that sort of crap. And then there’s a knock on the door, and some Alpha you’ve never seen before is yelling about having seen Tony nekkid? And that he will see it again, no problem?”

“Yes.” Steve took a drink of his beer to try and hide his annoyed expression. “And when I asked who he was, he asked who I was and told me I didn’t know anything about Tony.”

“Okay, but to be fair.” Clint reached over Steve’s shoulder to pluck a piece of chicken from his plate before sliding into his mate’s lap. “To be fair, you told him that you know all of Tony’s friends, which it categorically untrue. You know six of Tony’s friends and five of us are sitting right here at this table.”

“Were you a dick to him Stevie?” Bucky asked, raising both eyebrows knowingly. “You were a dick, weren’t you?”

It was frankly hilarious to see a grown ass Alpha sulk, and all the other Alpha’s at the table laughed out loud at Steve’s petulant expression.

“Me and Tony were talking!” Steve argued. “About important stuff and he barged in and Tony just– Tony just–!” He sighed in frustration. “Tony just switched gears completely. Went from sort of crying to me to full on sobbing over that other Alpha.”

“What–what kind of important stuff?” Clint shot Sam a look and leaned further across the table. “What were you talking about?”

“More importantly, why was Tony crying?” Sam cut in. “What were you talking about that had Tony tearing up?”

Steve took another drink and looked away. “Not um– not really anything.”

Bucky’s eyes narrowed and he asked, “Stevie, were you telling Tony that you love him?” just as Happy whistled softly. “That kind of important stuff, huh?”

“And this other Alpha just walked in and Tony– Tony what? Forgot you were in the room? Forgot you were talking?” Sam drummed his fingers on the table. “Just left your conversation entirely?”

“He burst into tears and threw himself at the Alpha and called him–” Steve made a face. “—Honeybear?”

“Honeybear?” Now Bucky made a face. “What the hell is a honeybear?”
“That’s exactly what I asked.” Steve put his empty bottle down and motioned for another one. “Tony told me to come back later, whoever Honeybear is basically kicked me out the door… I have no idea what’s going on.”

“Well it couldn’t be all that important.” Clint pointed out in an attempt to waylay some of Steve’s worry. “School is still in session today, I saw the children all out for recess when I stopped by to bring Tony a sandwich, which means that whoever Honeybear is, he isn’t important enough to make Tony cancel classes for the day.”

“Wait, you’ve seen Tony today?” Steve took the beer Valkyrie handed him and ripped the top off without even looking up. “Was the soldier with him at the classroom? Was he acting weird at all?”

“Nope.” Clint shrugged and leaned back into Sam, rubbing his cheek onto his Alpha. “And he didn’t say anything weird either. He was grading multiplication tables. Nothing out of the ordinary. Maybe it wasn’t as big a deal as you think it is, or maybe this Honeybear already moved on. Schools out, use your words like a big boy and go ask him.”

“Maybe what’s not a big deal?” Valkyrie cut in, and smacked Steve on the arm. “And next time I bring you a beer, your Alpha ass better say thank you, you hear? I’ll start charging you double if you’re going to be rude.”

“Sorry, Valkyrie.” Steve grabbed her hand and tugged her down so he could kiss her cheek. “Thank you for the beer.”

“Forgiven.” The Beta dropped into the open seat at the table and leaned over to ruffle Clint’s hair. “Pretty Omega. Tell me why the Sheriff is mopey.”

“He was trying to have important talks with Tony and some other Alpha in a uniform showed up and stole Tony away.” Happy informed her as he dug back into his soup. “And the Sheriff here don’t know what to think about it.”

“What to think about what?” From Natasha, who had come up behind them from her upstairs apartment, laying a small hand on Bucky’s shoulder and letting her mouth curve into a half smile when the Alpha looked up with a soft expression and the barest hint of red in his light blue eyes.

“About some Alpha swooping in and taking Tony’s attention.” Valkyrie said and Steve rolled his eyes. “Oh don’t look so upset, Sheriff, it was bound to happen, hm? Pretty Omega like Mr. Carbonell. The only reason other Alpha’s in this town don’t try to court him is cos they all know you and he fancy each other.”

“Can confirm.” Sam nodded and Happy grunted in agreement. “Not only is he gorgeous, but he’s hilarious and sweet and good with kids. All attractive Omega qualities.”

“So an Alpha from out of town has designs on our dear Mr. Carbonell, and apparently all the other Alphas in Wildrock do as well.” Natasha’s hand tightened almost imperceptibly on Bucky, and he shook his head in the tiniest motion.

He might think Tony was gorgeous, but there was only one Omega who held the Deputy’s interest.

“You need to step your game up, Steve.” Clint yelped a little when he reached for another piece of chicken and the Sheriff smacked his hand away. “You’re going to lose Tony to some mysterious Alpha who’s apparently seen him naked more times than you?”

Steve thunked his head down on the table in frustration and the entire group burst out laughing.
“Poor pretty Alpha.” Valkyrie teased, petting through Steve’s blonde hair. “Is this the first time you’ve lost an Omega’s interest? I personally have never lost anyone’s interest but its probably because I’m more interesting than you.”

“Thank you for your kind words, Valkyrie!” Steve said loudly and everyone laughed again.

Everyone except Natasha, actually, who’s attention had been caught by the pair walking through the front door of the tavern.

“Say, Sheriff.” She started casually. “That Alpha Tony knows. Dark-skinned fellow? Real handsome with a charming smile? Uniform that has no business looking so good on him?”

“Uh–” Steve frowned. “Yeah?”

“Mmmm.” The Madame’s green eyes sparked and Bucky’s nose flared at the brief scent of interest from the Omega. “Not to ruin your day even further? But I can see why Tony would trade you in for that particular Alpha.”

“You can see why he would–” Steve twisted around to stare at the door and the others followed suit. “Oh, for heaven’s sake!”

“Oh for heaven’s sake.” Valkyrie repeated, but hers was much less frustrated and much more impressed as she watched Tony escort the mysterious Alpha across the room and to their table. “Honestly, just once I want someone that beautiful to walk into my bar looking for me. Just once.”

“Hi everyone.” Tony had the biggest smile on his face, both hands holding tight to one of the Alpha’s, their shoulders budded up against each other when they stopped in front of the table. “This is Colonel James Rhodes with the Tenth Calvary. He’s my–” Tony’s smile somehow stretched even bigger. “He’s my best friend. My Rhodey.”

“Gentlemen.” The Alpha nodded his head towards the men, then tipped his hat and flashed a winning smile at Valkyrie and Natasha. “Ladies.”

“Oh my.” Natasha cleared her throat lightly. “Colonel Rhodes, welcome to Wildrock. How do you find our little town?”

“A welcome change from both the city, and the miles of plains I’ve seen while marching.” Rhodes said smoothly. “Thank you kindly.”

“This is Natasha.” Tony hurried to introduce them, squeezing at Rhodey’s hand lightly. “She conducts her business upstairs, and this beauty here is Valkyrie. She owns the tavern and makes the best pumpkin pie I’ve ever had in my life.”

“Valkyrie.” The Colonel’s eyebrows lifted in interest. “Hello. A beauty who makes the best pumpkin pie Tony has ever had? That’s impressive.”

“Yes, well I’m an impressive sort of gal.” Valkyrie pursed her lips and looked him over, her dark eyes sparking. “And if you don’t mind me saying? So are–”

“He minds you saying!” Tony interrupted. “Thank you, Valkyrie!”

“Prude.” She grinned and stood up to grab her drink tray. “Colonel, could I get you a drink? On the house, of course. A good looking soldier like yourself and a friend of our sweet Mr. Carbonell deserves one, I’d think.”
“I don’t know, Tones.” Rhodey slid his arm around Tony’s waist and hugged him tight. “Do I deserve a beer for putting up with your nonsense?”

“Valkyrie, give him a shot of whiskey too.” Tony called after the Beta. “He needs it!”

“Happy Hogan.” Happy stood with a congenial smile and moved to shake the Colonels hand. “Blacksmith for the town, been here my whole life.”

“Good to meet you.” Rhodey shook his hand firmly, then turned to Sam and Clint.

“Deputy Sam Wilson.” Sam didn’t stand, not with Clint still snuggled on his lap, but he tipped his head in acknowledgment. “My mate, Deputy Clint Barton-Wilson. Welcome to Wildrock.”

“Deputy Wilson.” Rhodey nodded, and then winked at Clint. “Omega.”

“Oh my.” Clint cleared his throat and blushed light pink, much to the consternation of his mate. “Pleasure’s all mine, Colonel Rhodes.”

“This is Deputy Bucky Barnes.” Tony took over the introductions again. “And of course, you met Sheriff Rogers earlier.”

Both Steve and Bucky stood to his feet, offering the Colonel a smart salute.

“Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes, sir.” Bucky spoke first, reaching to shake Rhodey’s hand. “From New York, the 107th. Came out this way after the war ended.”

“The Campbell Guards.” Rhodey whistled as if impressed. “The regiment I would have joined had I had the option. Glad to meet you.”

“You’re from New York?” Steve shook his hand next. “Captain Steven Rogers. Also the 107th. What brought you out this way, Colonel?”

“Not originally from New York.” Rhodey said tactfully, Steve’s eyes dimmed in understanding. “But that’s where I ended up when all was said and done. Now we’re out fighting Indian wars apparently, and my units trek brought me within a day of Wildrock so I thought I’d come say hi.”

He grinned down at Tony, who cuddled close to his side and trilled happily when the Alpha held him tight. “And someone’s got to keep an eye on this one, so here I am.”

“I’m so glad you’re here.” Tony tucked his face in Rhodey’s shoulder. “Come on home with me and I’ll make you dinner.”

“Oh no.” The Alpha chuckled. “No, I’ll cook you dinner because the last time you cooked for me I ended almost dead.” Happy’s eyes widened and Rhodey added, “Tony can’t really tell when fish is cooked and I ended up with food poisoning.”

“Oh my god.” the blacksmith snorted and Natasha covered her mouth so she wouldn’t laugh.

“So now I cook for us.” Rhodey’s smile was fond. “And everyone survives. And not to be rude, but while it was real nice to meet all of you, I slept most of the day away and haven’t eaten since yesterday evening so—”

“Oh we should just eat here!” Tony exclaimed. “We can have some of Valkyries dessert and she makes an amazing roast and we can call talk and—”

“I told you I’d make you dinner.” The Alpha said sweetly, but firmly, and everyone sort
of…blinked… when Tony nodded in agreement and went quiet again. “Ms. Valkyrie, I’m sure you make the best pumpkin pie I’ve ever had, but we will have to take a rain check.” He waved towards the bar. “Thank you!”

“As long as that means you’re coming again tomorrow.” Valkyrie winked boldly at the Alpha, who cocked his head and winked right back.

“I’m sure I’ll be around. Gentlemen.” He made brief eye contact across the table. “Ms. Natasha. Pleasure to meet you. Tones, you ready to go?”

“Of course.” Without so much as a by-you-leave, Tony followed the Alpha right out the door and into the late afternoon sun, already laughing about something the Colonel said.

“So that’s a honeybear, hm?” Natasha folded her arms. “I wonder where an Omega could find herself one of those to keep around?”

“Did ya see how quickly Tony listened to him?” Bucky settled back in his chair, glancing up with a quiet, coaxing rumble until Natasha moved close to touch his shoulder again, a brief reassurance that while Honeybear was certainly gorgeous, Natasha’s affections lay squarely with the deputy. “Never seen that Omega listen to anyone the first time around.”

“That was…weird.” Happy said hesitantly, watching Steve from the corner of his eye. “But if the Colonel’s an Alpha that’s known Tony his whole life– ain’t strange that Tony would defer to him, yeah?”

“Are you kidding me?” Clint sounded loopy and dreamy as he stared out the door where the couple had disappeared. “I’d let an Alpha in a uniform boss me around too.”

“Clint!” Sam yelped. “I’m sitting right here!”

“Oh big surprise.” Clint rolled his eyes and poked his mate in the shoulder. “I’m a sucker for black men who can fill out a uniform and smile like they have a secret I am desperate to know. Everyone knows that, Sam. You know that. I obviously have a type and obviously you’re it.”

“And Tony’s friend is obviously your type too, huh?” Sam growled in annoyance. “Hm?”

“Um….” Clint’s blue eyes sparked mischievously. “I might not remember he’s my type if you take me home and remind me of why you’re my type.”

“It’s three in the afternoon!” Happy objected and the mated pair ignored him, Sam simply tossing Clint over his shoulder and hauling the giggling Omega away, grumbling about can’t get no respect and damn horny Omega rolling over for anyone in a uniform and having to interrupt my day to remind my mate who his Alpha is.

“Not to be rude, darling.” Valkyrie patted Steve’s head sympathetically when she came back with a fresh drink for Happy. “But whether that Alpha is Tony’s friend or not? That Omega has zero idea that you exist right now.”

Steve snarled something under his breath and Valkyrie clicked her tongue before moving back to her bar.

“You’re alright, Sheriff.” Natasha’s fingers slid from Bucky’s shoulder to his neck and then to just the end of his hair, playing gently with the strands and brushing her fingers over the stripe of skin above his shirt collar. “I’ve seen many an Alpha look at many an Omega, and the Colonel might love Tony, but it’s nothing romantic.”
“You know all th’ ways an Alpha looks at an Omega?” Bucky tipped his head back so Natasha’s fingers slid deeper into his hair, the tiny Omega purring low in her throat at the unexpected and welcome physical contact. “Hm?”

“I know the ways that matter.” She murmured. “And I know the ones I want to see.”

There wasn’t anything to say to that, or at least nothing Bucky wanted to say with the other Alpha’s at the table, but he let his eyes blur all the way red in response and Natasha wet her lips before nodding just once and moving away.

Bucky turned back to the table, ready to try and say something to comfort Steve or at the very least, to reassure him that Natasha was right, Bucky hadn’t seen anything but platonic between Tony and the Colonel, but Steve’s head was still down, the Sheriff obviously not ready to hear anything else.

“Welp…..” Bucky pushed his chair back. “Since Sam and Clint are busy and Stevie’s brain is exploding, guess I should go man the station.”

“You do that.” Happy slurped up the rest of his soup. “Someone needs to act like a damn Deputy since th’ rest’a you are all wrapped up in Omegas.” He waved Bucky out the door then went back to finishing his bread, shaking his head over the afternoons antics.

He was so glad his Omega wasn’t that high maintenance. All she ever wanted was to be held and kissed sweetly, and Happy was always ready to hold and kiss her as sweetly as she wanted.

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“So that redhead.” Rhodey turned the burner on the stove down so the gravy wouldn’t burn. “She runs a whore house?”

“Yes.” Tony sipped at his wine, smiling over the domestic sight of his best friend in his kitchen. “Bout the meanest Omega I ever met, too. She’ll smile at you one second then have a knife to your jugular in the next. I’ve seen her bring one of her girls hot tea to drink and kick a john down the stairs without blinking.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt that at all.” The Alpha took a drink of his own. “And Valkyrie runs the saloon? Are they bonded?”

“No, Valkyrie’s a Beta, so she flirts with anyone and everyone, and Natasha and Bucky are in love.” Tony explained. “Or, we think they are in love? I’ve never seen them do more than smile at each other and every once in a while hold hands. Weird to think a Madame would be taking things slow in a relationship, but meh.” he shrugged it off. “At least they know it’s love and not lust.”

“Uh-huh.” Rhodey’s dark eyes softened when he turned around and saw Tony wrapped in one of the blankets from his pack, the Omega not even trying to pretend he wasn’t inhaling Rhodey’s scent and purring over the familiarity. “Clint and Sam been mated for a long time, huh? They seem very much in love.”

“Almost six years I think.” Tony nodded and put his wine down to snuggle deeper into the blanket. “No children yet, but the way Sam’s been acting, I wouldn’t be surprised if it happened soon. And Clint and I are um— he uh, he keeps me level, you know?”

“Yeah, I know.” The Alpha went back to cooking. “I can see it when he looks at you. All possessive and protective n that Omega-y way. But his mate doesn’t look at you the same way. You haven’t
been using him for your heat?"

“Oh no.” A quick shake of Tony’s head. “No, Sam and I don’t do that. Sometimes when Clint and I
are together, he will join in with Clint, but only every once in a while. And I haven’t head a heat
yet.” He flushed uncomfortably. “I think its the stress of the past few months. Hasn’t happened yet,
and even if it did, its not like Sam would want me, you know? He’s mated and my scent—” he made
a motion towards his neck. “You know it will get all gross if I’m knotted.”

“So why the relationship with him? If he’s the type of Alpha to be alright with his Omega being with
another Omega, why do you want him around at all?”

“It’s been good to have a solid, safe Alpha around.” Tony said slowly. “He isn’t attracted to me
beyond thinking I’m pretty, there’s no danger of him wanting to mate with me, and since my scent is
off, I’d probably have to beg him to knot me during a heat but I don’t think he would.”

“Hmph.”

“It’s just nice to have an Alpha around that I can trust. Especially since you haven’t been here.”

The last words were quieter, and Rhodey rumbled comfortingly at the Omega. “Well, I’m glad
you’ve found people here to keep you company, Tones. Clint seems like a good friend and if his
Alpha is safe then I can’t say anything about it.”

“They’re good people here. All of them. Different sorta people than the ones in New York.” Tony
blew out a deep breath and asked. “Aren’t you going to ask me about Sheriff Rogers?”

“I dunno, Tony, is there something you want to tell me about Sheriff Rogers?” Rhodey raised his
eyebrows and when Tony blushed, he rolled his eyes. “That’s what I thought. What are you doing
messing around with that Alpha, Tony? You know it isn’t a good idea.”

“I like him, Honeybear.” Even quieter than before, and the Colonel turned from flipping the steaks so
he could listen. “He um—” Tony picked at the blanket self consciously. “He treats me the way you
always told me an Alpha would treat me. The way an Alpha should treat me. And I— I like him.”

“Yeah, yeah I can see that too.” Rhodey stirred the gravy while he thought about his next words.
“But it’s not fair to him to let him court you, Tones. Not with your situation being what it is. I know
it ain’t fair to you either, you shouldn’t have to lock your heart away, but at least you know why you
need to keep him at arm’s length. But it’s worse for him because he doesn’t know. And the chances
are he will never know, not really, not unless you’re willing to open him up to all of that crap.”

“I’m not letting him court me.” Tony mumbled. “We’re just— just spending time together.”

“Just spending time together?” He pulled plates down from the cupboard. “Tony, I know you don’t
have much experience with this? But that Alpha thinks your his whether you two have been courting
or not. You should have seen the look on his face when you hugged me, and again at the tavern
when you kept holding my hand. That Alpha wants you as his mate and its not fair for you to keep
stringing him along without telling him the truth.”

“I know it’s not fair.” Tony took the plate full of food and stared down at it for a moment. “I know
it’s not fair, Rhodey. Lying to Steve bothers me every day.”

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“I expected you here like a month ago, you know.” Tony crawled into the bed next to Rhodey later that night, hooking his fingers in the Alpha’s sleep shirt and cuddling close. “I’ve been waiting for you to come and get me. Didn’t think I’d be here for the fall.”

“I know you were, Tones.” Rhodey yawned and put his arm around the Omega. “I’m sorry. I can’t help when my unit moves out though, you know. These Indians we’re fighting—they have every right to resist us coming in, and sometimes the battles get bloodier than we expect. It was all I could do to get away long enough to come get you. Told them I had an Omega here that I needed to fetch, that I would meet back up with the unit at Boarshead Pass. I’m sure they think I’ll be coming back with a mate. Boy won’t they be surprised when I show up with a mouthy little Omega with the bad habit of saying whatever the hell he wants?”

“Boarshead pass.” Tony repeated. “Does that we have to leave soon?”

“Tomorrow, Tony.” The Omega whined anxiously and Rhodey held him tighter. “I know it’s short notice, but if you want to come with me to California then we gotta go.” Silence from Tony, and he added, “Winter’s coming and once the passes are snowed in and either be stuck in Wildrock until Spring thaw, or we can do winter in California, but we’d have to leave tomorrow.”

“What if I— don’t want to go?” Tony asked carefully, and was thankful for the dark when Rhodey snarled out loud. “No, no listen. What if— what if I stay here? Even when the weather is good, Wildrock is a whole days ride from the nearest train, and when winter hits full force, apparently we can go months without a train making it this far west. No one— no one could find me, even if they knew where to start looking.”

Rhodey snarled again, deeper this time because he definitely didn’t like what Tony was thinking.

“I know the plan always was for me to come West first and then for you to come and take me to California, but I like it here. I like teaching kids, which is something I never thought I’d say. I’ve stopped jumping at every noise, I can even face down Alpha’s who are yelling at me.” Tony hurried on when Rhodey didn’t say anything. “I’m eating well and I even went to a dance a few months ago and you know I always used to avoid those sort of things! I’m doing good here, Honeybear. Better than I’ve been in years.”

“Tony—”

“And Steve is a good Alpha!” Tony blurted out. “When I told him my boundaries how he couldn’t knot me—” Rhodey made a disgruntled noise and Tony couldn’t help his smile—“and how I didn’t want to have to take my shirt off and he was fine with all that. He’s generous with me—” Tony paused meaningfully and the Alpha made another noise at knowing entirely too much about Tony’s physical relationship with the Sheriff.

“And before you showed up at my door Rhodey, he was telling me that he wants more than what we are doing, that he wants to move towards something real and that he was willing to take it at my pace but he really wants to—”

“That isn’t an option for you!” Angry now, the Alpha flipped on a lamp and sat up in the bed. “Tony! It’s not an option! You can’t stay here and you can’t stay with that Alpha. What happens when he starts asking questions about your scars or about why he can’t knot you? What happens when you can’t answer those questions, or worse, you do answer them and it unravels everything? Tony, I risked my life to get you out of New York and now you just want to throw it all away for—”

“I know you did!” Tony jumped to his feet and started pacing. “I know you did Rhodey! You risked your life to get me away from them, you made sure I made it clear to St Louis and that I had people
looking out for me to get me to Wildrock. And I know you promised to—” he cleared his throat. “You promised to bond with me, if that’s what it took to fix this and I love you so much for that but—”

“And I meant it!” Rhodey said loudly. “I meant it, Tony! Because I’m the only one who would know how to deal with—” he made a vague motion. “All of that. And I’d do that for you in a heartbeat. You can’t expect that Sheriff to understand or even want to understand why you would need certain things to keep you safe here!”

“I am safe here!” Tony shouted and Rhodey took a step back in surprise. “I am safe here, Rhodey. I’m safe with Sam and Clint, and I’m safe with Bucky and Happy and I’m safe with Steve!” He took a deep breath, dragging his fingers through his hair. “This is the first time since my parents died that I felt even remotely safe, like my life might actually work, like I’m not cursed or something and—and—

Tears then, and Rhodey clambered over the bed to grab him tight, hushing him over and over.

“I didn’t mean to upset you.” He rumbled and Tony only cried harder. “I didn’t mean to upset you, Tones. But you know it won’t be as easy as just staying here and explaining a few things to the Sheriff. You’d have to start with your real last name and work backwards from there. Explain why you’re here, what you were running from, all those scars on your chest, why you don’t have a scent— all of it. And then you’re taking the risk that he won’t want to deal with it, and what happens then?”

Silence for a long time, the Omega sniffling in his arms as Rhodey weighed his next words.

“Tony.” He ran his hands up and down Tony’s back gently. “Tony, if you don’t leave with me tomorrow, then it will be at least spring, if not early summer before I can make it back to get you. What if something happens before then? What if I’m not here to get you out of trouble, or what if the Sheriff can’t handle all this and wants nothing to do with you after you tell him?”

“You had to stop looking out for me eventually.” Tony mumbled. “Might as well be now.”

“The hell you talking about, I have to stop looking out for you!” The Alpha snapped and held him even tighter. “I will look out for you until the day you put me in my grave for scaring me to death with some crazy shenanigan!”

“It’s been years since I did anything remotely resembling a shenanigan, Rhodey.” Tony finally managed a smile. “And I’m a school teacher now, you know. The most scandalous things I’m allowed to do is be a little late for class because I was kissing Steve.”

“You’ve come so far and grown so much.” Rhodey said mock-seriously and this time he got a laugh out of the emotional Omega. “I can’t believe our days of spiking the punch and greasing the kitchen floor are gone already.”

“Do you remember when we threw beets in the well water and everyone’s clothes were stained red?”

“Vividly. Do you remember when we changed all the clocks back three hours and Father Coulson couldn’t figure out why no one was in church?”

“Ugh. What about that time we told my ma that I was too sick to see my tutor but really you’d accidentally dyed my hair green?”

“Okay, I don’t remember being the one that did the dying? But I do remember Mama Marie shaving us both bald as punishment.”
Tony started laughing then. “Oh god, we were so ugly for the entire summer.”

“Speak for yourself.” Rhodey snorted, easing Tony back towards the bed now that he was calmer. “I look good no matter what my hair, or lack of hair, is doing.”

“Yeah, you’re a handsome Alpha.” Tony settled back into his side of the bed and waited for Rhodey to lay back as well. “I miss it back home, you know. I miss the city and the people, I miss going to the theatre and walking the parks. I miss my library—” he sighed. “I miss it all.”

“But you want to stay in Wildrock anyway? California isn’t exactly New York, but there’s more than one restaurant. More than one schoolhouse. It would be closer to feeling like home than this place does.”

“I–I–” another sigh from the Omega. “I want to try to say here, I guess. We both know there’s nothing back East for me until I get everything figured out. It’s not like I could get on a train and go back to New York and back to my house. Can’t walk through the front door and order a bath, can I? Not really my house anymore, is it?”

“We’ll figure it out, Tony.” Rhodey assured him. “It hasn’t even been a year since you left. We’ll figure it out, don’t worry. One day you’ll be able to go back.”

“Maybe.” Tony scooted across the bed until he was close to the Alpha again, years of sharing a room as children and months of missing his best friend making it almost instinctual to curl into Rhodey’s side. “But what if we don’t figure it out?”

“Then… then maybe staying here in Wildrock with your Sheriff will be the best decision.”

“Yeah. Maybe.”

Rhodey was awake long after the Omega had fallen asleep in his arms, breathing in the muted scent of his best friend, his heart hurting thinking about all Tony had gone through, everything he would have to go through before it was all over.

He found it hard to believe that this Sheriff Rogers hadn’t asked any of these questions, that the Alpha hadn’t thought it weird that Tony hardly scented of anything while most Omega’s at least had an air of sweetness around them, that Tony wanted to stay mostly clothed when most Omega’s craved the skin on skin contact with an Alpha.

Why hadn’t the Sheriff pressed the issue of courting? It didn’t take a genius to see the Alpha wanted Tony badly, and obviously was only settling for spending time together because Tony didn’t want more, so why had it taken the Sheriff until now to finally start to say something?

It was suspicious that Steve wasn’t suspicious so come tomorrow morning, Colonel James Rhodes was going to be having a very stern talk with one Sheriff Steven Rogers.

It was time to clear a few things up.
“Colonel Rhodes.” Steve swallowed a scalding hot gulp of coffee and stood to his feet when the door to the Sheriff’s office opened and Rhodey stepped through. “Good morning.”

“Captain Rogers.” Rhodey returned with a half smile and a nod. “Or I suppose you prefer Sheriff Rogers in these parts?”

“Sheriff is fine.” Steve motioned to the chair on the other side of his desk. “Or Steve, if you prefer. Wildrock is a little more casual than back East, that’s for sure. What can I do for you this morning?”

The Colonel gave the office a thorough look around before he took the chair Steve offered, his posture deceptively casual but eyes razor sharp as he met Steve’s gaze, and the Sheriff had the uncomfortable feeling of being judged and found wanting.

Not a feeling he was used to at all.

“Sheriff Rogers.” Rhodey began after a moment, voice calm and even. “I have known Tony since we were boys, since my family moved into the lower level of his family’s home in Manhattan. We shared a room up until I presented as an Alpha, and then a few years later when he showed as an Omega. Since Tony presented, I have given many Alpha’s the talk I’m about to give you right now, and you’re going to let me say what I need to say before you open your mouth and attempt to argue with me, do you understand?”

“Um--” Steve blinked at the other Alpha in surprise, but the Colonel only raised his eyebrows and waited. “Uh, yes sir. Yes Colonel, go ahead.”

“Sheriff Rogers,” Rhodey hesitated, steepling his fingers as he thought. “Tony Carbonell is my very best friend. My oldest friend. And he is an Omega that you will tread lightly around, do I make myself clear? He is not the Omega to get stuck on your knot—only to find you stepping out with someone the next day. You are not to play with his heart, nor his emotions and heaven won’t help you if I find out you’ve ever made him cry, yeah?”

He waited, and Steve nodded quickly.

“First of all, Tony Carbonell is my very best friend. My oldest friend. And he is an Omega that you will tread lightly around, do I make myself clear? He is not the Omega to get stuck on your knot—only to find you stepping out with someone the next day. You are not to play with his heart, nor his emotions and heaven won’t help you if I find out you’ve ever made him cry, yeah?”

“Sheriff Rogers, Tony is--” now Rhodes hesitated, steepling his fingers as he thought. “For reasons that are his own to tell you, Tony is a very special Omega, and courting him will not be as simple as making your intentions known and eventually putting a mating bite on his neck. I am not going to elaborate on it, you’ll have to ask him for more, but I am telling you that getting involved with Tony, really involved with him, is not going to be simple. If you’re looking for an easy Omega, he is not the Omega for you.”

Another pause, and this time’s Steve nod was a little confused, so Rhodes leaned in closer, clasping his hands between his knees and narrowing his eyes at the Alpha.

“Tony says you haven’t said anything about how he doesn’t scent sweet, or about needing to keep his shirt on.”

“No. No I haven’t.”
“But you’ve noticed.”

“Of course.” Steve rubbed at the back of his neck self consciously. “We’ve been spending time together, his lack of scent is… it’s noticeable, yeah. I figured he would tell me about the shirt issue when he was ready, and the scent thing—” He shrugged. “Some Omega’s don’t have a noticeable scent until they are in love, or at least until they are with their mate, I thought Tony was the same way. I was willing to wait to find out.”

“Willing to wait.” Rhodey repeated and fell silent for a minute, chewing at the inside of his cheek as he thought about what to say next.

“Sheriff Rogers.” A deep sigh and something uncomfortable wound through Steve’s gut at the sudden pain in the Colonel’s eyes. “Sheriff Rogers, there has been two times in my life when I wasn’t there for Tony when he needed me. One was out of my control entirely, and the other--” his throat jerked as he swallowed. “--the other time nearly got him killed. Nearly got us both killed, if I’m being honest.”

“Because of those times--” another hard swallow and the uncomfortable in Steve’s gut turned to dread. “Because I wasn’t there to help, Tony is scarred.” Rhodey made a motion over his chest. “All through here. And by the time I was back to try and fix things, the damage was done and I couldn’t do anything about it except try to get him away from it all, so that’s what I did. I got him as far as St. Louis, and put him on a train out here so he would be safe.”

“Jesus.” Steve coughed to clear the emotion from his throat. “That’s why he won’t take his shirt off? Because he’s--”

“Yes, that’s right.”

Silence in the office, both the Alpha’s thinking about Tony, about what the Omega could have gone through, who had been hurt badly enough to leave scars.

“I’m in Wildrock to take Tony to California with me.” The Colonel finally said and Steve’s head snapped up, a warning growl rumbling in his chest before he could stop himself. “I told Tony I’d be here at the end of the summer, but my unit got held up so I’m late. I’m here to take him away, to keep him safe by keeping him by my side.”

“He is safe with me.” Steve didn’t quite manage to tamp his growl down entirely, and it dragged the edge of his words. “He is safe with me. Do not take him away.”

“That’s not your choice.” Rhodey said mildly. “And to be fair, it's not my choice either. It's entirely up to Tony whether he wants to go West with me or if he wants to stay here in Wildrock, and whatever his decision is, I will respect it and more importantly you will respect it.”

“I--” Steve was …. well he was sort of stunned by how angry the thought of Tony leaving made him. But angry wasn’t even quite the right word. He wasn’t angry he was devastated. The idea of losing Tony before he’d even really had him, of Tony saddling up with another Alpha-- platonic or not--and riding away from Wildrock was too much.

Steve knew he had no right to be so possessive-- not in the face of an Alpha who had known Tony for nearly thirty years now, not when he had only known the Omega for seven months or so, not when he and Tony weren’t even courting, no matter how tender their last few nights together had been.
No, he had no right.

So why did the thought of Tony leaving make him ache to his soul?

“What did Tony say?” He bit out, willing the red in his eyes to recede. “What did he say about leaving?”

“He’s already yours, isn’t he?” Rhodey asked instead, ignoring Steve’s question entirely. “You already think of him as yours, even though you haven’t spent a proper night together?” He waved off Steve’s alarmed look. “Tony and I have no secrets, Sheriff Rogers, he’s told me you had no issue with his boundaries, so I know you haven’t exactly been with him in the traditional sense. You think he’s yours, don’t you? Tell me the truth.”

“Yes.” Steve grit out. “I think of him as mine.”

“Hm.” The Colonel nodded. “Well see to it that you treat him like he’s yours then. Safe and secure and all that, alright?”

“Wait--what?”

“Tony isn’t going with me.” Rhodey stood to his feet and Steve jumped up as well. “He told me that he wanted to stay here, that he loves the students, the town, that he is safe with his friends and more importantly, he is safe with you. Tony always said that the day his parents died--”

“Damn it.” Steve muttered and Rhodey nodded shortly.

“--the day his parents died was the last time he felt truly safe, so the fact that he uses that word when talking about you means a lot to me. Tony is an Omega with secrets, with a past, and despite all the snark and bullshit he puts out there, he feels everything to his core. Whether it’s a kind word or a harsh one, Tony takes it all to heart and never forgets, and it changes him a little bit every time. If I’m going to trust him with you, you need to make sure those changes are good ones.”

“The day his parents died was the last time I saw Tony really smile.” Rhodey continued. “But he hasn’t stopped smiling since I showed up yesterday and I have to believe that he’s truly happy here. Do you understand why that’s such big deal to me?”

“I’m beginning to.” Steve said quietly. “I’ll be good to him, Colonel Rhodes.”

“Good.” Rhodey reached to shake Steve’s hand, and when Steve grasped it firmly, Rhodey yanked him forward until they were almost nose to nose, his eyes blurring a dark, furious red.

“So help me god, Sheriff Rogers, if I come back in the spring and you’ve broken that Omega’s heart, I will personally show you that little spot past the bluffs where I buried the last Alpha I caught disrespecting an Omega, do you hear me?”

“Yes sir.” Steve said firmly, keeping the red from his own eyes even though he never once looked away. “I’ll take care of him.”

“See that you do.” Rhodey offered a wave to Sam and Clint as they filed in, Bucky eyeing the Colonel curiously. “Gentlemen, been a real pleasure.”

“Colonel.” Bucky nodded and Clint murmured, “Colonel.” before Sam pinched him and waved as Rhodey left.

“Stevie.” Bucky leaned against Steve’s desk and frowned at him. “What was the Colonel doing here
“Probably giving him a shovel talk.” Sam started rifling through the papers on his desk. “Wasn’t he? Come up here to tell Steve to treat Tony right or he’d break his neck?”

“Specifically that he would bury me in a spot past the bluffs.” Steve agreed and Clint whistled softly. “Said that Tony’s got secrets and that courting him would be more than some nice conversation and an eventual mating bite.”

“We knew that though.” Bucky cut in. “We knew he’s got somethin’ goin’ on, that’s the whole reason why Sam and Clint keep such a close eye on him, why before you got here I kept such a close on him. Course he’s got secrets.”

“Colonel Rhodes is here to take Tony to California with him.” Steve said then. “That’s why he’s in Wildrock.”

“Sorry, what?” Clint started to yell and Sam hushed him quickly, putting a soothing hand at his mate’s side. “What do you mean he’s taking Tony to California? Is Tony going? When are they leaving? Do I get a vote in this? This can’t right! What the--”

“Tony isn’t going anywhere.” Steve interrupted and Clint stopped mid sentence, flopping back onto his Alpha’s lap in relief. “Apparently he told Colonel Rhodes that he is happy here, that he loves teaching, that he is safe with his friends--” Sam grinned. “-- and that’s he’s safe with me.”

“And then he threatened to bury you in a shallow grave if you broke Tony’s heart?” Bucky guessed. “That about right?”

“That’s about right.”

“You know what this means, don’t you?” Clint was back to speaking at a normal register. “Sheriff? Means that you need to step up and finish that important talk you two started, yeah? Get some things between the two of you figured out.”

“I know what it means.” Steve muttered, folding his arms and looking down at his feet. “Was thinking about that sort of thing before the Colonel showed up in town, still thinking about it now.”

“You aren’t having second thoughts though, are you?” Sam asked warningly. “Now that you know some more about Tony? Because if you are thinking he’s too much trouble--”

“-- you better tell him to go on with his Honeybear and get outta here.” Bucky finished.

“Don’t let him stay here if you aren’t willing to deal with all this.” Clint added, snarling a little. “I expect you to be a better Alpha than that, Sheriff. Giving up on Tony because he won’t be an easy mate isn’t right.”

“No second thoughts.” Steve finally straightened up, and went to retrieve his jacket and his hat. “Now if you’ll excuse me. I have an Omega to find and a conversation to finish.”

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“I wish you didn’t have to go yet.” Tony held on to Rhodey’s arm just a little bit tighter as they walked down the stairs of his apartment. “Are you sure can’t stay until tomorrow? You could tell your commanding officer that the Omega you went to fetch put up a fuss and you had to argue for a
few days before finally throwing up your hands in despair and leaving me behind.”

“And anyone who has ever met you even just once would completely believe that story was completely true.” Rhodey put his few belongings in the saddlebags of his mount and turned to hug Tony fully. “And as much as I’d like to stay another day, I have to get back in with my unit. Got fight to pick and country to see and all that.”

“Come spring I’ll be entitled to some leave though.” he ran his fingers through Tony’s hair. “Most the men use it back East with their families but I can use mine here, stay for a week with you if you’d like.”

“A week should be enough time to catch up on all the mischief I’m going to get in to.” Tony tried to smile but it came through watery. “In the spring then. If I haven’t joined some gang of horse thieves and headed south. I’m due for something like that, you know. All these months of being respectable and I’m bound to do something a little crazy.”

“I don’t doubt that.” Rhodey kissed his forehead and hugged the Omega closer. “But maybe keep it this side of the border for just a few more months. Are you sure you aren’t going to come with me? You’d like California. Get you a little place by the water, yeah? Plus it’s about as far from your old life as we can get, at least until we get a few more things figured out.”

“I know. I know it’s farther away and I know I used to want that but now-- now I want to stay here, Rhodey.” Muffled in his shirt, Tony clinging to him. “I like it here.”

“And you love the Sheriff.”


“Well, I told Sheriff Rogers about my spot by the bluff where I bury shitty Alphas.” Rhodey combed his fingers through Tony’s hair. “Scared him enough that I know he’ll do right by you.”

“You’ve been threatening Alphas with that line since I turned sixteen.” Tony leaned away to look up at him. “The bluff you’re talking about is the one overlooking the harbor back home. That’s a long way to drag a body.”

“Hey, he didn’t ask me which bluff I’d bury him at, and I didn’t elaborate.”

Tony burst out laughing and Rhodey grabbed him close again. “If something happens with your Sheriff.” He cleared his throat. “Tony, if something happens with your Sheriff, when I come back in the spring I want you to think about what I said before you left St. Louis, about us bonding. I’d take care of you, Tones, you know I would. And a bond would take care of half the issues you have back East and--”

“I’d never make you give up finding a mate.” Rhodey could tell Tony was frowning even without seeing his face. “I love you so much for offering, but I’d never say yes. You deserve to be bonded to someone who wants you like that, not stuck spending your life with a platonic mate. And I know it would solve a lot of issues, but I can’t do that to you. I won’t do it to you.”

“I’d do it to protect you.” The Alpha’s voice roughened. “I’d do it in a heartbeat.”

“I know you would, Rhodey.” Tony trilled softly, coaxing an answering rumble from the Alpha. “And I’d be lucky to have you, but you don’t love me like that and I don’t love you like that and--”

“And if that Alpha does what he’s supposed to and takes care of you, then we won’t have to bond,
right?” he tipped Tony’s chin up. “But you need to do right by him too, Tony. If you want to stay here, want to stay with him, you gotta trust him a little bit. You gotta give him the chance to be a good Alpha for you.”

“I will.”

“Promise.”

“I will!”

“I told him about your scars.” Rhodey whispered and Tony tensed in his arms. “Not about how you got them, but that you have them because I wasn’t there to protect you.”

“Rhodey it wasn’t your fault, I told--”

“You can say that all you want but I’m always going to feel a little guilty.” The Alpha worked his hand between their bodies to lay over Tony’s heart and the Omega purred at the contact. “Now your Sheriff knows that there is a physical reason behind all those barriers you put up and maybe he won’t be so discouraged when you stonewall him about getting too close.”

He waited a beat and then, “And he knows how serious I was when I told him to keep you safe.”

“You didn’t tell him about my scent?”

“No.”

“Or my last name?”

“No, Tones, those are all your things to tell. But your scars-- he was going to see them eventually and I didn’t want you to finally be brave enough to show him and then--”

“I know.” Tony interrupted. “Thank you. You’re right, he was going to see them eventually and I’d rather him know that there was an issue instead of me taking off my shirt and him screaming or something.”

“I highly doubt an Alpha of that size would scream.” Rhodey said dryly. “But I’d pay money to hear it.”

“I would too.” Tony laughed quietly and Rhodey kissed his forehead before he started easing away.

“Alright, Tones, I have got to get on the road or I won’t make the pass by dark.”

“Be careful.” Tony stepped away from the horse, arms wrapped around his mid-section, hugging himself to keep from reaching out again. “I love you, you know.”

“I love you too.” Rhodey smiled one last time at him. “Spring time, Tony. Just six months or so. It’ll go by fast and I’ll be back before you know it.”

“Alright.” Tony nodded, forcing a smile to his mouth and blowing a kiss at the Alpha. “Six months. See you soon.”

Rhodey rumbled something comforting, then urged his horse into a trot, dust kicking up behind him as he headed down the road through town.

Tony stood there with his hand raised in a wave until the horse and rider had disappeared into the hills beyond Wildrock.
Then he collapsed down onto the bottom step, put his head on his arms, and let the lonely wind around him until he thought he would suffocate from the weight of it all.

“Bye, Honeybear.”

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Steve found Tony in the same place almost an hour later, and paused a few steps from the landing, shoving his hands in his pockets before clearing his throat and asking, “Let the children out of school early today?”

“Gave them the day off entirely.” Tony spoke without lifting his head, and the blankness in the Omega’s voice made Steve hurt. “It’s harvest season after all, and those with a farm need the older children to help in the fields so I only have half an attendance anyway.”

“And those who don’t have a farm?”

“I gave them extra math sheets and reading yesterday.” Tony still hadn’t lifted his head or turned to look at Steve. “I knew I would be in no shape to teach today, not with Rhodey leaving, so they can do some work at home and tomorrow class will be back as normal.”

Steve watched Tony for a minute and then quietly, “Would you like to go for a walk, Tony?”

Tony started to shake his head and Steve added, “A real walk, I mean. Down to the creek? I brought you a sandwich from the market and the leaves are turning right about now. Sure is a pretty place to just sit, pretty place if you need to cry, maybe just a pretty place for me to hold your hand while you tell me about your Rhodey.”

“Yeah?” Tony sniffed, curled a little tighter into himself. “I think a real walk sounds exhausting and full of fresh air and bugs and other things I don’t enjoy.”

“Would you like me to stay with you? Sit with you for a minute?”

“No thank you.” Tony kept looking away. “I want to just be alone for a while. I’ll be fine.”

“Tony--” Steve started to move forward, wanting to hold the Omega, to comfort him, to offer something. “Could I--”

“Thank you, but not thank you.” Tony shook his head quickly. “I don't want any company, or to take a walk-- real or not-- right now. I just need some time to myself.”

When he stood up, Steve caught a glimpse of the tears on the Omega’s cheek and rumbled anxiously. “Sweetheart, is there anything I can do? It breaks my heart to see you so sad, to see you missing your friend so much.”

“Have a good day, Sheriff Rogers.” Tony said woodenly, and made no attempt to wipe the tears away as he climbed the stairs. “Thank you for checking on me.”

“I’m here if you want me, Tony. For any reason at all.”

The Omega’s steps faltered for a second but he didn’t reply, just closed the door to his apartment behind him, leaving Steve alone outside.

“Such a sad Omega.” Steve whispered. “Such a sad Omega, I wish you’d let me hold you.”
The town of Lofsgreen sat half a days ride from Wildrock, not even big enough to make it onto the map, nothing more than a few buildings and miles of farm, here and gone in a moment when the Wells Fargo coach came through on it's way to the bigger cities.

The largest building in town served as the only restaurant and something of a hotel for the tiny town. On Friday and Saturday nights it was a saloon and brothel, and on Sunday mornings it was a church for the truly penitent, the sometimes penitent, and those that were dragged there by their wives and mothers.

Today it served as a meeting place for two Alphas and the group of men they had brought with them from St. Louis, twenty or so taking up most of the dining room in the hotel as they waited for news on what to do next.

The male Alpha was throwing back drink after drink, eyeing the Omega behind the bar with something dangerous in his eyes, but when he leaned forward and growled at her, the female Alpha snarled loud enough to send the serving girl scrambling.

“For once in your life.” She said coolly, going back to applying a bright red layer of nail polish to her fingers. “Just *once* keep it in your pants. You have a disconcerting habit of leaving bruises on your bed mates and in this small of a town you could pay for that in a very unfortunate way.”

“I’m not afraid of a bunch of cowboys.” He scoffed.

“You should be.” She answered without batting an eye. “Alpha’s like you get lynched out here, no trial, no due process, no chance for you to weasel your way out of it or buy off a jury, so back. off.”

He huffed and sat back in his chair angrily, kicking his boots up on the table. “How long are we supposed to wait, anyway?”

“We will wait however long we need to wait.” The female Alpha waved her hands in the air to get them to dry. “And you will wait with your mouth shut, yes?”

The male Alpha simply huffed again, but he shut up and more importantly, he didn’t bother the Omega at the bar anymore either.

Almost an hour passed before the door of the hotel swung open and a young man hurried through, making a beeline for their table.

“You were right, ma’am.” he said, doffing his hat nervously at the female. “Th’ Colonel went right to Wildrock, right to th’ school teacher.”

“Poor predictable Rhodey.” She laughed in delight. “I knew if we watched him long enough he would lead us to Tony. Tell me, what name is that bratty Omega going by these days?”

“Ah--” the Beta checked the hastily scribbled note in his pocket. “He goes by Mr. Carbonell. Tony Carbonell.”

“His mother’s maiden name.” The male Alpha muttered. “Clever. No one would think twice about that name.”

The female stood to her feet, straightening her clothes and treating everyone in the room to a view of
lean curves and a wicked smile, smirking when the males in the room started to stare, and then looked away guiltily.

They all knew better than to spend too much time ogling her. She’d cut an eye out of the last man to stare too long and the men had never forgotten.

“What is it they say around here? Saddle up? Hit the trail? Mosey along? Either way, let’s go.”

“We leaving now?”

“Yes. We can make Wildrock by sundown and I can be reunited with my dear, long lost Mr. Carbonell in the morning. Pay the girl at the front, won’t you?”

“I don’t have any money!” the male protested and she groaned out loud at him.

“Of course you don’t. You there! Omega!” she snapped her fingers and the serving girl hurried over.

“Here you are then.” she dropped a handful of cash into the Omega’s hands. “Extra for having to put up with this brute. Tell your boss I appreciated his hospitality and if I ever have to come back to this god-forsaken western territory, I’ll be sure to stay here again.”

“Uh, yes ma’am.” the Omega hesitated. “Should I tell him your name?”

“Sunset Bain.” the Alpha replied, twisting her hair up to tuck it under her hat. “But you can call me Mrs. Stark.”
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

I keep laughing at myself because first this was 10 chapters of romance, then it was 15
with a bit of plot, then 18 and I swore that was it and now it’s like twenty maybe 21, so
that’s nice… I need to stop putting a length on the fics and just tell y’all to buckle up for
the ride lol

Anyway, here’s your warning– you might throw something over this chapter so please
make sure you are reading this somewhere you won’t break your phone

Also, the SLIGHTEST TW for a line of period typical (post Civil War) racism towards
Sam, but the guy is shut up real quick.

Tony was thankful that today of all days the children were willing to do their class work quietly and
calmly– no shouts of “Let loose the dogs of war!” before the older children started a throwing paper,
no squeals of annoyance because one of the younger boys had pulled someone’s pigtail, none of the
general rowdiness that was to be expected after having the previous day off.

No, they were all dutifully copying the sentences on the board, some in cursive, some in print, all of
their heads bent over their desks as they worked.

And Tony was thankful for it.

He hadn’t slept at all last night, feeling awful from having cried so hard after Rhodey, sick to his
stomach over the talk he would have to have with Steve, anxiety and dread warring in his chest over
having to talk about his scars, about his past, and perhaps a trickle of relief because it had been
difficult to feel as if he was lying every moment of every day and now he wouldn’t have to do that
anymore.

It had been hard on him, keeping up the lie for this long, but Tony felt bad about sulking over it.

No matter how difficult it had been on him, it wasn’t near as difficult as it would be for Steve to
realize like he’d been lied to for so many months.

Tony didn’t know if he could handle seeing the disappointment in the Alpha’s blue eyes. Or the
anger. Steve would probably be angry, and rightfully so. Getting involved with an Omega who had
weird boundaries and rules was difficult enough, but an Omega who had secrets like Tony had
secrets…?

Maybe he should have talked to Steve before Rhodey left, and then if the Sheriff was upset he would
have had a way out of this mess. Now he didn’t have a way out. Nowhere to go if it all went to shit
and no one to run to if he had to escape, no way to find Rhodey, no way to–

“Mr. Carbonell?” RiRi’s soft voice broke into Tony’s rapidly spiraling thoughts and he startled in his
seat, the book slipping from his hands and smacking onto the desktop.

“Oh. Ms. Williams.” He straightened with a hopefully encouraging expression, grateful–if not
The children were surprised—for the interruption. “What did you need?”

“Why are you so sad today?” She asked quietly, and a few of the other children looked up as well, concern etched on their young faces. “You haven’t smiled at all.”

“Oh,” Tony’s face fell. “Sorry, RiRi, but I’m fine, thank you for asking.”

“If you’re sad you can come over to Mrs. Parkers for dinner.” Harley offered and his little sister nodded enthusiastically in agreement. “We’re going over there too and I know she’s always happy to see you.”

“Quit tryna hook my Aunt up with the teacher!” Peter hollered. “She already said no and he’s sweet on the Sheriff!”

“That’s enough boys.” Tony finally smiled over the argument. “And Mr. Parker, the word is trying to not tryna.”

“Sorry.” Peter mumbled. “I guess you can come over for dinner if you want.” He sent a sly look towards Liz. “You too, Liz. If you want.”

“Aw look at the Omega trying to act like a real—” Flash started to tease Peter and Liz, but stopped when Tony cleared his throat pointedly. “Um, sounds like a nice evening.” the young Alpha finished, ducking his head and going back to his class work.

“It does sound like a nice evening, thank you Flash.” Tony waited until Flash glanced up to to smile encouragingly at him. The Alpha was trying to make amends for his earlier behavior, he really was, and while all the earmarks of an obnoxious Alpha being raised by an equally obnoxious Alpha were still there, Flash was at least trying to overcome some of them and Tony was determined that the boy not get discouraged over it.

“And thank you for the suggestion, Harley—” the boy beamed when Tony smiled at him too. “But I’m afraid I’d be terrible company tonight so I think I’ll take my dinner at home, or maybe at Ms. Valkyries if I get my grading done in time.”

“Sometimes when I miss my pa real bad me and ma sit and tell stories about him.” RiRi offered. “Maybe that would help you with missing your friend?”

Tony tapped his pencil on the desk a few times while he thought, and then motioned her back to her desk.

“My best friends name is Rhodey,” he began and a few of the children looked up curiously. “But I call him Honeybear. When I was nine and he was twelve, he caught me sneaking into the pantry to get into the sweets and he pretended to be a bear, roaring and shaking the door and growling at me. I was so scared that he really was a bear that I grabbed a pail of honey and threw it at him as I ran away.”

“You threw honey at him!?” Michelle, always one to indulge in a prank or two, cracked an incredulous grin. “Mr. Carbonell! Why would you throw honey at him!?”

“Bears like honey and I figured it would distract a wild animal while I made my escape!” Tony defended and the class dissolved into laughter. “If he would have been a bear it would have worked!!”

“What happened after you threw honey at him?”
“Our ma’s got a hold of us.” Tony smiled at the memory. “It took two weeks of solid baths to get all the honey out of Rhodey’s hair and skin, we had to throw his clothes away because they wouldn’t come clean. That isn’t counting the thirty minutes it took to get the pail off of his head because it was stuck on there pretty tight. We weren’t allowed to play together for a while but our ma’s gave up keeping us apart because we snuck out to spend time together anyway.”

“So you call him Honeybear because—"

“At first it was a way to make fun of him.” Tony admitted and the children laughed harder. “And after he presented as an Alpha, I would shout it in public because all the other Alpha’s laughed at him and the Omega’s thought it was cute. Now it’s just an old joke.”

“What does he call you?”

“Tones.” Tony slumped back in his seat, a fond smile on his face. “Yeah, he’s not as good at nicknames as I am. Still my best friend though.”

The kids chattered amongst themselves over the new knowledge that their apparently unflappable teacher had in fact nearly drowned an Alpha with honey, and Tony breathed out a sigh of relief, meeting RiRi’s eyes and flashing her a thumbs up.

She’d been right that talking about Rhodey would make him feel better.

Maybe the same principle would apply when he talked to Steve.

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The visitors at the Wildrock Hotel had asked the Beta at the front desk where the best food in town was, and she had pointed them one direction towards the sandwich shop, and the other direction towards Valkyrie’s saloon.

They had traipsed through the doors of the saloon loudly, the male Alpha jostling with a few other other men and making a scene, the female Alpha watching it all with a cool expression, dark eyes flitting around the space and taking it all in.

When her gaze landed on Valkyrie, one perfectly arched brow rose in expectation of the Beta scrambling to bring her a drink or at least calling a hello, but Valkyrie raised her own eyebrow and stared the Alpha down.

No one was going to come into her bar and try to stare her down no matter how ridiculously beautiful they were.

And the female really was beautiful, all long limbs and lean curves and exactly what Valkyrie looked for in a woman, but this one– this one wouldn’t be up for a tumble in the back room, and even if she was? Valkyrie wouldn’t be asking.

No, this female looked like trouble walking, and Valkyrie didn’t want anything to do with it.

She makes the rules. Valkyrie thought to herself and eyeballed the male Alpha. He’s probably the reason for the rules. Looking at the other males– Henchmen. They enforce the rules.

“Oy.” She snapped her fingers to get the groups attention. “Tables in the back, yeah? I’ll bring you a drink.”
One more measuring look, and the female Alpha turned to find a table, the rest of her men following suit.

Valkyrie blew out a deep breath.

She didn’t know what this particular gang was doing in Wildrock, but there was no way they were here for the sites, the culture or for her famous pumpkin pie.

The Sheriff wasn’t going to like this.

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By the time the deputies from the Sheriff’s office meandered through the door of the tavern, the group in the back had put away two different orders of food and was on their fourth round of drinks. It was still too early in the evening for Natasha to bring her Omega’s down the stairs so other than a few other stragglers, it was only the deputies and the gang in the restaurant, and both were content to leave each other be.

By the time Steve got there, there were a few more people in the tavern, but the group at the back was on round six and his blue eyes narrowed when he heard the ruckus they were making.

“Everything alright?” He asked Valkyrie as he got his own beer and she shrugged. “Who are the Alphas? Do you know? What are they doing in Wildrock?”

“I don’t know much. They’ve been paying for everything up front.” Valkyrie’s eyes darted towards her till. “The female—she’s the leader. The Alpha male, every time he opens his mouth she’s got something bitchy to say that shuts him up. The rest are just henchmen, hired muscle though there ain’t much muscle to speak of. They look like trouble but so far I haven’t even seen them so much as look wrong at anyone, so I’m letting them stay.”

“Alright, I’ll keep an eye on them.” Steve rapped the counter once, twice, and then—“Valkyrie, have you seen—”

“No.” she interrupted with a quick shake of her head. “Our sweet Mr. Carbonell has been at the schoolhouse all day with the children, Mrs. Parker stopped by during her lunch and told me when she took Peter his pack that they were laughing over a honey story? I dunno, Sheriff, but it seems like he’s doin’ alright.”

“Thank you.”

“If it’s any consolation,” she leaned over the bar and lowered her voice. “It’s Tuesday which means after he grades his paper he will be sailing that pert little ass right up to my bar for dinner and a slice of pie and you’ll get a chance to check on him.”

Steve smiled a little and she squeezed at his hand. “Don’t worry, Sheriff. Clint told me a thing or two about what happened with that Colonel. I’m thinking the only reason a talk like that even happens is cause that Omega is already half in love with you, yeah? Don’t get too discouraged.”

“Advice from a bartender?” He asked, bending to kiss her cheek. “Imagine that.”

She blew him a kiss and waved him off. “Just part of the job description, Sheriff. Take your beer and go sit down.”
Steve joined the table with Bucky, smiling over at a very snuggly Sam and Clint, the Alpha working overtime to remind his flirty mate that he was the only man in uniform Clint should be drooling over.

“What’d Valkyrie have to say about the newcomers?” Bucky muttered around his beer. “Cos that noise is startin’ to piss me off.”

“Easy Buck.” Steve said mildly. “It’s a saloon you know, a little noise is expected, they aren’t any louder than when the miners come down the hill at the end of each month, you know?”

“Ugh.” Bucky rolled his eyes. “What did she have to say?”

“And they’ve been paying for their food and all right away, and apparently that female Alpha is the one calling the shots. Wildrock doesn’t have a bank worth mentioning, not with the coach coming through once a week and it was in yesterday, so they missed it completely.”

“Worst thieves ever.” Clint commented, opening his mouth obediently so his Alpha could feed him a bite. “And the girl? Those boots she’s got on cost more than a months salary, so no matter how hard she works that hat? No way she’s local.”

“A months salary?” Bucky whistled quietly. “Now how you gonna know a thing like that? Sam, you buying your mate fancy things?”

“I’m not high maintenance enough for anything that costs a months salary.” Clint scoffed and the Alpha’s all exchanged a yeah right look. “I just look through the same catalogues Tony does.” he said offhandedly, and then speared Steve with a knowing smirk. “All the same catalogues.”

“Christ.” Steve turned bright red and Sam outright cackled at him. “Thank you for that.”

“You seen him since yesterday?”

“Nah.” Steve took a long drink to hide his disappointment. “He didn’t send a note around or anything, and I didn’t want to bother him, but it’s Tuesday so he should be here any minute.”

Any minute was nearly an hour later, and Steve spent the entire time trying to act like he wasn’t either staring at the door waiting for Tony or side-eyeing the female Alpha in the back, tensing when she strolled by their table and let her nails slide across his shoulders in an obvious flirtation.

Steve ignored her entirely, shifting away in his seat so her hand would fall away and she chuckled over it before calling to her Alpha companion, “I’m going back to the hotel, darling! Tell me if anything fun happens!”

After she left, it was another half hour before anything else happened, and this time it was Tony that caught Steve’s attention, the Alpha straightening up when the doors opened and Tony swept through and headed right for the bar, obviously looking for some food, probably looking specifically for pie.

No one at the table could hear what was said, but Valkyrie kissed the Omega once on each cheek then pointed at a bar stool before turning to dish him up a healthy portion of dinner. Tony smiled up at her and took a sip of his water before glancing around the room.

His smile grew bigger when he saw Clint and Sam, and he waved at Bucky, but then his eyes landed on Steve and the smile slid right off his face, expression dimming.

“Well shit.” Bucky blew out a deep breath. “That don’t look good, Stevie. Thought you said everything was going to be alright between you?”
“I– I don’t think he’s looking at me.” Steve frowned, head turning slightly to check his peripherals. “Sam, what’s directly behind me?”

“That group of loud mouths.” Sam never took his eyes off his and Clint’s meal. “Tony walked in and that male Alpha hasn’t stopped staring. I’m about ninety five percent sure that Tony is scared out of his mind right now.”

“That’s not going to happen on my watch.” Steve growled and pushed away from the table. “Not going to let Tony be afraid of anybody in this bar.”

He was just taking a step forward, just heading to Tony to whisper something comforting and maybe sit with him at the bar, when a Beta male walked through the doors. He was one from the group that had stepped out to relieve himself earlier, and Steve had made a note of when he left but hadn’t put a second thought in to it.

Now he was wishing he had paid attention, because the Beta made a beeline for Tony, snatching him right off the stool and dragging him towards the middle of the room.

“Well what d’ya know!” The Beta shouted and grabbed at Tony’s arm, holding tight enough to make the Omega cry out. “Ain’t this that Omega you’re lookin’ for? Came all cross country for this and I found him right here! Guess I get the ree-ward, eh?”

“Let me go!” Tony yelped, but the Beta simply yanked harder, hollering about “Gonna go find Sunset and show her what I got! We been looking all over for you Omega!”

Steve jumped up so fast the table overturned and splattered food everywhere, but it didn’t matter because Sam and Clint were on their feet as well, Bucky with his pistol drawn before he’d even found his footing, Clint only a second behind him.

The Beta, who was suddenly acting a lot less drunk then he’d been just a few seconds earlier grabbed a revolver from his belt and held it to Tony’s head. “Now you boys jus’ hold on.” He said calmly, and Steve swore when he realized they had been played. “Wouldn’t want me to accidentally hurt this pretty thing, would ya? Stay right there and let me conduct my business.”

“Let him go.” Steve warned, his voice casual but eyes blurring red, cursing because he’d left his shotgun at the department, cursing because he only had his pistol on him, so angry he could barely see straight because Tony’s face was white, his eyes wide with fear. “You don’t want to start trouble in a room full of deputies, do you?”

“S-Steve?” Tony whimpered and Steve almost howled with rage when the Beta shook him hard, Tony’s feet slipping out from beneath him and nearly sending him to the floor. “Steve!”

“Let him go or I swear I will break your arm off and use it to beat you to death.” Bucky snarled, pulling his second pistol and leveling it at the Beta. “You wanna take that risk?”

“The funniest thing about that.” The obnoxious New York accent came from behind, as well as the sound of no less than half a dozen revolvers click-click-click as they were pointed at the back of Steve’s head. “Funniest thing is, I don’t think we’re in a room surrounded by deputies I think those deputies are in a room surrounded by a gang of armed men. Don’t tell me you were so intent on protecting that little Omega that you forgot to check your six?”

“Damn it.” Steve growled. He couldn’t believe he’d been so focused on Tony that he’d forgotten about the party of newcomers behind him, and now he’d put them all in danger.

“Put ’em down, guys.” he groaned. “Can’t do nothing when they’ve got guns at our back.”
“That’s better.” The Alpha swaggered around in front of them, eyeing the deputies, outright leering at Clint as he passed. “Pretty Omega, why don’t you put that thing down before you hurt yourself. Does your Alpha know you play with guns like that?”

“*His Alpha* bought him that gun.” Sam slowly lowered his own weapon when someone pressed a barrel into his back. “And you need to stop looking at my mate like that.”

“Look at you all high and mighty.” The Alpha sneered. “You know back home boys like you get lynched for speaking to a white man like that.”

“Well out here, calling me boy will get you strung up by those fancy britches and left for the vultures to find.” Sam growled back. “Call your boys off and leave it to just me and you we will see which one of us walks away, huh?”

“Yeehaw cowboy.” The Alpha smirked, and turned his attention to Tony. “Well well well. Of all the bars in all the towns, imagine finding you in this particular one, Tony. We have been looking for you for months now, never thought you’d be hiding out in this little wasteland.”

“Tiberius.” Tony was shaking, trying to lean away from the gun at his temple, trying to stay away from the Alpha as he came closer, obviously trying not to collapse from sheer panic. “How did you– what are you– how did you find me?”

“Tony?” Steve growled when a gun pointed at his midsection as a warning to shut up. “Tony do you know this Alpha?”

“Um–um–um–”

“Go on, sweetheart.” The Alpha– Tiberius– reached up to cup Tony’s jaw, forcing his head to turn so he could look closer at him, and Steve bristled over the Alpha calling Tony sweetheart when that was what Steve called him. “Go on and tell the nice Sheriff exactly how you know– AH!”

There was a click and a swoosh, then a thwack and Tiberius jumped back with a scream, hand protectively covering his crotch, staring in horror at the arrow embedded in the floor scant inches from where he’d been standing.

Everyone went perfectly still, a confused silence spreading across the room, and then one by one every eye turned to stare at Valkyrie.

“That’s right, bitches.” She said calmly and thunked her crossbow down on top of the bar. “I’ve got a cross bow. And the next person to touch that Omega is gonna get a bolt through the heart if I like you, bolt through the dick if I don’t. Who’s going to move next?”

“Shit.” The Beta holding a gun to Tony put it down and backed away, hands held high. “What’s with the hostility? We–we can do this nicely, yeah?”

“Back off, now.” Valkyrie loaded another bolt and pointed it at Tiberius’ head. “Tell your men to stand down or I’ll nail your knot to the wall behind it, you hear?”

“G-g-guns down.” Tiberius stammered, and only when every revolver was back in it’s holster did Valkyrie lower her bow and nod towards Steve.

“Sheriff. Not to ruin your meal but I’d much appreciate it if you get these boys out of my restaurant.” She motioned for Tony. “Come here, baby. Up to the bar now, they aren’t going to touch you.”

There were tears in Tony’s eyes and Steve wanted so badly to run to him, but he’d
already fucked the situation by paying attention to Tony and not to his surroundings, so he picked his gun back up and pulled his cuffs to start restraining as many of the thugs as he could.

“Tiberius, I’m almost certain I told you to send for me if anything interesting happened.” The sudden reappearance of the female Alpha had them all tensing again, Valkyrie’s hand twitching towards her bow, Steve raising his gun until it pointed between her eyes.

“No harm, now.” She shook her head and waved him down. “I’m unarmed. Not sure where I’d hide a weapon on this outfit anyway. Besides, I don’t need a weapon to talk to Tony, do I?” she cocked her head and stared at the Omega. “Do I, Tony? Or should I call you Mr. Carbonell? Is that what you prefer these days? Mr. Carbonell the school teacher?”

“Tony—” Clint started raising his gun at well, sights pointed squarely at the back of the Alpha female’s head. “Tony what is going on?”

“Tell them what’s going on, darling.” The female encouraged, watching Valkyrie and that crossbow carefully as she moved towards Tony. “Tell your friends that there’s no reason for all this violence and fighting.”

“I–” Tony turned to Steve helplessly, biting at his lip and clenching his hands. “Um, I–”

“Tell them!” The order came whip cord sharp, cutting through the tension in the room and making Tony jump in fright, and Steve’s stomach twisted uncomfortably when the Omega whimpered, tipping his head to the side in a clearly submissive gesture.

“Stevie, what the fuck is going on?” Bucky whispered. “Why th’ hell is Tony reacting like that?”

“I don’t know.” Steve’s heart landed somewhere by his toes when Tony’s eyes closed, his body posture frightened but pliant when the female reached to touch him, rumbling low in her throat as she stroked his cheek. “I don’t– I don’t know.”

“Tell them who I am, Omega.” she commanded. “Otherwise there will be probably be bloodshed and you don’t want that on your conscience, do you?”

“It’s fine, Valkyrie.” Tony said miserably when the Beta started snarling at the Alpha. “It’s–It’s fine. This is Sunset Bain. She’s my–my–” this time he sought Steve out, begging him, pleading with him to please understand. “My Alpha.”

“Tell them who I am, Omega.” she commanded. “Otherwise there will be probably be bloodshed and you don’t want that on your conscience, do you?”

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“It’s fine, Valkyrie.” Tony said miserably when the Beta started snarling at the Alpha. “It’s–It’s fine. This is Sunset Bain. She’s my–my–”

“The fuck–!” From Clint, and Sam barely got a hand over his mouth in time to stop him.

“She’s my wife.” Tony said again, cleared this time. “My mate. My–my–” this time he sought Steve out, begging him, pleading with him to please understand. “My Alpha.”

Steve couldn’t help himself, couldn’t help jerking away a few steps, expression washing with horror and before he could help it— disgust.

He tried to blink it away, tried to school his features but it was too late.

Tony had seen the rejection and flinched as if he’d been slapped, turning and hunching his shoulders as if he was trying to hide.

“That’s right.” Sunset crooned approvingly. “I’m your Alpha, aren’t I? Good news, little Omega. I’ve come to take you home.”

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For safety’s sake– and because they were still pissed off at being taken unawares– Steve and the deputies rounded up the six men that had pulled their weapons in the bar and locked them in the jail for the night, confiscating the weapons and tossing them in the gun safe.

They hadn’t had any choice but to let Tony walk out the door with Sunset and Tiberius, the Omega looking tiny and frightened between the two Alpha’s, and Steve hadn’t been able to watch, his jaw clenched and face red as he resolutely looked the other way.

“So.” Valkyrie was the first one to speak as they tried to put the bar back together. “That was a surprise to everyone, right? Not just me?”

“You could say that.” Clint was helping to right the upturned tables, cleaning the mess off the floor where food and drink had gone flying. “I mean, outta all the secrets I thought Tony had? An Alpha and wife wasn’t one of them.”

“Explains why he don’t scent like nothing.” Bucky grunted, digging the cross bow bolt from the floor. “Some Omega’s only scent pretty when their mate is with them, you know? No wonder Steve couldn’t ever get a good scent from him.”

“I think the only thing Tony scents like when that bitch is around is fear.” Sam growled. “And who was the other Alpha? Is Tony involved with two Alphas? Two?”

“Either way–” Valkyrie cut a look towards Steve, who had posted up by the window, arms folded and jaw set as he stared out into the night. “Either way our Sheriff isn’t exactly doing alright, so we need to be careful with him.”

“I don’t even know what he could be thinking.” Sam admitted quietly. “He was all set to admit his feelings to Tony only to find out that not only does Tony have an Alpha but that she is apparently dangerous as hell and followed him all the way from back East? What kind of secrets require being hunted down by your mate?”

“Do you think she followed the Colonel?” Clint paused in his cleaning up. “I mean, you don’t think the Colonel was in on it, do you? Seems mighty convenient that he’s here one day and gone the next and now all this shit is happening.”

“I doubt that. No Alpha who loves an Omega that much– jus’ friends or not– would sell him out to another Alpha.” Bucky finally got the bolt out and set it on the table.

“But two things are for sure. Stevie is heartbroken and he is fuckin’ furious. Don’t know which one’a those emotions are gonna make an appearance first? But either way someone’s getting hurt.”
“Pretty Omega.” Sunset shut the door to her hotel room and tossed her hat on the bed. “Don’t look so morose, darling! I missed you and my feelings are a little hurt that you don’t seem to have missed me. I thought you would be thrilled to see me.”

“Thrilled to see you.” Tony repeated, slumping into a chair and hiding his face in his hands. “Why the hell would I be thrilled to see you? If I wanted to see you I would have stayed in New York!”

“Mmm, yes.” she pursed her lips in disapproval. “We should chat about that, shouldn’t we? Tell me, Omega, how did you manage to escape in the middle of the night, somehow make it to St. Louis and clear out to this trash heap of a town without us having any idea where you’d gone for months?”

“Maybe we should talk about how you managed to find me, instead.” Tony muttered. “I tried really hard to cover my tracks but apparently even that wasn’t enough.”

“Aw, but you did a wonderful job of trying!” The condescension in Sunset’s voice was thick enough to physically hurt, and Tony turned away from it. “I’ll admit I was surprised you could even think something this complicated all the way through, but then once I realized that your obnoxious friend James—”

“Don’t talk about Rhodey like that.” Tony ignored the slight to his own intelligence to defend his friend. “He’s my best friend.”

“Fine. Rhodey.” she sneered. “Once I realized that he had conveniently gone west to St Louis the same time you disappeared, it was just a matter of following him until he led me to you. It took a while you know. We stole his mail, intercepted his wires— couldn’t figure out how he was communicating with you at all! But I knew he would come find you eventually, he can’t help himself. He’s like a dog in that respect, always going home to his master, isn’t he?”

The words were obviously intended to draw some sort of reaction out of Tony, and the Alpha chuckled when he tried to scoot further away from her, backing his chair towards the wall.

“What are you even doing here, darling?” Sunset started undressing, peeling her vest off and tossing it over a chair, working at the buttons of her blouse without caring that Tony was uncomfortable with the show of skin. “Small towns aren’t really your scene. Don’t you miss the theater? Don’t you miss the gardens? Your library? Drinking over priced wine and wearing custom made clothing? You can’t tell me that pretending to be a schoolteacher is even remotely interesting to you. How have you managed it all this time?”

“I love the children.” Tony kept his head down, his body angled away from her. Even after what she’d put him through, even after months apart his biology still urged him towards his mate and he hated it. “I’m happy here.”
“You aren’t happy here.” Sunset crouched down in front of his chair, brushed her knuckles over his cheek. “Not so far away from your mate, are you? How was your last heat, hm? I’m sure it was terrible without me. Even if you’d found an Alpha to help you at the beginning, it couldn’t have lasted long. Everyone knows a mated Omega stinks if another Alpha tries to knot them. Did you try that? Try letting another Alpha in your bed only to have them gag? Poor Omega, what a sad thing to go through.”

“I don’t stink.” Tony whispered, and despite his reluctance to let anything she said affect him, his feelings were still hurt by the implication that Steve an Alpha would be disgusted by him. “No one has said that I stink.”

“Of course you do.” Sunset laughed a little, her nails biting into his jaw and leaving half-moons printed on his skin. “They just haven’t said anything about it to you. Any other Alpha who even gets close to you would be horrified by how badly you smell once he’s inside you. I’m the only one who will ever think you scent sweet because I’m your mate, and your scent is meant for me alone.”

She leaned in then, tucked her nose behind Tony’s ear and took in a deep breath, humming low in her throat before moving down his neck towards his bonding mark. “It always made me crazy, how good you scent, did you know? Even if we hadn’t been arranged I would have wanted you for—.”

She stopped, and Tony knew she had realized that he didn’t scent the way he was supposed to, the way that a mated Omega was supposed to scent.

“What did you do?” The Alpha asked quietly and fear started curling in Tony’s stomach, fear and maybe just a little bit of pride at having thrown his mate for a loop.

“Omega.” her voice lowered and that little bit of pride washed away in a flood of worry. “What did you do? Why don’t you scent mated?”

A hand at his collar, and before Tony could pull away, Sunset yanked hard enough to pop some of the buttons off, pushing his head to the side so she could get a closer look at his neck.

“What the hell–?” she gasped and ripped the rest of his shirt open. “Tony! What did you do?”

She traced the scars over Tony’s chest, still raised and red and thoroughly obscuring what had once been her family crest inked on his chest. “You tried to erase my mark.” she said in horror and flattened her hand over the curve of his neck. “You cut my bond mark off of you? Why?!”

“I didn’t want it in the first place.” Tony tried to sound brave but his voice wavered when the Alpha’s eyes blurred red, dark and furious. “I didn’t want your mark and I didn’t want people asking questions about it so—”

“You stupid–!” She raised her hand like she was going to slap him, and Tony shrank away, tensing for a blow that never came.

“Oh god, you stupid Omega.” Sunset dragged her hands through her hair and stepped away to pace back and forth. “Oh stop flinching, I have never once raised my hand to you, not once and you know it. Don’t insult me by acting like I’ve ever actually hurt you.”

“You had men hold me down and give me a tattoo!” Tony cried. “How is that not hurting me?”

“Oh god, you stupid Omega.” Sunset dragged her hands through her hair and stepped away to pace back and forth. “Oh stop flinching, I have never once raised my hand to you, not once and you know it. Don’t insult me by acting like I’ve ever actually hurt you.”

“You had men hold me down and give me a tattoo!” Tony cried. “How is that not hurting me?”

“I was claiming you! You are my mate and I can mark you as I wish!” she hissed, baring her teeth in a snarl. “And you have no right to remove it! Look at you! You’re scarred and—and—” she made a face at him. “And ugly. You’re ugly now. My pretty little Omega torn up and scarred because you were angry with me? How do you think that makes me feel, knowing you would hurt yourself
because we had a fight? That you would scar yourself before even attempting to talk things through with me?"

“How does that make you—” Tony shook his head. “I don’t care how it made you feel, Sunset. I don’t care about that.”

“Well you should.” She was back in front of him, putting both hands on his knees and pushing them apart so she could kneel between them, invading his space much like she had back when he’d been willing to share her bed, to share his body, back when he was hers and he had thought she was his. But now he was none of those things now— not willing and not hers, so—

“I don’t care.” He repeated louder, forcing himself to straighten. “I don’t. And it wasn’t a fight, Sunset, you had planned to—”

“We can talk about my plans, later.” The Alpha interrupted him, hooking both hands in his ripped shirt, holding tight so he couldn’t get away. “You know, your little bits of defiance are mildly amusing, they really are. But I didn’t marry you because you were amusing, I married you because I thought we matched well, don’t you think we matched well?”

“We are certainly a beautiful couple, or at least we were—” her lip curled as she looked down at his chest again. “—before you mutilated yourself. Why would you do that to yourself? To me? You knew how it would upset me and you did it anyway.”

“We were an arranged marriage and I didn’t have a choice in the matter.” Tony said wearily, tired of the facade Sunset always kept up, of her sweet words that barely covered the malice, of the way she had always lied so easily and then managed to turn it on him whenever he tried to protest

“You married us to combine fortunes.” He said again, and his mate’s dark eyes flickered red in annoyance. “It was never more than that, so stop pretending we were every happy together and that me leaving came as a shock.”

“Come now.” Sunset lowered her voice to a rumble, coaxing and tempting, knowing that even without a bond mark the Omega wouldn’t be able to ignore the push to submit to his Alpha, their biologies still entwined regardless of how badly Tony had tried to erase it.

“Come now, little Omega, surely the moments we spent in our rooms meant something? The heats we shared? What about the time we—”

“Stop.” Tony shook his head against the memories that flooded him, the intimate memories of times they’d had before when Sunset had actually been a good Alpha to him. “Just stop. What do you want? Why did you track me all the way out West and why did you bring— why did you bring—” he closed his eyes. “Why is Tiberius with you?”

“I thought a friendly face would make you happy!” She exclaimed, frowning at him as if confused. “You and Ty have been friends longer than you and that Rhodey. I thought he’d make you comfortable!”

“The last time I saw Tiberius he told me that if I ever got tired of having a female Alpha he’d show me what a real knot felt like, and you said that you were tempted to let him!” The Omega retorted. “Why would I be happy to see him?”

“Well. He’s been my friend and business partner for a long time so I brought him along on the journey.” Sunset’s voice flattened, lips thinning in disapproval at Tony’s anger. “But you know I was only teasing about that, darling, and if he ever says anything like that to you again, I will rip his
throat out. Does that make you feel better? I will do whatever it takes to keep you safe from now on, Omega.”

“Right.” Tony rubbed at his eyes, suddenly exhausted with the whole ordeal, knowing he wouldn’t win any of these conversations. “You were always a nice balance of strangely protective and borderline abusive, weren’t you?”

Silence in the room, Sunset staring in shock at her mate, Tony refusing to look at her.

“You are not the meek little Omega that I took as mate, are you?” she finally asked. “Being in this dusty little town has given you a backbone, has it? Perhaps I’ll have an equal as a mate now, instead of a burden.”

Tony stayed stubbornly silent.

“Your scars can be covered up with the right clothing and it is simple to put my mark back on your neck when your next heat comes along,” She said decisively. “I’m sure in time I’ll be able to look at you without being hurt over what you did to yourself, but until then we will just have our intimate moments with you mostly covered. That will work, hm?”

Silence from the Omega still.

“We will leave in the morning.” Sunset narrowed her eyes at his lack of reaction. “I’ll take you back to Lofsgren and from there we can go to St. Louis and back home.”

“I have class in the morning.” Tony said dully. “I won’t leave until the afternoon.”

“You don’t have a choice in the matter.” Sunset cocked a brow at him. “I need you back home and as your wife and more importantly your Alpha, I have every right to drag you from Wildrock and onto a train to New York. There isn’t an authority that would stop me, not when I explain how your friend Rhodey took you away from me. Imagine that, another Alpha– a black one nonetheless–taking my sweet Omega from me? I’m simply here to bring you home.”

“You’d make Rhodey the bag guy in this.” Tony stood up and tried to tuck in his tattered shirt. “Of course you would.”

“I’ll do whatever it takes to get you home.” The words were said sweetly but there was an edge of threat to them that Tony couldn’t ignore.

“I know you will.” Tony buttoned his vest over his chest, trying to hide the scars as best he could. “And I know no one would be able to stop you, but I’m telling you I have class in the morning and I will be there to say goodbye to the children. You’ll give me that, at least, since you’ve ruined everything else.”

“That’s–that’s acceptable.” A little too stunned by the defiance from her mate, by the way he looked so weary and resigned but still was so stubborn, Sunset ignored the disobedience. “You may say goodbye to the children. Anyone else you need to say good bye to?”

“No.” Tony headed for the door. “No, no one else will care that I’m gone.”

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“Steve, if you want to go home–” Sam motioned to Clint. “My mate and I will stay here with the
prisoners overnight. There’s no reason for you and Bucky to stay in town, we can run home for a change of clothes and bunk in the back room, keep an eye on everything. Go home and sleep it off. It’s been a long day for everyone.”

“I’ll stay here.” Steve didn’t move from his desk, arms folded stubbornly over his chest, blue eyes stormy. “I won’t sleep anyway, I might as well be useful instead of sulking around the house.”

“Sheriff.” Clint ran his fingers through his already messy hair and took a deep breath. “Sheriff, you know that Tony—Tony didn’t mean to hurt you, right? I’m sure he had every intention of talking to you and all this happened before he got the chance.”

“Stop, Clint.”

“I’m just saying, it’s obvious that he is terrified of both those Alpha’s. Terrified. He must have had a good reason to leave them behind and maybe he was afraid that if you knew about his past you would—”

“Stop, Clint.”

“You can’t honestly think that Tony would actually keep those kind of secrets from you unless there was a good reason!” Clint shouted. “We know him! You know him! There’s no way—”

“I don’t know him!” Steve shouted back, jumping to his feet and smacking both his palms on the desk. “I don’t know him at all. I thought I knew Tony Carbonell, thought I was falling in love with a schoolteacher who had a few secrets! Not a mated Omega who’s married to a wealthy Alpha who has no issue bringing weapons into my town to take what she wants! I don’t even know his real name! I don’t even know his—”

“It’s Anthony Stark.” Tony spoke from the doorway, and Steve’s head snapped around. “My name—my name is Anthony Stark.”

“Tony—” Clint went to hug him, but Sam put a firm hand on his arm and shook his head, glancing meaningfully towards the Sheriff.

“Stark.” Steve repeated, working not to react to the sight of the Omega looking small and vulnerable in the door frame, the light of the lamp throwing shadows across his face, his vest barely covering a torn shirt. “Anthony Stark. The gun makers?”


“Right.” Steve threw his hands up. “Well now I know one thing about you. Excellent.”

“For what it’s worth—” Tony met Sam and Clint’s gaze steadily, Bucky’s pale eyes with a tremulous smile. “I’m sorry for the lies. I didn’t know another way to do this and I didn’t expect to be here long enough for it to matter so—”

“Yeah, Colonel Rhodes told me you planned on leaving.” Steve cut in. “Why didn’t you go?”

“Steve!” Bucky growled, knowing that Steve was hurting, but still upset that he’d take it out on Tony, who was obviously hurting too. “Take it easy!”

“No, I want to know.” Steve’s eyes flashed red in frustration. “Why didn’t you go with him? It was a perfect out, a perfect way to avoid all of this! How were you planning on explaining it to me? Or were you just going to lead me on until you had a chance to leave again?”
“I— I was going to tell you soon.” Tony said woodenly, all the emotion washed from his voice. “Rhodey told me I had to tell you, that I wasn’t being fair and I know I wasn’t being fair. I was going to tell you, Steve, but—”

“But what!!”

Tony jerked away from the anger in Steve’s voice, hunching his shoulders and turning a little as if trying to protect himself. “I was afraid you’d look at me the way you’re looking at me right now.”

It was the flinch more than anything, the way Tony turned as if he needed to protect himself, that struck Steve as wrong.

It was wrong.

Tony went toe to toe with the Alpha Mayor and didn’t back down. He had no issue with telling Steve exactly what he wanted, what he needed. Even when he was sick he had demanded to know why Steve was around, only acquiescing ad being soft after Steve spent hours taking care of him.

Tony wasn’t afraid of anything, yet the arrival of this Alpha– his Alpha– had stripped it all away. Now he cowered from Steve’s anger instead of snapping that Steve needed to back off, that he didn’t understand. There was a layer of dejection to his words that had never been there, a slump to his shoulders that Steve had never seen.

It was wrong.

“How—How am I looking at you?” Steve was nearly whispering then, almost afraid to hear the answer, his anger and frustration bleeding away to soul deep sadness. “How am I looking at you, Tony?”

“Like I’m ugly.” Tony whispered back. “You’re looking at me like I’m ugly and you’ve never looked at me like that before.”

“Tony—” Steve’s mouth opened, his heart breaking, but he didn’t know what else to say. “Tony— I—”

“It’s alright.” Tony’s hand went to his chest unconsciously, pressing over the scars. “It’s alright, Steve, I understand why you feel like this. Can’t say I can blame you either.”

Silence, and after a few seconds, Tony motioned to the door, to the dark street. “I’m just going to— well, anyway. Good night.”

“Let me walk you home, Tony,” Bucky shrugged into his jacket, keeping his tone soft and soothing as he approached the Omega. “It’s dark and you’ve had a long day and—”

“She’ll be mad if I scent like another Alpha.” Tony shook his head, went so far as to take a step away and that stopped Bucky in his tracks, uncomfortable with what looked like fear from his friend. “So thank you, but no thank you.”

“I’ll walk you home then.” Clint snatched his coat and grabbed at Tony’s hand before he could back away. “Come on, baby, I’ll walk with you. She can’t be mad if you scent like an Omega right? No harm there.”

“You don’t have to.” Tony didn’t even make an attempt to smile, his eyes blank in the low light. “I’m fine.”
“No you’re not.” Clint linked their fingers. “Come on.”

They left without another word, Clint shooting his mate a look over his shoulder as he closed the door, and the minute they were gone, both Sam and Bucky turned back to Steve.

“I don’t know.” Steve said in response to their un-asked question. “I don’t know. I have no idea what to think and– and no idea what to do.”

“I think the obvious thing to do is to make sure neither of those Alpha’s get close to Tony again.” Sam said flatly. “Because that Omega barely has a scent at all, but right now he scents like depression and that’s not right.”

“Ain’t right, Stevie.” Bucky echoed. “He’s scared and I don’t think I’ve seen him scared. Do something about it.”

“His Alpha is in town.” Steve raised his eyebrows. “His Alpha, his mate. She has every right to treat him however the hell she wants to and unless he complains about it or I see her hurt him, I have no legal right to intervene.”

“Legal?” Sam ran a hand over his short hair. “Who cares about legal, Sheriff? You see the way his shirt was torn, the way he kept shifting around like he was hurt? She could’a hurt him. The male Alpha might have—”

“Don’t finish that sentence or I’ll lose my mind.” Steve ordered, eyes snapping red and then back to blue almost instantly. “I can’t think about that. Until Tony says anything about not wanting his mate or– or something like that, I have to respect their bond. It’s the law.”

“Stevie—”

“I have to respect their bond!” he said louder. “What kind of Alpha would I be if I broke up a marriage and attempted to ruin a bond because I have feelings for Tony? An Omega that I don’t know at all?”

“You’d be the right Alpha for him because you’d be rescuing him from what is clearly a bad situation.” Sam answered. “Don’t act stupid, Steve, you know that Omega loves you. And after seeing his mate, you also know that he was hiding and that’s the reason for the lies. He had a good reason, Steve.”

“Doesn’t change the fact that I fell in love with someone that doesn’t exist.” Steve said after a long minute. “If he asks me for help, I’ll step in but otherwise– otherwise I can’t. I won’t.”

“He already asked ya for help.” Bucky folded his arms and fixed Steve with a glare. “When that Beta had a gun to his head, Tony cried for you. Not for us, not for Clint, you. He asked ya for help. Don’t be so caught up in right and wrong and the law that you ignore what needs to be done.”

“What needs to be done sometimes has nothin’ to do with the law.” Sam agreed.

“What needs to be done.” Steve fell back into his chair and buried his face in his hands. “Damn it.”

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“Are you gonna be alright, Tony?”
“I’m fine, Clint. I just need some sleep. School day tomorrow. Got to be up early.”

“It’s weird you know, you talking like this?”

“Like what?”

“I dunno. Flat? Empty? Usually you’re so full of piss and vinegar and snark and sass and now you’re just…blank.”

“Sometimes when you feel too much it’s easier to not feel anything at all.”

“Tony–”

“Good night, Clint.”

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Morning came, and Steve was still sitting at his desk staring at a blank spot at the wall.

He’d been up all night thinking about Tony, thinking about that female Alpha that called herself his mate, the male Alpha that wasn’t his mate but was still entirely too familiar with Tony. He thought about how scared Tony had been, how broken he was as he introduced Sunset, how hopeless he had looked standing in their doorway.

Then he thought about the pain in the Omega’s eyes “you’re looking at me like I’m ugly” and wondered how many times Tony had been told that when he lived with Sunset. Let himself wonder for about two seconds about why Tony’s shirt had been torn, but then he couldn’t think about that anymore.

The whole situation was–well, it was the worst and Steve didn’t know what to do.

“You asked to see me, Sheriff?” Yinsen stepped through the door of the office close to lunch time. “Is everything alright?”

“It’s about Tony.” Steve said carefully and watched the Doctor wash pale. “I thought you might have some answers for me. A few things have come up and I know he visited you several times when he first came to Wildrock so I thought–”

“He finally told you about his scars.” Yinsen nodded in understanding and maybe Steve should have corrected him, but at this point he just needed to know things and didn’t care how he got the information. “And you have questions.”

“What can you tell me about them?”

“When Mr. Carbonell–” Yinsen’s eyebrows lowered when Steve grimaced, but he continued, “–first came to Wildrock, he came to me with help dealing with a wound on his chest. It looked like an animal attack, slash marks across his sternum right over a tattoo of his family crest–”

“His family crest?” Steve interrupted. “Inked onto his chest? That seems odd. Have you ever seen that before?”

“I’ve heard of some families who do it.” Yinsen shrugged. “Wealthy ones usually, that old money that can trace itself back to the Mayflower, those types are very proud of their heritage and put their crest on everything, including their mates.”
“Barbaric.” Steve muttered.

“It absolutely is.” Yinsen agreed. “Either way, his was a rather intricate “SB” so you would understand why I was confused upon learning his name was Carbonell, but sometimes they brand Omegas based on which side of the family has the better pedigree—” Steve grimaced again. “—nasty practice of course, but not all that uncommon back East. Goes right along with the arranged marriages in the high society you know.”

“He had an ‘SB’ inked on his chest?” Steve asked, his heart sinking as he started to put the picture together in his head. “And then cuts across it?”

“Five of them, yes, looked like a bear took a swipe at him. Deep too, and relatively fresh so I had to stitch him up. The curious thing was—” Now the doctor hesitated. “And I might be overstepping my boundaries here, but I’m sure you’ve noticed the scars over his bonding spot. I always thought those looked deliberate but Tony told me they were from when he fell after the ‘animal’ attack.”

“Deliberate?” Steve clenched his jaw hard enough he thought he might have cracked a tooth. “He cut across his bonding spot on purpose?”

“You’ll forgive me, Sheriff, because it’s not my business.” Yinsen held up his hands apologetically. “But there are two reasons anyone comes this far West— they are looking for an adventure or they are running away. An Omega showing up with a mutilated brand on his chest and cuts across his bonding spot— he isn’t here looking for an adventure, if you understand my meaning.”

“You knew.” Steve’s voice rose in shock. “You knew he wasn’t just Tony Carbonell, knew he was probably running from a mate and—”

“—and it wasn’t my place to say anything.” the doctor shook his head. “Tony came to me and asked me not to ask questions and I didn’t. I figured he was running from an arranged marriage, maybe an abusive Alpha, but it wasn’t my place to intervene. But since you and he are so close, I figure you know most of it, I could at least fill in a few blanks.”


“The skin wasn’t even healed all the way around the ink. Still puffy and raw around the deeper lines. It was new, which leads me to believe it had been a forced brand, and something he ran from as soon as he could.”

“Jesus Christ.” The Alpha dug his hands into his hair. “Jesus Christ. Forced?”

“He would have asked me to save the brand if he had wanted it.” Yinsen murmured. “But he told me he didn’t care about the stitch job so long as the ink was unreadable.”

“…thank you, Doctor.” Steve said after a moment. “I— I appreciate the information.”

“Be good to him.” Yinsen admonished the Sheriff. “I don’t know the whole story, I don’t know what he’s running from but he will need a good Alpha to help him through it. Be that Alpha, Sheriff. Or when Mr. Carbonell’s past catches up to him, we might not be able to save him at all.”

Steve managed a politely worded good bye, walking with Yinsen to the door and waving him down the street.

Then he took off at a jog towards the school house.

Tony’s past had already caught up to him and Steve had wasted enough time wallowing up in his
own feelings about the whole mess.

It was high time he and Tony had a very honest talk, high time they settled a few things between them and once that was done, Steve was going to take care of Sunset and whoever that other Alpha was.

He was going to run them out of town and then he was going to make that Omega his own and then—

—Something was wrong.

Steve slowed to a walk when he crested the small hill and saw all the children milling about in the school yard.

“Hello RiRi.” he lifted his hand in a curious wave. “Peter, Ned. Michelle, why are you and all the children outside? Is lunch early today?”

“No sir, Sheriff Rogers.” Michelle didn’t look up from her book. “We sat inside this morning for about an hour and Mr. Carbonell never came to class so we thought we could at least play out here until he came down.”

“You haven’t seen him all day?” Steve started running now, dashing around the building and up the stairs to bang on Tony’s door. “Tony! Tony let me in!”

Silence.

“Sweetheart—” a few of the children that had followed him back tittered at the endearment. “Sweetheart, open the door please let me just check on you, you don’t have to let me in but I need to see you.”

Silence.

“Tony I’m going to break down this door if you don’t open up right now!!”

Silence.

“Damn it.” Steve took a deep breath and let the Alpha surge through him before kicking at the door with all his strength, the wood splintering from the blow. “Tony? Tony!”

The apartment was empty.

Horribly, terribly, empty.

There wasn’t a single dish out of the cupboard, which meant Tony hadn’t made breakfast.

The bed was still made, which meant he probably hadn’t slept in it at all the night before.

All his clothes were still in the dresser, his toothbrush dry in the bathroom, the blankets folded neatly on the couch, the stack of homework he had graded before dinner last night stacked on the table.

But Tony— Tony was gone.

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Bucky almost fell off his chair in surprise when the door to the office slammed open and Steve
“Stomped through.”

“Stevie,” he said in concern, following the Sheriff back to the back room. “How did the talk with Yinsen go? Did he have any answers about Tony or that Alpha or—”

“Tony’s gone.” Steve spun the combination on the gun locker and wrenched it open, grabbing two rifles and an extra shoulder holster for a pistol. “Probably got snatched last night, but definitely before school this morning.”

“What?!” Bucky started grabbing guns of his own, adding a third revolver to his two, the sawed off shotgun and a belt of slugs. “Stevie what the hell?”

“I don’t know what happened?” Steve loaded the rifles as fast as he could and glanced around for more bullets. “But I’m about to go un-do it.”

“I’m with you.” Bucky crammed his hat onto his head as they marched back through the front office, nearly bowling Clint over as they went.

“Whoa, hey, where is the cavalry going?” Clint yelped when Steve shoved past him. “What’s going on?”

“Tony’s gone!” Bucky shouted over his shoulder as they ran for the horses. “Gonna check the hotel first and then we’re gonna chase them down!”

“I’m coming too!” Clint spun right back around and headed out the door with them. “Wait up!”

“No you’re not.” Sam grabbed his mate and pulled him back to the office. “No you’re not, you’re going to stay here in case anything happens, I’m going to call Happy and have him come stay with you and help out here.”

“Sam!”

“Omega.” Sam twisted his mate around. “We have no idea how many men Sunset brought with her, and I won’t be able to concentrate on the fight if I’m worried about you. Stay here.”

“I’m more than capable of holding my own!” Clint argued. “Tony is my friend too! Don’t leave me out of this because you are afraid of—”

“This is the one and only time I’ll ever tell you this.” Sam whispered, and his eyes flashed red. “Stay here, Omega. Do as your Alpha says.”

Clint went pliant immediately, tipping his head back to show off his mating mark in a submissive gesture, even as his eyes sparked angrily over the command.

“I love you.” Sam kissed him for a long minute. “And I won’t survive losing you so I need you to hold it down here, alright? We’ll bring Tony home and then you can spend a week telling me exactly how I can make it up to you for using an Alpha command?”

“Two weeks.” Clint corrected, still angry but knowing Sam had a valid reason for telling him to stay, and when Sam kissed him again, Clint kissed his Alpha right back.

“Two weeks.”

“Bring him back.”
“I will.”

“Sam!” Steve yelled from the front, his rifle held loosely in one hand, Nomad prancing anxiously beneath him. “You coming?”

“I’m coming, Sheriff.” Sam kissed his mate one more time. “Let’s go get us a schoolteacher.”
Chapter 17

The Beta girl at the front desk of the Lofsgreen hotel screamed when the door kicked in and three Alpha’s pushed through, all carrying rifles, all with pistols in their holsters, all with scowls on their face.

“Ma’am.” Steve tipped his hat and forced something that resembled a smile to his face. “I need you to tell me if the lady Alpha and all her friends are still staying in this hotel, and if they aren’t here? I need you to tell me where they went and I need you to tell me now.”

“S-Sorry, sir.” she stared up at him with wide eyes. “I don’t know who you mean.”

“Lady Alpha.” Sam cut in. “Real tall, really pretty, real dangerous. Had a pack of about half a dozen Beta’s with her, another male Alpha who was more like her whipping boy. I know you know who I am talking about.”

“No, no I’m really sure I don’t remember–”

“Beta!” The word ripped over a growl and Steve’s eyes snapped red. “However bad she is? I can promise you I am worse. You tell me where she went now.”

“Tell us, sweetheart.” Bucky had the terrifying ability to look perfectly calm, perfectly casual right before he hurt someone. His voice was honey smooth, his smile almost friendly, and his eyes weren’t even red but they sparked furious and the Beta swallowed hard, backing away a few steps. “Tell us, or the Sheriff here might just burn your hotel down, ya know? You ever been real close to a real big fire?”

“Bucky.” Sam said quietly. “Easy does it. She’s not involved in this.”

“Maybe she is, maybe she ain’t.” Bucky shrugged and leaned against the desk, causing the girl to back up even further. “There’s only one way to find out, huh?”

“Oh my god, don’t hurt me.” she whimpered. “Um the um– the lady Alpha she came back late last night, grabbed her things and left again. I swear. She was with the male and they were saying—”

“What were they saying?!” Steve didn’t mean to roar, or maybe he did, maybe he wanted to scare her badly enough that she started crying and any other time the Sheriff would have felt bad about it. Any other time he would have clocked a man who yelled at a woman just to make her cry, but right now? All he knew was that he was desperate to find news about Tony and if this Beta was keeping anything from him—

“They-they-they were saying something about heading north to the rails.” She hiccuped, wiping at her eyes. “That someone was grabbing the Omega and would meet them. That’s all I know.”

“So they planned it last night.” Sam said grimly, and Steve banged his fist on the counter, cursing under his breath. “Were probably waiting to snatch Tony after Clint dropped him off at his apartment.”

“Knew I shoulda walked him home.” Bucky muttered, crossing the lobby to peer out the windows. “Could’ve stopped this shit before it happened and got the Alpha all at the same time. Stevie, there’s no rails north of Wildrock, you know?”
“There aren’t any rails north of Wildrock.” Steve turned back to the Beta at the desk. “Change your story and give me the correct one.”

“I swear!” she was sobbing now, scared for her life in the presence of three furious Alphas. “I swear, they said north to the railway and I thought it was weird because there isn’t anything on the map north of us! I swear! I don’t know anything else!”

“Sounds awful suspicious t’me.” Bucky said from the window, fixing the Beta with a glare. “Who’s to say she’s not part of the gang? We should drag her back to Wildrock and let her sit behind bars for a few days until–”

“Get away from the window!” she blurted out and the three Alpha’s heads snapped around to stare at her in confusion. “Oh god get away from the window they set up an ambush and are waiting to–”

The window shattered into a million pieces, glass flying everywhere and before Steve or Sam could even react, Bucky was blown off his feet by a rifle blast, thudding onto the floor and bellowing over the pain.

“Down down down!” Steve shouted, diving over the counter and taking the Beta girl to the floor with him when bullets started flying, punching holes in the hotel walls and destroying the other windows as they went.

“You stay here.” he ordered her. “Don’t stand up until we say it’s clear, do you understand?”

“I’m so sorry! I’m so sorry they said if I talked to you or kept you in here too long they would start firing at me that’s why I was trying to get you to leave!” She was babbling, panicking. “There’s over a dozen men in there, they only took half the gang with them! They said if the Sheriff came in to tell you that the Omega was back in Wildrock already, I’m so sorry I’m so sorry–”

“Hey!” Steve clamped a hand over her mouth, working to keep his voice calm despite Bucky crying out behind him and bullets spraying the air around them. “Hey. It’s not your fault, right? You didn’t know, you’re terrified, no one blames you.”

“I–I–I–”

“Stay here.”

Steve didn’t wait for her to answer before scrambling out from behind the desk and trying to get to Bucky, he and Sam both army-crawling across the floor with their heads down, not bothering to return fire yet when they couldn’t even see where the bullets were coming from.

“Bucky!” Sam reached the Alpha first and rolled him over, cursing at the blood soaking the front of Bucky’s shirt. “Where is it? Where are you hit?”

“My arm.” Bucky snapped through clenched teeth, the pain turning his eyes red, the words barely decipherable through a growl. “Left one. Shoulder. Shattered something, I can’t move it, Sam.”

“Don’t worry about trying to move it.” Steve stripped off his belt and motioned for Sam’s as well, linking them together. “Sam’s gonna help you sit up, I’m going to get your arm strapped to your side and we’re going to get the hell out of here.”

“Stevie–” Bucky winced a round came too close to them, ripping into the ground just a foot away. “Stevie, I said I can’t move it, not that I’m useless. Give me a rifle and help me over somewhere I can get these sons a’bitches. Ain’t never left a fire fight, ain’t gonna start now.”
Steve waited until the hail of bullets paused for a few seconds as gang across the street reloaded, then nodded, jaw set. “Alright then. Sam, put Bucky at the table in the corner, he can put his weight on the wall so he can still shoot. You take the window diagonal from him, lay down cover fire with the pistols.”

“On it, Sheriff.” Sam paused midway to helping Bucky up. “Wait, where are you gonna be?”

“I’ll be busy.” Steve grabbed the shotgun and tossed Bucky the rifle. “Cover me.”

“Stevie!” Bucky shouted as Steve took off at the front door. “God dammit get your ass back here!”

“Where the hell is he going?! What does he mean cover me?!” Sam dove for the window to start trying to cover Steve as best as possible, which was easier said than done when Steve was weaving and diving and ducking and dodging and generally getting in the way every time Sam tried to fire. “What is he doing?!”

“He’s doing what he always does!” Bucky groaned as he brought the rifle up to his right shoulder. “Running into fucking battle as if he’s invincible when the only reason he doesn’t get his ass shot is because I—” he lined up a shot out the window and bang!—someone across the street started screaming. “—was the best —” another bang! Another scream. “—sniper in the Army—” bang! No scream and Bucky frowned, staring down his sights again. “—on both sides—” bang! Scream. “—of the Mason Dixon!”

“I’ve worked with the Sheriff for damn near six years.” Sam ducked beneath the wall to reload. “And I’ve never seen him—” a quick peek over the sill. “Yep, he just blasted the door open and charged right in. I should go after him.”

“Don’t bother.” Bucky grunted as he took another shot. “He hasn’t died yet, ain’t gonna be a rag tag group’a Beta’s that takes him out.”

“You just let him do this?!” Sam jammed a round in and jumped back up, both revolvers firing one right after another. “Why don’t you stop him?!”

“Have you met him?!” Bucky hit the floor when a bullet whizzed by his ear, and almost screamed when he landed on his left shoulder. “YOU TRY AND STOP HIM!!!”

“Aw shit.” Sam holstered the revolvers and dashed over to try and help him back up. “We’ve got to put a stop to this before you bleed out or the Sheriff get’s killed or—”

Sudden silence, ringing loud in their ears after all the noise and the two deputies froze, staring at each other in concern.

“That’s— that’s not good.” Sam propped Bucky up and crept back to the window, peeking over the edge to see what was going on, a hand hovering over his gun. “I count six bodies in the street, one half out the door, another out the window and—”

There was a crash, a blood curdling scream, and a man came flying from the top window, splatting onto the dusty street below.

“Damn it.” Bucky cracked a relieved grin. “He loves throwing shit. Haven’t seen him toss a guy through a window in years.”

“You and I should get a beer.” Sam finally relaxed when Steve came barging out of the opposite building and stomping across the street. “I feel like there’s a lot of things we don’t talk about.”
“Stevie doesn’t like to talk about the war.” Bucky grimaced as he tried to get comfortable against the wall, the color washing from his face as the shock wore off and the pain set in again, sharp and hot and horrible. “Doesn’t like what he hadta do during it, doesn’t like th’ instincts it gave him, how mean he is when he gets mad.”

A shaky breath, the Alpha’s eyes flickering closed. “But he’s happy for it now, ya know? Gonna take all that and more t’get his Omega back.”

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Sunset drummed her fingers on the table between the seats in the train car, long nails clicking noisily on the wood, but the Omega across from her didn’t even glance her way.

“We could have avoided all of this, you know.” She broke the silence first. “You’re upset with me, but it’s not like it had to happen this way.”

Tony turned to look at her and Sunset was taken aback by the blankness in his gaze. “You’re right. It didn’t have to happen this way, you could have let me say goodbye to my students like you said you would.”

“Oh.” She shrugged his comment off. “I thought that was a metaphorical thing, like perhaps you wanted to walk through the school room one more time before leaving. I didn’t think you meant you wanted to actually say goodbye to them. You haven’t been here long enough for it to matter anyway, they won’t miss you.”

The Omega opened his mouth like he was going to answer, but only sighed and looked away again, unconsciously tugging at his shirt and vest as he stared out the window.

Two Beta males had been waiting for him in his apartment after Clint had walked him home last night, and before he’d even registered the scent of stranger in his home, one had grabbed him and put a hand to his mouth so he wouldn’t scream, the other keeping an eye out the window until Clint had disappeared over the hill towards town.

Then they had tied his hands, stuffed a gag in his mouth and dragged him away.

In the dark, Tony had been completely disoriented, forced to hold onto the Beta in front of him so he wouldn’t fall off the horse when they took off from Wildrock, heading north into the wilderness. And maybe he had fallen asleep, or passed out, or something along those lines, but suddenly there had been a train where there wasn’t supposed to be a train, a set of tracks that Tony hadn’t known existed this close to Wildrock.

The Betas had wrestled him unceremoniously into one of the railroad cars and the train had taken off and now they were puffing along through the plains, twisting around the hills and Tony had no idea where they were, or where they were going and he was terrified.

He was still in the torn clothes from the night before, exhausted and hungry and reeling from how quickly everything had gone to shit and dealing with Sunset’s manipulation, with the way she twisted everything in some sort of game that only she knew the rules to–

–Tony was too tired for that.

“You’re upset with me.” she spoke first again. “And I don’t understand why. You leaving nearly ruined my life, darling, if anyone should be upset it should be me. I would have been perfectly fine
letting you play school teacher for a little bit if you hadn’t been so malicious and selfish over simple little things. Such a vindictive Omega, I’m honestly shocked by you.”

“Don’t pretend you are emotional over what we had.” he answered quietly, wearily. “Even when it was good, it wasn’t ever that good.”

“Oh no, I’m not emotional over you.” Finally some truth from the Alpha, her voice hardening in annoyance. “I’m emotional over your money. Neat trick you did, making it impossible for me to touch even once cent of your fortune. You’ve always been clever for an Omega, but this was—” her eyes flickered red. “—this was outright cruel.”

Tony tried not to look too proud in case it riled the Alpha up more, but he couldn’t help a tiny, satisfied smile.

“When did you discover what I did?” he couldn’t help asking. “Once you realized I was gone, how did you wait before trying to rob me blind?”

“Rob you blind?? As your Alpha I am entitled to everything you own!” The words were nearly a snarl, Sunset’s calm composure slipping in her anger. “You had no right to draw up papers like that! What were you thinking, giving the rights to your money away! Keeping me locked from properties unless you were there with me? You have no right!”

“I have every right.” Tony replied coolly, if not triumphantly. “The law states that an Alpha must be first and foremost on any property holdings and money owned by an Omega. Rhodey is an Alpha. I’m not breaking any law by giving that Alpha control over my liquid assets as well as naming him on the deeds of my properties.”

“When I went to the bank—” her eyes sparked again. “—the manager told me that not only was I not allowed to touch your money, but also that even if you fell very sick and couldn’t make decisions or even in the event of your death that every penny that isn’t tied into the business would go to Colonel Rhodes and his family.”

“Yes.” Tony took a closer look at his mate, at the worry she was failing to hide. “Why does this matter, Sunset? You have your own fortune. Tiberius has his own fortune. Why would you need mine? Even if I died and everything went to Rhodey, you wouldn’t be anything close to destitute. Why does this matter?”

It was the Alpha’s turn to be silent, her jaw set stubbornly and Tony’s eyes widened in a flash of realization.

“You came to get me because you need something, otherwise you would have left me alone in Wildrock. Do you need money? Why do you need money?”

She pursed her lips but didn’t answer.

“Oh no.” Tony slumped back into his chair. “The railroad investment with Hammer Industries. You took it, didn’t you? His new engines and the track set to tunnel through the mountains. Surely you didn’t invest all your money in—”

Sunset growled and his jaw dropped. “I told you not to even go near him! It was a sketchy deal based off of wild speculation! It was doomed to fail!”

“Yes.” she said stiffly. “But the day I take business advice from an Omega—”

“It has nothing to do with whether or not I’m an Omega!” Tony cried. “Hammer’s designs are faulty
“and he cuts corners in production and he uses slave labor even though it’s outlawed. The entire
situation was awful from every angle and you still went through with it!”

“The return would have been in the millions.” Sunset argued half heartedly. “And I don’t care about
the slaves, no harm done in those lives lost but—”

“Lives lost.” Tony repeated. “What do you mean lives lost?”

Tiberius walked in just then, frowning over the argument. “What are you two shouting about? I
could hear you in the other car.” He went to sit down on the bench next to Tony, but Sunset growled
warningly, so he chose a seat across the aisle.

“What are you two shouting about?” he asked again, shooting the female Alpha a cross look. He
wasn’t exactly thrilled to have been treated like a second class citizen for most of this cross country
trip, and was even less thrilled about it happening in front of an Omega. “Telling him about the deal
with Hammer, are you?”

“I was starting to, yes.” Sunset answered frostily. “And then you interrupted.”

“Bum deal, really.” Tiberius opened the cupboard built into the side of the car and pulled a bottle of
scotch from it, pouring himself a healthy amount. “Not only did that blighter take my money and her
money, but then the damn drill—”

“Good Christ.” Tony covered his mouth.

“—got no more than a hundred yards into the mountain digging that tunnel and the whole thing blew.
Caused a cave in, bits of drill every where, lost something like two or three dozen—”

“Two or three dozen?!”

“Don’t know exactly how many, and don’t care all that much.” He shrugged off Tony’s outrage.
“Can’t blame us, really, the plans looked solid and he promised his engines were top of the line so—”

“My engines are top of the line!” Tony jumped up from his chair and started pacing the length of the
rail car, tugging at his hair in frustration. “My engines are top of the line. Hammer’s designs are
knock offs of my own. Not the same quality, not the same parts. My engine design is what keeps the
trains running across this country, and every time his have tried to compete they have failed!”

“Well, your engines weren’t available to us.” Sunset cut back in. “See what your little trick with your
money cost? Since we weren’t allowed to use the higher quality Stark engines for this business
venture, or use the money to build more in your factories, we had to settle for second best and
people died because of it.”

“Don’t you dare try to turn this on me as if it was my fault.” Tony outright snarled at the two
Alpha’s. “Don’t you dare. Hammer’s idea was a terrible plan for about a thousand different reasons
and yet you went ahead and did it anyway and now men are dead. Men are dead and less
importantly, you are broke. All because you wouldn’t listen to me. Because you would rather ruin
things than take an Omega’s advice.”

Tony shook his head and dropped into a chair some distance away from them. “I can’t believe—”

“Well you know what they say about hindsight being perfect and all that.” Sunset motioned for
Tiberius to bring her a drink. “And as it is, I’ve barely got a penny to my name and since I apparently
can only access your money if you, my mate, are there with me— you can see I had no choice but to
come and get you.”
Tony was quiet for a long time, trying to work through everything they had told him, to piece together the story from their most likely less than accurate retelling.

He was missing something, something important.

Yes, Sunset didn’t have access to his money without him, but she owned properties and businesses that she could liquidate to make sure she wasn’t, in fact, penniless. The business deal going sour with Hammer and costing so many lives– it was awful, but worse had happened with the investors walking away with barely a blemish on their reputation.

No, something else was going on, some other reason why she needed him home.

Tony just had to figure out what it was.

“Where are we?” he asked, changing the subject. “This train track shouldn’t exist here, so where are we?”

“This is my private track, darling.” Sunset drained her drink and motioned for another. “The Bain’s have always needed round about ways to move our cargo across the territories, and this one runs just north of the main lines. I’m a little surprised you didn’t know about it, as much snooping as you tried to do into my business before we were wed.”

“A private track?”

“Yes, of course. I couldn’t take you on the one that is closest to Wildrock, now could I? That would be the first place your Sheriff would look for you.”

“…my Sheriff?”

“You think I didn’t see the way he looked at you?” her eyes glittered maliciously. “You think I don’t recognize the look of an Alpha who wants something he can’t have? I am well aware that your Sheriff will be coming after you, and I plan to have you very far away as soon as possible.”

Tony shrank away from the danger in her tone, a cold sort of dread settling in his stomach.

Steve wouldn’t be coming after him, not after all the lies and heartbreak and months of being led on, just to realize that Tony wasn’t the Omega he had fallen for.

No, Steve wasn’t going to come after him, and Tony hated himself for even hoping.

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Bucky knew without asking that Yinsen was going to take his arm, and his voice was strong as he ordered everyone out of the room.

“I’ll stay.” Steve said stubbornly, already positioning himself at the end of the operating table so he could hold Bucky still. “You don’t have to do this alone, Buck, let me–”

“Get out.” Bucky growled, his eyes hazy from the whiskey they’d been pouring down his throat to dull the pain. “Stevie get out, don’t want no one in here when he–”

“You heard him, Sheriff Rogers.” Natasha swept into the room with a fresh glass of whiskey in one hand and a cigarette in the other. “Get out. I’ll stay with Deputy Barnes.”
“Natasha.” For the first time since taking the bullet, Bucky looked afraid, twitching away from the Omega and looking as if he wanted to hide. “No, I don’t want anyone here to see—”

“Tough.” Closer now, Bucky could see that Natasha was very very pale, her lips pursed and hands trembling. “If you think I’m going to sit out in that room there and wait for—” she stopped, took a quick breath in. “Would you like me at your head or holding your hand?”

“Natasha—”

“Would you like me at your head or holding your hand?” She repeated, and even though her voice never wavered or raised in pitch, neither of the men in the room were going to risk arguing.

“My head.” Bucky whispered. “Please.”

Natasha tossed back the rest of her drink, dropped the cigarette in it, and moved to stand at the Alpha’s head, weaving her small hands into his hair and bending down to touch their foreheads together.

“I’m right here, my love.” she whispered. “I’m right here with you.”

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When Happy came to the surgery, Clint had his face buried in Sam’s shoulder, and the Alpha was soothing him with soft noises and gentle rumbles.

Steve still had tears tracking down his face, his arms crossed and shoulders hunched as he sat at the table, and the blacksmith’s heart sank.

“I heard about Barnes.” he said quietly. “They had to take his arm?”

No one said anything, and that was enough of an answer.

“Real sorry to hear that.” Happy cleared his throat. “Sheriff, not to distract from the moment—”

“Please distract from the moment.” Clint interrupted. “Because I’ve never even heard Bucky sound scared and I just had to listen to him scream so—”

“Shhh, shhh.” Sam cuddled him close again, dotting kisses over his face. “Shhh, my mate.”

“Distract us.” Steve forced himself to sit back, running his hands down his thighs anxiously. “What d’ya have for me?”

“You said that one of the men you talked to in Lofsgreen mentioned a secret rail Sunset has?” Happy asked, taking the chair across from Steve at the table. “Right?”

“The Beta at the hotel said something about it.” Sam frowned over Clint’s head. “But not any of the—”

“Right before I threw that guy out the window he told me the same thing.” Steve interrupted. “She’s got some line that runs parallel to the main rails but further north.”

“The Sheriff threw someone out a window?” Clint frowned at his mate. “Really?”

“That’s a story for later.” Sam shook his head. “Happy, did you find anything out? Seems far fetched
to me, an Alpha from back East having her own personal rail? She might be wealthy but I don’t think she’s *that* wealthy, the President doesn’t even have his own lines this far West.”

“Yeah but the lengths a bad guy will go through to cover their tracks?” Happy raised his eyebrows. “Sunset has a lot of secrets she doesn’t need out there for everyone to see, a personal railway is the perfect way to make sure no one looks.”

“How do you know all this?” Steve asked, drumming his fingers on the table. “If we didn’t know about a rail less than a hundred miles north of us, how did you—”

“Oh, I don’t know anything.” Happy stood back up, went to open the door, motioning someone through. “But I know someone who knows just about *everything*.”

“I wouldn’t say I know everything, darling.” Came the reply, and the other three men in the room looked up in shock when the very prim, very proper, very unexpected Pepper Potts stepped into the room. “But I do know an awful lot.”

“Sheriff, Sam and Clint.” Happy tucked Pepper’s hand into his elbow. “You all know my Omega, Ms. Potts.”

“Gentlemen, always a pleasure.” She smiled congenially, never minding their outright flabbergasted expressions, and stood on her toes to kiss Happy’s cheek. “My sweet Alpha, would you pour me a drink while I talk to the Sheriff?”

“Yes ma’am.” Happy kissed her back and led her to the chair before heading for the whiskey.

“Um—” Clint blinked at her, then over at Happy, then back at her. “*What*?”

“Ms. Potts.” Steve finally smiled a little bit. “All the times Happy has spoken about his Omega, I never thought it would be you.”

“Well I don’t see why not.” The pretty Omega tucked a strand of red hair behind her ear. “We’re so obviously perfectly matched.”

“Obviously.” Steve’s smile grew. “You have some information for me?”

“Yes, quite a bit actually.” Pepper opened the briefcase at her feet and pulled out a folded map. “I’m afraid I wasn’t entirely truthful with you, Sheriff, when we had tea and chatted about how well I know Mr. Carbonell—” She paused. “Or rather, Mr. Stark, since that little secret seems to be out in the open.”

“What?” Steve growled, and Happy put a warning hand on the Sheriff’s shoulder before handing his Omega her glass of whiskey.

“Thank you, sweetheart.” Pepper tossed the entire glass back in one go and Clint’s eyes nearly bugged from his head. “Yes. I’m the one who set Tony up here as a schoolteacher, and helped him with his cover identity and money issues but that’s all a topic for another time, because you don’t care about that, do you?”

“The hell I don’t–!” Steve started to object and the Omega shook her head, cutting him off.
“No, Sheriff Rogers, you don’t care about all that. What you care about is right here.” She stabbed a finger at a spot a few notches above Wildrock on the map. “Because this? This is the ‘secret’ rail belonging to one Mrs. Sunset Bain. Except it isn’t as secret as she thinks it is, because I know every twist and turn and stop along the way.”

“This, gentlemen, is my personal map of this part of the territories, the area North and North east of us and I have another heading West but I don’t think we need it.” Pepper trailed her finger along the line of the rail. “You can be assured that I have every single one of my maps detailed down to the tiniest square inch.”

“The government doesn’t even maps this specific.” Sam interjected. “How do you have them? Why do you have them? No offense meant, but what is a socialite doing with maps this detailed? What purpose could you possibly have for owning them?”

“Oh.” Pepper smiled politely. “Oh that’s right, you all think I’m just some pretty socialite who got tired of living in the city and moved here for the adventure. Well that’s only partly true.”

“This is a mine, right here.” She pointed to an ‘x’ on the map. “And here is another. Gold, here. Gemstones from this one. Oil, here, even though I am still trying to figure out how to process it. Another mine here, one more here. Deputy Wilson, I have very detailed maps of this part of the country because I own this part of the country and I like to be very informed of what belongs to me.”

“Wait.” Clint narrowed his eyes. “You mean you own– you? You own all of this? All the land surrounding Wildrock?”

“Most of it.” Pepper touched the strand of jewels around her neck. “You didn’t think I lived all the way out here because I liked the weather, did you?”

“So you know the route of Sunset’s railway because you own the land it sits on.” Steve’s expression cleared, a tiny bit of hope in his eyes. “That means I can bring Tony home.”

“Yes, Sheriff. That’s exactly what it means.” The Omega folded her hands primly. “Bring Tony home, and if Sunset dies in the process… well. No tears shed, here.”

Even Happy seemed a little alarmed at that, and Pepper shrugged. “Don’t look so surprised, my love. She was a bitch when we were debutantes together, and she’s a bitch now. Leave her tied to a cactus or something.”

Then she smiled sweetly and reached over to pat Steve’s hand. “When this is all over, you’ll come for tea, won’t you?”

“Uh–yes?”

“Wonderful.”

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Bucky woke up slowly, groggily, painfully, and when he groaned quietly, there was a soft hand at his cheek, a glass of water held to his lips so he would drink.

“N-Natasha.” Bucky said hoarsely, and she tilted the glass so he would drink again. “What are you doing here?”
“Did you think I’d leave you?” Natasha busied herself pouring a fresh glass of water, but Bucky caught the flash of hurt in her green eyes. “Honestly, Deputy Barnes, sometimes I think you have a low opinion of me.”

“That’s not what I–” The words failed when Bucky went to move, went to reach for her and couldn’t.

“Oh no,” he choked out, his right hand reaching to hold the stump that was everything left of his left arm. “No no no.” Bucky tried to move again, to shift on the bed, and bit his lip bloody so he wouldn’t shout, falling back onto the pillows with a curse. “My arm. God damn it.”

“Shhh.” Natasha was back at his side when tears started spilling down the Alpha’s face, his teeth gritting in a fresh wash of pain. “Oh no, no shhh don’t cry. It isn’t all terrible.”

She placed her own hand over his, covering the bandages. “It was as clean as we could hope for, and the doctor says you will heal just fine.” She kissed his forehead, smoothed the hair from his face. “Shhh, don’t worry, don’t worry, you will heal. It isn’t as terrible as it seems.”

“Not as terrible as it seems?” Bucky repeated miserably, turning his face away. “I’m not whole anymore, Tasha. They took my arm.”

“That doesn’t matter.” Natasha forced a lightness to her voice so she wouldn’t cry as well, pulling on every bit of her strength to not break down, to be strong when he needed her to be. “That doesn’t matter, you are more of an Alpha than half the men in this town whether you have all your limbs or not.”

Bucky didn’t answer, still turned away, and the Omega took a deep breath in before leaning close and murmuring. “If it was between taking your arm or losing you entirely, I’d want them to take your other one, too. You’re still here, and that’s all I care about.”

“Was planning on asking you to be mine, Tasha.” Bucky whispered, starting to tremble as being awake without pain medication started taking its toll. “But I can’t do that now, can I? You don’t want an Alpha who can’t hold you the way you want to be held.”

“Deputy Barnes, you don’t know the first thing about how I want to be held.” she tried to sound teasing, but it only came out heartbroken. “Use your words and ask me.”

“…what?”

“Use your words and ask me how I want to be held.” She sat as light as she could on the side of the bed so she could see him better. “Ask me.”

Silence between them, the Alpha’s breath coming hard and anxious, the Omega barely breathing at all as she waited.

“How– how do you want to be held, Natasha?”

“Like you love me.” The words broke over a sob and Bucky’s eyes flew open when he heard her crying. “I want to be held like you love me and you can do that perfectly well with one arm.”

“Are you– are you sure?” Barely daring to hope, Bucky brought his right hand up to brush a tear from her cheek. “Tasha–”

The Omega didn’t answer, only turned her nose into his palm and purred, the sound shaky and uncertain and gorgeous and Bucky fit his palm to the back of her neck and pulled her down against
him until their noses bumped.

“Tasha, I–”

“Shhh, my love.” Bucky *growled* over the endearment and the purr grew stronger. “You don’t have to say anything else. I *know*.”

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When Clint peeked in on them an hour later, Natasha was curled into Bucky’s good side, her head over his heart and their legs entwined.

He tiptoed in to cover them with a blanket, checked to make sure Bucky had taken the laudanum the doctor had left, and tiptoed back out, heading down to the Sheriff’s station.

“When Buck ain’t gonna like us taking off without him.” Sam was saying as Clint came in the door. “When he wakes up, he’s going to beat your ass.”

“When Bucky wakes up he’s going to have a lap full of Natasha.” Clint picked up a rifle to clean, breaking it down easily. “I don’t think he will be thinking about Steve for a while.”

“Good.” Steve grunted, hastily throwing an extra set of clothes in a bag along with the rest of his supplies. “Because by the time he *does* get around to being mad at me, I plan to be right back here with Tony at my side. Clint, you gonna ride with us?”

“Of course I am.” Clint didn’t even look up from the rifle. “You aren’t leaving me behind this time. Bucky’s safe, Happy can hold down the station if we need to, and since Ms. Potts is apparently staying with Happy, she’s got six bodyguards in town as well. And when I say body guards–” he reached for a rag. “I mean, men who probably got drummed out of the army for being unnecessarily rough and are now protecting the most mysterious woman in the world. Wildrock is fine, I am going with you guys.”

“Alright then.” Steve nodded firmly. “We’re leaving in an hour, so go home and get a few days worth of supplies and–”

“You need to go to Tony’s apartment and get him some clothes.” Clint interrupted, and when the Alpha’s looked at him in confusion, he explained, “Most likely Tony never even got a chance to change, which means he’s wearing those clothes she tore up, yeah? And if she bought him *new* clothes, he will feel gross wearing them. Steve, bring him his own clothes from home, put them next to your things so when he puts them on it’s comforting and it scents like you.”

“That’s a good idea.” Sam rumbled approvingly in his mate’s direction. “Clint’s right, Tony won’t want to wear anything she buys him, and something that is both familiar and scents like you will help settle him.”

“Clothes it is.” Steve hefted his bag over his shoulder. “One hour, yeah? Then we ride.”

“Yee-haw.” Clint sounded like he was teasing, but the Omega’s eyes were sparking dangerously. “We got a train to catch.”
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

We learn some more of why Sunset is basically The Worst, some sweetness between FalconHawk and some insight into Steve’s behavior, and then Pepper being the shockingly bloodthirsty girl we all love and then a surprise mention of someone awesome.

Sunset’s private train had only four cars behind the engine– the sitting room the Beta’s had tossed Tony into the first night, a sleeping car complete with a bathroom, a dining room with a small kitchen, and a fourth that Tony wasn’t allowed in.

“You don’t get to know all my secrets, darling.” When Tony asked about the fourth car, Sunset only waved him off. “I use this track for most of my business and I know you wildly disapprove of most of my business, so there’s no need to peek behind door number four, hm?”

“Door number three it is.” Tony muttered, and headed for the bathroom in the sleeping car, giving the bed a wide berth as he went, eyeing it uncomfortably.

Tony hadn’t been a virgin when on his wedding day, or at least not really. He was an Omega, after all, and the constant need to touch and be touched was one that he had soothed over and over in the arms of other Omegas, working through their heats together, snuggling in bed, doing the sort of things he and Clint did with their tongues and their fingers and toys.

Sunset had been his first Alpha, though, the first knot he’d ever taken and their wedding night had been… it had been fine. She had been gentle when she took him as mate, and gentle every time after, but it hadn’t been very long before Tony realized something was… missing.

And as time went on, Tony had realized what was missing was love.

When he was with an Omega friend or two curled together in bed, there was always an element of genuine affection between them, snuggles and quiet talks, easy laughter and teasing smiles, but that was missing from his marriage to the Alpha. Sunset didn’t love him, probably didn’t even like him much, and the longer they were married, the more painfully obvious it became.

She was always willing to tumble into bed with him if he was feeling amorous or needy, but unless he was in heat, she left the bed as soon as they were finished, rarely even undressing all the way, and never initiating their moments together. Her touches were satisfactory but perfunctory, the bare minimum needed to bring her mate to pleasure, and each emotionally empty encounter left a hollow ache in Tony’s chest.

At first Tony had been confused, thinking that he wasn’t as attractive as he should be for his mate, that maybe he needed to do more to entice her, so he started buying and wearing lacy things, lower cut shirts, showing off the bonding mark on his neck in a clear attempt to woo his Alpha to his side. It might be an arranged marriage, but it was still something Tony had been willing to try at.

But Sunset hadn’t wanted to try, and he had been hurt, watching her so blatantly admire other Omegas while all but ignoring him. When he confronted her, Sunset had laughed in his face, teasing
him about being a petty, jealous Omega and telling him he was adorable when he was oblivious.

Tony Stark was anything but oblivious, and after he got over his hurt, he was furious with her for going through with the arranged marriage, for not only marrying him but trapping him with a bond that she so obviously didn’t care about at all. As wealthy, powerful Alpha she could have stepped back, released him from the arranged engagement and they both could have survived the resulting social condemnation before stepping back into their usual roles.

But she hadn’t. Sunset had gone through with it anyway and Tony had been trapped and furious.

It was then, faced with his anger, that the true side of Sunset had come out— all malicious smiles and cutting words and manipulative conversations. She was ice cold one moment, and then flirty and playful the next. Demanding absolute obedience in public, then telling him he was too meek when they were in private. His snarky, sassy, bold side— the one that had delighted Steve so much— was crushed beneath her snide remarks and blatant disapproval until he barely spoke around her at all, choosing to be silent instead of mocked.

His love for flashy clothes and pretty underthings, originally attempts to get her attention, were things she laughed at, so Tony wore them just to be rebellious— just because she wasn’t looking didn’t mean that he couldn’t still love them.

She locked the doors to his library when he did something to make her angry, and then the doors to his little workshop when she was especially displeased. On a whim, she would refuse to let him leave the house to see his friends, and then for reasons Tony never really understood, one day she would change her mind, encourage him to read, to tinker, to spend the night with one of his Omega friends, to do the things he enjoyed.

Except he could never really enjoy them, not anymore, not when he wasn’t sure when she would take them away again.

It was a game that only the Alpha knew the rules too, and one that Tony got tired of playing, so eventually he was just relieved that she didn’t seek him out, that she didn’t come to his bed, that she took no interest in him physically at all.

They ate breakfast together every morning and avoided each other until dinner, and dressed up together to go out in public, and slept in separate beds and it worked just fine for almost two years, worked just fine until Sunset had decided to take it all a step further.

Tony stripped to his waist in front of the mirror, folding his torn shirt and disheveled vest carefully since it was the only clothes he had, and stared at the mess he had made of his body.

The scars on his chest were thick and raised, some still red along the edges even after all these months. Smaller lines, branching off to the side where the stitches hadn’t held right and ruined him even more. There was a long one that traveled from over his heart up to his bonding mark, the silvered imprint barely recognizable beneath the myriad of cuts across it.

Rhodey had been furious over it all— furious that Sunset had been treating Tony so badly when he had been gone on a detail with his unit, furious that she had had Tony branded like property, furious that Tony had gone through such lengths to erase it.

The Alpha had cried when he found Tony with the knife, bandaging him up and cursing under his breath and Tony had cried too, partly from the pain, partly from disbelief over how awful his life had become so quickly.
From marrying a beautiful if not aloof Alpha and trying to make the marriage work, to almost bleeding out in a hotel in St. Louis after having to be rescued from his own home by his best friend—two years, and his life had gone to shit, and here they were less than a year later and he was in a shit situation all over again.

Tony grimaced, touching gingerly over the mottled skin.

The only upside to hurting himself so badly was that now there was no evidence of Sunset’s claim on him anywhere on his body. Not the mating bite on his neck, not the family crest she had inked over his sternum. Nothing physical was left of her, and that was worth the pain he had put himself through.

“It’s too bad really.” Tony startled badly when Sunset spoke from behind him, and when he lowered his brows in confusion, she held up a key in the mirror. “I have a key to every room and closet on this train, Omega, surely you didn’t think something like a locked door would keep me out.”

Tony set his jaw, and didn’t answer, reaching for his clothes to try and cover back up.

“It’s too bad.” she said again, gaze not even flickering as she watched him put the torn shirt back on. “How ugly you are now, I mean. No more sheer insets and low cut tops for you, hm? You’ll have to wear all those horribly boring clothes the spinsters wear, buttoned to your neck and all that.”

“Tell me, Sunset.” Tony’s fingers were shaking as he buttoned his vest, but his voice was steady. “Why did you feel the need to brand me?”

“Why not?” She shrugged carelessly. “You are mine and I wanted everyone to know it. Everyone was surprised that I didn’t brand you on our wedding night, but I thought it would be a little much for you just then.” Her lips twisted in smirk. “You’re welcome.”

“The mating bite wasn’t branding enough?”

“Well, now if you’d like me to be completely honest.” Another smirk and Tony’s heart sank a little. “I thought you and that Rhodey were fucking behind my back and I wanted him to have to stare at my mark every time he took your shirt off. If it also reminded you to keep your mouth shut—” a flare of red in her eyes. “—when you felt the need to talk about my business, then all the better.”

“You thought Rhodey and I—” Tony gripped at the edge of the sink. “Not ever. Rhodey is my best friend, and beyond that, I wouldn’t ever cheat on my mate, no matter how—”

“No?” The Alpha cut him off, cocked her head to the side. “Not ever. Rhodey is my best friend, and beyond that, I wouldn’t ever cheat on my mate, no matter how—”

“No?” The Alpha cut him off, cocked her head to the side. “Then why did I hear him telling you multiple times that he would bond with you and take you away from me?”

“Because he knew I wasn’t happy.”

“And why does that Alpha Sheriff stare at you like he’s had you, hm?” she snarled under her breath. “Have you been sharing yourself with the Sheriff, little Omega? It’s cheating whether you’re stuck on his knot or down on your knees!”

Tony flinched away and her eyes glittered. “Want to take back your passionate declaration about never cheating?”

The Omega didn’t answer and after a moment, Sunset shrugged that particular part of the conversation away and motioned towards Tony’s chest. “Anyway, even though you managed to cover it, any Alpha who sees you naked will know you belong to someone else just because of the scars. Honestly, Omega, what were you hoping to accomplish? Erasing a physical mark doesn’t
change the fact that I can use an Alpha command and as my mate, you have to obey it. What good did mutilating yourself do?"

“I almost died, you know.” He whispered, and she made an unimpressed noise. “The tattoo wasn’t cleaned properly and I got an infection while you were off working a business deal. I nearly died.”

“But you didn’t, did you?” She frowned. “I heard all about it, you know, how Rhodey showed up out of nowhere to save you, though carrying you from the house was a tad dramatic don’t you think? You would have been fine if you’d stayed long enough to see a doctor.”

“And if I hadn’t been fine?” Tony stared at her in the mirror. “Would you have grieved? Is there anything in you that cares about me at all? That ever cared about me? I know we were arranged, but I cared for you a great deal until—”

“You’re sweet, Tony.” she interrupted. “Sweet and pretty and wealthy. Well spoken, well educated—you have every quality that a desirable Omega should. Our times in bed together were pleasant, and there is no reason why our marriage couldn’t have continued on the way it was, affection or no affection between us. If you had been a good mate and—”

“**A good mate?**” Tony threw his hands up in the air. “You were planning to hurt people! To probably kill people, or at the very least destroy their lives to get what you wanted, and you expected me to be quiet about it? Why would I ever—”

“A good mate would have trusted his Alpha’s decisions!” she snarled. “You— You were always poking your nose where it didn’t belong and ruining things! Tiberius and I worked for months to secure that deal and—”

“You would have destroyed an entire Indian community!” Tony shouted. “Damming that river would have flooded the valley! You would have destroyed them for a little bit of money and to give some rancher water rights! I will not have the Stark name—*my name*—attached to anything like that!”

“But it wouldn’t be your name attached to the project, would it?” Just that quickly, Sunset’s voice dropped to a quiet, *dangerous*, register. “It would be mine. Because with that brand on you, you are no longer a Stark, you are *Sunset Bain’s* mate and *Sunset Bain’s* property and you wouldn’t have a choice, would you, little Omega?”

Tony was silent, clenching his fists and turning away.

“Such a spiteful Omega,” she mocked. “**So fiery** about what you think is right that you would ruin your own mate in the process, because what? I didn’t fawn over you like the other Alphas? Because I wasn’t enamored with your intelligence and quick wit? Were you *jealous* that I preferred female Omegas, is that why you tried so stop all of it?”

“No.” Aware that he couldn’t win the fight, not with the way she twisted her logic and used his words against him, Tony shook his head, backed down. “No, it wasn’t because I was jealous.”

“You’re sure?” she prompted. “Because I would have been more than willing to spend some time with you. All you had to do was ask, you know. You are such a prideful little thing, won’t even ask your Alpha to hold you.”

“Right. I had to ask my Alpha for any and every sign of affection, any and every touch.” He nodded wearily. “I remember.”

Tony went to push past her, but the Alpha straightened until she filled the doorway, a hand at his shoulder so he couldn’t move away.
“Omega.” she murmured, sweetly, softly, and Tony was instantly on guard at the change in her tone. “How about we make a deal, you and I?”

“A deal?”

“Mmmm.” she nodded, running her fingers through his hair. “What if you come home with me for the winter, no more than six months? And if by the time spring comes, we haven’t learned to love each other I’ll let you go, and you can come running back West to play school teacher again.”

“Wh-What?” Tony knew better than to trust her, not after everything she’d done. “What do you mean?”

“Six months, darling.” she crooned. “That’s all. Give me the chance to be a good Alpha for you, to treat you the way I should have treated you all along. I have no money, so I won’t be involved in any dealings you don’t like. I know Tiberius makes you uncomfortable, so I won’t let him near us at all. We can go to your favorite concerts, we can take carriage rides through the park, we can spend the evenings reading in your library….”

Tony didn’t answer, still unsure of what she was trying to say.

“Your heat will come on, being with me again.” Sunset added, and rumbled coaxingly, “Needy Omega, don’t you miss me taking care of you when you want me the most? I’d be good to you darling, so good to you.”

He still didn’t reply and she sighed again, pressing her palm over the ravaged mark on his neck. “And if after all that, if after six months you still don’t want me, you will be free to go. It would break my heart, but I’d let you go if that’s what it took to keep you happy.”

The Alpha leaned in and kissed his forehead, ignoring the way the Omega tensed and tried to pull away. “Don’t break my heart, my mate, hm?”

She left without another word, and Tony sagged against the door frame, folding his arms to try and calm his trembling, mind racing as he tried to process everything she had said.

Six months around his mate would bring his heat on because regardless of their emotional estrangement or marital issues, his biology was still very closely linked to hers. The heat would no doubt be stronger than usual, especially after not having one for a while, his body desperate to make a connection and his risk of pregnancy would be--

Oh.

OH. She wants a baby.

Tony’s knees gave out and he slid to the floor.

A baby meant that he could never leave, because he wouldn’t ever leave his child to be raised without him and Sunset knew it. He would be effectively trapped at her side, linked in an irreversible way and worse-- worse than even that-- any children they had would be automatically entitled to any and all money Tony had, all the properties, his businesses, his patents, everything.

As Alpha of the family, Sunset would control her mate, her children, and have access to everything they owned, to do with as she pleased, and once she had it, there would be no reason for Tony to be around at all.

In a flash of realization, Tony knew why she had never been tried to deepen their relationship, to be
anything more than roommates sharing a home and occasionally a bed.

He was a tool, a footnote in her plan, a step to getting her everything she wanted, and once she had everything, he would be useless. *Disposable.*

His stomach twisted violently, and Tony scrambled for the toilet so he could be sick.

*I’m disposable.*

*I’ve always been disposable.*

Steve, Sam and Clint left Wildrock and ran the horses as fast as they could for as long as they could, tearing across the country while there was still daylight to see.

They found the rail lines exactly where Pepper said they would, and took off down the line for as long as possible, only stopping when darkness fell and it was too dangerous for the horses to continue.

They built a fire and laid out bed rolls, wiped the animals down and gave them extra to eat before trying to settle in for a few hours of sleep.

“Are we going to talk about how unexpectedly amazing Ms. Potts is?” Clint asked as he put his mat out next to Sam’s. “Because I gotta say, staggeringly wealthy, prim and proper and gorgeous, and a little blood thirsty? I might be in love.”

Sam grinned over at his mate as he warmed some dinner over the fire. “I was a little surprised, sure. I knew she owned a lot of land, but I didn’t realize she owned all the land. Weird to realize a woman who would blow away with a stiff breeze is probably the most powerful person this side of the States.”

“And Happy?” Clint pressed. “He’s a blacksmith! Huge! Dirty! Loud! And they’re in love? How!?”

“I think it’s cute.” The Alpha shrugged. “Opposites attract, right? Worked with us, didn’t it?”

“Because I’m beautiful and you’re not?” Clint nodded wisely. “I agree.”

“Brat.” Sam tossed a pebble at his mate. “You are beautiful.”

“So are you.” Satisfied with their sleeping arrangements, Clint joined Sam at the fire and bussed a kiss onto his cheek. “Gorgeous Alpha.”

“Come here.” On edge after everything that had happened, after finding out about Tony, after the shoot out, after the desperate dash to try and catch the train, Sam needed his mate close, needed to breathe him in and know that he was safe, so he pulled Clint into his lap and cuddled him tight.

“I’m right here.” Instinctively knowing what the Alpha needed, Clint mouthed along the silvered mating bite on Sam’s neck, purring and trilling comfortingly. “I’m right here, I’m not going anywhere, I’m safe, no one’s going to take me away.”

“I know.” Sam breathed in Clint’s scent, nuzzling at his cheek. “I know you are. Still need to hold you though.”
They sat quietly for a few minutes, reaffirming their bond with gentle touches and soft words until Steve joined them at the fire, spreading the map out on the ground and taking out a pencil to start mapping their route out for the next day.

“Steve?” Sam spoke up when Steve didn’t say anything. “Alright?”

No answer from the big Alpha, and Sam turned his mate around in his lap until they could both see Steve, fixing the Sheriff with a knowing look. “You’re not alright, are you? Worried about Tony?”

No answer.

“Steve, he’s fine. Thanks to Pepper’s map we found the track before the sun went down and she told us there’s so many switchbacks that as long as we go straight as the crow flies, we should meet or even beat the train as it pulls into Littlehill.” Clint said confidently. “Day after tomorrow at the latest, don’t stress about it Sheriff.”

Steve didn’t look up from the map and Sam clicked his tongue. “That’s not what’s bothering you, is it? You know we will catch up with him, so what’s the problem?”

Clint whined sympathetically, and Steve tilted his head towards the noise with an anxious growl.

“Oh.” Sam’s eyes softened with understanding. “I see.”

“What do you see?” Clint started to scoot off Sam’s lap, a hand held out cautiously towards Steve, a low purr vibrating in his throat. “Steve, you alright?”

“No, my mate.” Sam shook his head and dragged Clint back. “Stay away from him.”

“Sam–”

“Clint.” The Omega froze when his Alpha’s voice dropped. “Don’t.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Do you remember our bonding heat?” Sam nipped at his mate’s ear. “And I couldn’t be there when you started, I was a day late?”

“I remember it vividly.” Clint wiggled his ass invitingly just to hear his Alpha groan. “Why do you ask?”

“Because the day that I was away from you?” Sam nudged him to look over at Steve. “That’s what I looked like. I could barely talk, I couldn’t keep the red from my eyes, I couldn’t be around an Omega at all— not even the mated one that owned the ranch we were chasing the rustlers from— anytime she got within fifteen feet of me I was growling and starting to snarl and Steve and Bucky had to drag me away.”

“So Steve—”

“He was trying to tell Tony that he loved him, right? Or at least that they should move forward with everything, right? Before Colonel Rhodes showed up?” Sam closed his teeth over the bonding mark on Clint’s neck, digging in enough to make his mate groan. “And he never got the chance to tell Tony, because first it was Rhodes and then Tony didn’t want to want to be around anyone because he was so upset and then Sunset showed up and—”

“Oh.” Clint dropped his head back onto Sam’s shoulder, baring his neck so his Alpha would bite
him again. “I see.”

“That’s an Alpha right there—” Sam lowered his voice. “That’s an Alpha who had every intention of claiming his mate, even if it was just with words, and he never got the chance and now his mate is being claimed by someone else. Taken away from him in the middle of the night and we’re running a desperate sort of race to hopefully find him?”

“He’s about to lose everything.” Clint finished. “Before he even ever had it at all.”

“Everyone rolls their eyes over the way Alpha’s choose a mate.” Sam wove his fingers into Clint’s short hair and tugged. “But when we know, we know. It doesn’t have anything to do with needing to get a knot off—” Clint giggled and Sam pinched him. “–it doesn’t have anything to do with that. It’s a soul thing, my mate, soul deep. When we meet the Omega that is meant for us, we know almost immediately.”

“It takes more convincing for us.” The Omega teased, and Sam nodded in agreement.

“And it should. I knew in an instant that you were meant for me, but you deserved to be wooed and courted and spoiled and loved before you made up your mind, and that’s the way it should be.”

“That’s an Alpha—” he looked back at Steve, nearly whispering now. “That’s an Alpha who knows who his mate is, and might never get the chance to even say it.”

“At least when I was away from you, driving myself mad with wanting to get back to you, needing to claim you, I knew you’d be there waiting for me.” The Alpha rumbled deep in his chest, standing to his feet and bringing his mate with him, drawing them away from the fire for some privacy. “I knew the minute I walked into the room you’d be anxious to see me, wanting me, needing me—”

Clint sucked in a harsh breath when his Alpha stripped off his shirt, tossing it onto the ground before lowering him down carefully. “I knew you loved me already, my sweet mate, I knew you inside and out and every single perfect inch and I knew you were mine whether I’d marked you yet or not.”

“But–But– Steve doesn’t know if Tony will even–”

“No he doesn’t.” Sam sealed their lips together, working at his mate’s belt. “He doesn’t know how Tony feels, but he’s going after him anyway.”

“Would you do that for me?” Clint stretched out and smiled when the Alpha groaned in appreciation, heavy hands tracing the lines of his body like they’d done so many times before. “Chase me across the country even if you didn’t know how I felt?”

“Chase you across the country?” Sam laughed and rolled them so Clint was straddling him. “I’d tie you to a chair and not let you go until you told me you loved me!”

“So close to being so romantic.” Clint sighed dramatically and leaned down to lay a searing kiss on his mate’s lips. “And then you went and talked about tying me up.”

“You love to be tied up.” Sam eyes blurred red and even though Clint could barely see it, he could feel the change when the Alpha part of his husband surged forward in want. “Admit it.”

“I do love when you tie me up.” He breathed. “Alpha.”

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Steve didn’t really notice when Sam and Clint left the fire, and when the Omega cried out in pleasure somewhere in the dark, he didn’t bother looking up.

He stared down at the map on the ground, tracing the railroad track with his finger, then the path the horses would take with his pencil, shaking his head to try and clear the red from his eyes, forcing himself to breathe evenly, not letting himself think about what might be happening to Tony, if the Omega was being hurt or coerced or–or–

“I’m coming, Omega.” he whispered, but it came out as a snarl, desperate and brittle. “My Omega, I’m coming, sweetheart. Hold on for me.”

Even after months of dating, Happy hadn’t gotten used to just being able to walk into Pepper’s private parlor, so he rapped on the door and waited just outside the room for her to see him.

“Oh, hello darling.” The pretty red head looked up from her notebook with a smile and waved him in, lips turned up for a kiss he gladly gave. “I wasn’t sure if you would make it over today, not with the Sheriff and the others out of town.”

“I can’t stay long, have to get back to look after things.” Happy sat next to her on the dainty sofa, feeling large and clumsy and distinctly out of place until the Omega moved right onto his lap, snuggling against his chest and going right back to writing as if nothing was out of the ordinary.

“How are you?” Happy tucked a piece of hair behind her ear and left a gentle kiss at the base of her neck. “What are you writing?”

“I’m sending a telegram back East, and am just trying to get my message correct.” She shifted back further, and Happy wound a thick arm around her tiny waist. “Have I ever told you about my friend back home, the one all the families use to take care of problems?”

“The families?”

“The wealthy ones, my love. My family, the Starks, the Stanes, all those types. The old money. We all grew up together, you see, attending the same parties, the same finishing schools. Tony and I were particularly close when we were young, and even though we grew apart for several years, when he contacted me needing help, I couldn’t turn him down, could I?”

“No of course not.” Happy raised his eyebrows. “And, no you’ve never spoken of this… friend… before.”

“Hm.” She tapped her pencil on her lip as she thought about what else to put in her note. “Well, all the families are friends with another very specific family, have been for as long as anyone remember, and this very specific family is one who helps problems disappear, do you understand?”

“Problems.”

“Such as an unwanted suitor who won’t take no for an answer and was getting violent, or someone who was sabotaging the business but couldn’t quite get caught by the law… that sort of thing. This specific family takes care of those sort of problems when no one else can.”

“I…see. And you’re writing them a letter?”
“Sunset Bain fell out of favor in society years ago.” Pepper signed the letter and put it aside. “Her business practices are shady at best, she has contacts in dear old England that are very worrisome, and that friend of hers, Tiberius? He was a slave trader when it was legal, and he is a slave trader now. In fact, I’m sure it’s one of the things she uses her personal rail for and it’s abhorrent.”

“So you are writing the family to have them deal with Sunset?”

“It should have been done years ago.” Pepper turned and curled into her Alpha’s arms, nuzzling close with a happy sigh. “And after I found out how she had treated Tony, I should have done it then, but I had no idea where she was. I tried to keep tabs on her after Tony came here, but none of my contacts could find her. Now that I know where she is, I’m messaging the family to connect with her in St. Louis and deal with the situation.”

“Huh.” Happy ran a hand up and down her back, tangling in a few strands of hair before sliding back to rest low on her hip. “And she will be dealt with properly?”

“In a rather permanent fashion, I’m sure. This friend is one of the most brutal I’ve ever met. He trained my body guards, did you know?”

“What’s this friend’s name?”

“I couldn’t tell you his real name.” The Omega laced their fingers together and started purring when Happy kissed her cheek. “But we call him Jarvis.”

“Jarvis? He sounds like a butler.”

“I suppose so, if a butler could kill you with a piece of paper and make your body disappear.”

“That’s… horrifying.”

“I saw him kill a man with a hatpin once.” She said mildly. “Some Alpha slapped a little Beta serving girl when she refused his advances, knocked her right down the stairs and nearly killed her, poor thing was in the hospital for a few days. The next day my family and I were in the park and the same Alpha came by. Jarvis appeared from behind a tree, snatched a hat pin from a woman’s hat, stabbed the Alpha in the jugular, and then wiped the hat pin clean and walked away without saying a word.”

“That doesn’t scare you?” Happy pushed at her lightly so he could see her expression. “Pepper if he didn’t hesitate to kill in front of you, how can you trust him to—”

“My sweet Alpha.” Pepper patted his cheek. “I might be beautiful but I am no fainting damsel. And if I ever see Sunset again, I might use my own hat pin to stab her. I’m sure whatever Jarvis will do will be quick and painless.”

“Well—”

“Or not.” Pepper yawned and pressed her nose to his shoulder. “Either way, Jarvis will take care of it, and Tony will be safe. Then I think I’ll take her little personal rail for my own use. Would you like that, darling? A private train for us to travel in? Think of the things we could do together when there is no one to hear how loud we are being.”

She was grinning, and Happy chuckled lightly, but his eyes were wide.

Blood thirsty little minx.
He wasn’t *ever* getting on her bad side.
Tony didn’t like sitting in the same space as Tiberius, uncomfortable around the Alpha for at least a
dozen different reasons, but Sunset was resting in the sleeping car, there were at least eight of their
Beta henchmen in the dining car, and the mysterious fourth car was completely off limits, so he had
to be here, perched uncomfortably on the small sofa while Tiberius sprawled across the aisle in an
overstuffed chair.

Tiberius hadn’t said anything when Tony walked in, but he had lowered his book enough to watch
as Tony crossed the car, his eyes lit with a dangerous sort of interest and Tony had wanted to run
back to the sleeping car and grab a blanket to cover himself.

Instead, he had tipped his chin up and pretended he didn’t see the Alpha at all, finding a seat as far
away as he could and staring resolutely out the window.

Tiberius chuckled at Tony’s little show of defiance and went right back to reading, bored with
someone who wouldn’t want to pay attention to him, and for a long time the turning of pages was the
only sound between them.

Tiberius probably thought he was being intimidating by staying quiet and only looking up to
occasionally fix the Omega with a stare.

Tony had nothing to say to the Alpha and was just grateful Tiberius wasn’t running his mouth.

He hadn’t slept at all the night before, declining Sunset’s invitation to share her bed– probably the
first time the Alpha had even asked him to come to bed– and choosing to spend the night in the
dining car drinking cup after cup of terrible coffee, mulling over the last few days, forcing himself
not to be emotional over losing Steve leaving Wildrock, and trying to make a plan for when they
inevitably got back to New York.

He had friends in the city, but most of them had been pushed away thanks to Sunset’s attempts to
isolate him. If he could get a note to Pepper and tell her what happened, she could maybe contact the
Jarvis family and they could take care of Sunset in that rather particular way they took care
of other problems, but it was a stretch to imagine that he would even get a chance to send a wire. A
letter was another option, easier to smuggle out, but posted mail could take at least a month to reach
Wildrock, if it got there at all.

Rhodey wasn’t an option– even if Tony could somehow track him down and get a message out to
California, it would be spring before the routes in the West opened up enough for Rhodey to get
back home and by then–

A frisson of fear ran through him at the thought of being with Sunset all winter and Tony forced it
away.

He couldn’t afford to be scared. He wasn’t going to let himself be scared.

He had stood toe to toe with Alpha Mayor Thompson and not backed down, he wasn’t about to let
his unwanted mate intimidate him either. Whether his Omega biology was still keyed to obey her or
not, whether his heat would come on because of being around her or not– he would be strong
enough to say no.

He had to be strong enough to say no.
“You look like you’re thinkin’ awful hard over there, Omega.” Tiberius finally spoke up and Tony quelled the urge to snarl at him. “Don’t hurt yourself.”

“Don’t you talk to my Omega like that.” Sunset breezed into the car at that very moment, silencing Tiberius with a snarl of her own. “He’s brilliant, don’t you know? Designed engines all by himself, didn’t you darling? Such a smart Omega.”

Before Tony could respond, or convince himself not to respond, the Alpha knelt in front of him, drawing her fingers down his jaw, her other hand on his knee.

“You are a smart Omega, aren’t you?” she murmured, and when Tony’s eyes narrowed, she tightened her grip until her nails were digging into his skin. “We are going to make Littlehill late tonight or early morning depending on whether my train can make it up the hills well enough in the dark, and I thought while we were restocking, I could take you shopping. Would you like that?”

“Shopping for what?” Tony asked warily. “I don’t need anything.”

“Of course you do!” She smiled brightly. “You need new clothes because you’ve been wearing these torn, ratty ones, and the train isn’t terribly warm so you will need a coat and perhaps an extra blanket or two, yes?”

Tony hated that he would need to accept anything from Sunset, but she was right– he did need new clothes. “That would be nice,” he said stiffly. “Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome, Omega.” Sunset looked so pleased that for a split second, Tony felt guilty for giving her such a hard time…. And then he remembered that this was just the game she played, and he started to lean away again.

“I thought I’d buy you something pretty too, would you like that?” She pressed when she felt Tony withdraw. “You were always so greedy for pretty gifts, I don’t have much money to my name anymore, but I have enough to buy my mate something shiny. Maybe it will distract you from being so upset at me?”

Sunset wet her lips and lowered her voice. “Tell me, Omega, do you still wear all those beautiful, lacy underthings, or has the wild West cured you of those frivolities?”

“No.” Tony lied, or rather tried to lie, he’d always been terrible at it. “No, I don’t.”

“You’re lying.” She sounded like she couldn’t believe he would lie to her. “You’re lying! Did you wear them for your Sheriff? Was that enough for him to overlook the sour stench when he knotted you?!”

“He never knotted me.” Tony bit out. “We weren’t involved. Not courting, not anything like that.”

“I can’t believe you would lie to me.” Sunset patted at his cheek with a faux sweet smile. “But that’s alright. When we get home, you’ll start to forget all about that little town and whatever nonsense you got up to there.”

“Oh and one more thing—” she cleared her throat and leaned into bump their noses together, a motion that was usually affectionate between mates, but only felt like a threat from this Alpha. “While you are shopping in Littlehill, don’t think about doing anything reckless with this new found attitude of yours. It would be a terrible shame if you didn’t survive this journey back home, and regardless of all those loopholes you wrote into our marriage contract, if you’re dead and gone there is no one stopping me from doing whatever the hell I want with everything that was once yours, do I make myself perfectly clear?”
“Yes.” Tony whispered.

“Yes, Alpha.” she hissed.

“Yes.” Tony repeated, meeting her stare head on. “Yes, you make yourself perfectly clear.”

Sunset glared, but pushed away from him, growling at Tiberius when he chuckled over Tony’s reaction.

“Brave Omega.” the Alpha said after Sunset had stormed out. “You’re taking a risk talking to her like that, she got worse after you ran away– real jumpy and pissy. I wouldn’t cross her, that’s for sure.”

Tony didn’t answer, and Tiberius went back to his book, and beneath them, the train chuffed on, carrying Tony further away from Steve Wildrock, and closer to a life he’d nearly died trying to escape the first time.

The Omega closed his eyes and tried to stay above the wave of hopelessness that threatened to carry him away.

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Sunset’s train track met the main line via a short tunnel through a hill, the opening of it camouflaged by a seeming impermeable wall of greenery, invisible to anyone who didn’t know it was already there, or in Steve’s case, anyone who had a map that pointed it out.

“How the hell does Pepper know these things?!?” Clint cried as they thundered past on their mounts, the horses running at an all out sprint, the building of Littlehill just barely visible in the distance. “That’s a damn hill with some trees and she knows there’s a tunnel?”

“It’s surprising what knowledge money can buy, Clint!” Sam shouted back. “If you quit spending your paycheck on ridiculous things you order from catalogues you could buy yourself a secret or two!”

“That will never happen!” The Omega cracked up laughing. “I’d rather have my knick knacks!”

Steve rode on the other side of Sam, pushing Nomad as hard as he could, the massive horse flying across the ground. He hadn’t said a word since they had left camp before the sun had even come up, and now with Littlehill less than an hour away, he was tense enough to snap, jaw set, eyes shifting between blue and red as he tried to keep a rein on his emotions.

If they didn’t catch the train at Littlehill, they would never catch it at all, because once it was on the main tracks it could go full speed clear to St. Louis.

They were taking a chance that Sunset had even stopped there, a chance that if she stopped it was overnight, a chance that she had even let Tony off the train for any reason at all, and he didn’t know how they were going to save Tony if he was still on the train.

It was all chances and none of them looked very good, but Steve didn’t care about that.

All he knew was that he had to get to his Omega or he might lose his damn mind.

Everything else was just… details.
“Be so careful when you’re out and about, darling.” Sunset snapped her fingers and motioned for four of her guards to go with Tony as he left the train. “Buy yourself something pretty and feel free to browse, but I expect you back on the train by dinner time, do you understand? Do not make me come looking for you.”

“I won’t.” Tony said quietly, ducking his head and Sunset nodded, apparently pleased with his show of submission.

Tony let her have the moment. He didn’t care if she thought he was being submissive, if she thought he was coming around to their situation, as long as he didn’t have be around her for a few hours.

“Alright then, have fun.” She blew him a kiss and waved before ducking back into the train, and Tony looked around at the four Beta’s assigned to guard him and sighed.

At least I’m off the train.

Fully intent on getting some new clothes, desperate to stop into a hotel and get a real bath so he didn’t stink of fear and train and Sunset anymore, Tony didn’t look twice at the Omega at the corner, wiping down his horse. He didn’t think anything about the dark skinned Alpha leaning casually against a post at the rail-side bar, hat low over his eyes, a hand resting easily on the butt of a revolver. And he definitely didn’t notice the blue eyed cowboy drinking a beer at a table just outside a little cafe that they passed on the way.

But all three of them noticed him.

“Four Beta’s to guard him.” Clint finished wiping down his mount and sauntered over to Sam, leaning on the other side of the post from his Alpha. “Sunset isn’t taking any chances is she?”

“She’s taking a chance with her damn life.” Sam retorted. “Staying on that train with only half her men and that smarmy pasty faced Alpha, Tiberius. Taking a real chance I won’t just strap a brick of explosive to that rail car and blow her to kingdom come.”

“Oooh.” Clint shivered and winked at his mate. “I love when you talk about things that go boom.”

“Let’s go check on Steve.” Sam put a hand low on Clint’s back, directing him down the walk way. “He can’t be doing real well right now having just watched his intended mate walk past surrounded by guards.”

“Surprised he didn’t jump them when they passed.” Clint agreed, and lifted his hand in a wave to the tense Alpha. “Sheriff. Doing alright?”

“Four Betas.” Steve said shortly. “They are taking him towards the market, let’s follow him, snatch him when he goes to buy clothes. They won’t follow him into the changing area in a tailor’s shop, especially since he’s an Omega, the shop owner won’t let them invade his privacy like that. We can take him there and get out of town.”

“Sheriff–”

“Let’s go.” He pushed back from the table without another word, and Sam and Clint exchanged a worried look before following him down the road.
They had found the train early that morning and after dropping their horses off to rest and eat, had spent the better part of the day just watching, counting the men getting on and off the train, watching as Tiberius had stumbled out around noon looking hungover as hell and heading right for the whore house.

They had seen Tony eating his lunch in the dining car, half a dozen guards sitting at the tables around him, and it was only now, in the early evening that Tony had stepped foot outside the train.

Steve had been anxious all day, snappish and tense and it was getting worse the longer they waited. Now that Tony was out in the open, Sam knew it was only a matter of time before Steve did something reckless.

“Steve.” Clint hurried to catch up to the Alpha, pressing at his hand in what was supposed to be a comforting gesture. “Steve, we’re gonna get him, alright? Just a few minutes and we’re going to get him. We’ll be riding away before the sun goes down, yeah?”

“Yep.” Steve said shortly. “I know.”

“You saw him, he was fine.” Clint continued. “Nothing to worry about, he’s not hurt at all.”

“Yep.”

“Steve, I’m just saying that you can–”

“Clint!” Steve tore away from the Omega, shoving him in the process and popping his teeth in a clear warning. “Enough!”

Sam grabbed his mate and pulled him close, shushing him with a quiet kiss and then he took two big steps forward and forced Steve into an alley, pushing him against the brick wall and baring his teeth in an angry snarl.

“Damn you, Rogers, I know you’re afraid for Tony and I know you are desperate to get to him but–” Steve growled and tried to wrench away, but Sam let his Alpha surge, used the burst of strength to hold Steve still. “If you ever handle my mate like that again, if you so much as side eye my mate–” another hard shove. “I will rip your throat out.”

It took a moment, but the red finally cleared from Steve’s eyes, and once it did, Sam let his own fade to dark brown as well.

“I’m sorry.” Steve muttered, and this time Sam let him up from the wall. “Damn it, I’m sorry, Sam, I’m sorry. I can’t get my head right. Let me apologize to your mate.”

“You’re not going near him.” Sam’s eyes weren’t red anymore but he was still furious. “Once we have Tony back and safe and you’re thinking clearly, then you can apologize, but up until that moment you need to steer clear or I will break something, do you understand?”

“I get it.” Steve’s throat jumped as he swallowed, lowering his voice apologetically. “Sorry, Sam.”

“Let’s go then.”

The rest of the walk to the market place was made in relative silence, Steve leading the way, Sam keeping an eye out for anyone watching them, Clint the only one acting as if nothing was amiss, hands in his pockets, whistling cheerfully.

It wasn’t the first time an Alpha had snapped at him, wasn’t going to be the last time an Alpha
snapped at him, and oh lord did he love when his mate got all protective and growly, so it was fine. He and Sam were anxious to get Tony too, nervous about how it all would go down, it only made sense that Steve was even more anxious while they were trying to rescue his intended mate. It was fine. Steve’s reaction was fine. Completely understandable.

So when Steve looked back over his shoulder and mouthed I’m sorry, Clint shook his head with a smile and a wink, waving the Alpha’s concern off. Later, after Tony was safe and sound and home, Clint would probably guilt trip the Sheriff into buying him something pretty to make up for it, but now was definitely not the time.

Nope, definitely not the time. Clint thought as Steve stiffened, tipping his head as if he heard something, and then ducked into a side street with Sam hot on his heels.

“There.” Steve whispered when Clint caught up to them and he peered down the way in time to catch Tony passing by, nearly dwarfed by the Beta’s surrounding him. “There he is.”

“Look how sad he looks.” The Omega clicked his tongue sympathetically. “He is miserable, Sam.”

“Such a sad Omega.” Sam agreed quietly. “But listen, even if it’s just the four Beta’s with him, we have to be smart about this. Can’t draw them into a fire fight in the middle of the market, don’t want to let Sunset know we are in town. We can’t do anything rash, do you understand?” A warning glare at Steve. “Sheriff? Do you understand?”

“I never do rash things.” Steve denied and both Clint and Sam sent him a look that was just this side of incredulous. “I won’t do rash things when Tony’s involved.” he amended. “It’s fine. I’m calm.”

“Alright then.” Sam narrowed his eyes one more time at the Sheriff before turning to his mate. “Clint, why don’t you get a little closer? They won’t think twice about seeing an Omega shopping, but Alphas will make them wary, especially as big as Steve and I are. I want you to– uh, Clint?”

He turned in a full circle when he didn’t see Clint behind them in the alley. “Sweetheart?”

“Up here, Alpha.” Clint whistled quietly and both the Alpha’s looked up, eyes widening in surprise when they saw him balancing on the rail of a narrow balcony that ran nearly the entire length of the short alley, a place for the surrounding businesses to store a few boxes of odds and ends. “I couldn’t see over your heads so I needed a better vantage point.”

“How did you–” Steve looked around the alley in bewilderment, then back up at the Omega. “How did you get up there?”

“Sheriff, do you mean to tell me that Sam never shared the story about how he and I met?” Clint walked confidently along the rail, arms held out from his body, barely a wobble in his step. “Didn’t you know I used to be in the circus?”

“Uh– “ Steve blinked at him, blinked over at Sam. “What?”

“Do you want to hear a story about the outfit Clint wore as a trapeze artist or do you want to rescue your Omega?” Sam asked impatiently. “Clint, be careful up there. Steve we need to–”

“We’ve got company coming, Alpha’s.” Clint cautioned, and Sam and Steve stepped back into the shadows when Tony’s guards stopped to peer down the alley before pushing him into it and filing after him.

“Why can’t we walk the way we came?” Tony sounded snarky and irritable, but there was an undercurrent of fear in his voice that had Steve tensing, growling in the shadows. “I don’t want to
walk down a dirty alley.”

“This is the fastest way back to the train.” One of the Beta’s said, shoving at Tony’s shoulder to get him moving. “And Ms. Bain might think it’s funny for you to shop, but I don’t want to be out here all day while you fuss over purses. Let’s go.”

“But she said I don’t have to be back until supper!” The Omega started to back away, not wanting to go down a dark alley with four of Sunset’s guards, not after her less than subtle threat about him not surviving the journey. “I don’t want to go back to the train yet, let’s just stay in the market place!”

“Ugh Omega.” Another shove and Sam started growling too. “Just get your ass moving. Tired of playing babysitter while you dick around out here, hurry the hell—”

“Yoo-hoo Betas!” Clint called and all four of the guards looked up. “Hi there. You touch my friend again and I’m going to have to break your hand, yeah?”

“Clint?” Tony’s mouth dropped, the packages in his arms falling to the ground. “What?”

One of his Beta guards startled at Clint’s voice, whipping around and drawing his pistol, but before he could even get his finger on the trigger, Sam stepped into the light and put a bullet through his heart, not about to let anyone pull a weapon on his mate.

Tony screamed at the noise, the report of the gun magnified by the closed space and in the resulting confusion, Clint leapt from the balcony square onto the shoulders of a different guard, taking him to the ground with his weight and locking his arms around his neck.

A third guard rushed around Tony and pulled his revolver to turn on Sam but Steve came out of nowhere with a roar, grabbing the Beta by the arm and spinning him around before taking him out with a nose shattering punch, the delicate bones breaking beneath Steve’s fist.

“Steve!” Tony cried at the same time Sam shouted “Steve! Gun!” And Tony ooophed as Steve yanked him out of the way, pushing him into the wall hard enough to make him wheeze and covering him with his body while Sam took out the fourth guard with a bullet to the leg, a hard right to the jaw sending him crumpled unconscious to the ground.

Amid the melee Clint was shouting “Stop struggling or I’m going to break your neck! I swear I’m going to—” and when the still fighting Beta managed to get his hand on his pistol, Clint grunted and rolled until he could get on his knees, pinning the man beneath him and with a quick wrench and a horrible pop, snapped his neck.

It was suddenly eerily quiet then, Clint still on top the Beta, hands on his thighs and breathing hard. Sam checked on both the unconscious guards, stepped carelessly over the one he’d shot in the heart and ran to gather his mate close, running his hands protectively over Clint’s body and murmuring into his ear.

Tony was still caged between the wall and Steve’s body, his eyes shut tight, but the lightest touch at his cheek, then a calloused palm at the back of his neck made him look up.

“Settle.” Steve rumbled, his eyes red and breathing harsh. “Omega, settle.”

“Oh.” Tears sprang to the Omega’s eyes, a hard shiver racking his body as the shock of the moment wore off and he started to cry. “Oh my god, oh my god—!”

Steve growled, and maybe he thought it would be reassuring but still running so high from the fight it came out angry and fierce and Tony yelped and tried to pull away, the tears coming faster now that
he thought Steve was upset with him.

“Tony’s terrified, get Steve away from him.” Clint kissed his mate reassuringly, then pushed him towards Steve. “Steve’s gonna go all Alpha on him, and Tony can’t handle that right now.”

Sam jogged over and put a firm hand on Steve’s arm. “Take a step back, Sheriff, give him some room to breathe. Come on, now.”

Steve’s eyes blurred an even darker red at the presence of an Alpha— even a friend— so close to Tony right then, and a snarl ripped from his throat, frightening the Omega even more.

Sam fought the instinct to just take Steve out so he would stop scaring Tony, but he was also well aware that he would be putting his life on the line in a very real way if he attempted it.

Second option was to lower his voice and distract Steve long enough to get him to step away, and that seemed like a safer bet, so Sam lowered his voice, kept his eyes down so Steve wouldn’t see him as a threat.

“Easy.” He murmured, hands up peacefully. “Easy, Sheriff. Let Clint look Tony over, huh? Let the Omegas snuggle for a minute, you know they both need it. You and I need to take care of these bodies before we can leave.”

Steve hesitated, frame relaxing for a split second and Sam took the chance to pull him away, Clint swooping in to get his arms around Tony before Steve could protest.

“Clint.” Tony curled his fingers in Clint’s vest, hiding his face in the Omega’s shoulder and inhaling the familiar, comforting scent. “How—how are you here? What are you doing here?”

“What do you mean, what are we doing here? We came to get you, you wacky Omega.” Clint chuckled just so he wouldn’t suffocate under the panic pouring off of Tony. “Just like you knew we would, right?”

“I—I—” Tony shook his head and held him tighter and Clint whispered, “Honey, you didn’t think we would come after you? We were always going to come after you. Just took us a little bit of time to catch up is all. Just not as fast on horses as you were in that train.”

“Oh.” Tony tried to laugh but it came out as a sob and Clint cuddled him closer, meeting Sam’s eyes and inclining his head down the alley.

Sam nodded in understanding and turned to Steve. “Clint and I are going to get Tony to the horses. You take care of all this and meet up with us as soon as you can, yeah?”

Amazingly, the big Alpha nodded as well, keeping his body and gaze away from Tony so he wouldn’t react further and make the moment even worse. “Yeah, that’s a good idea. I need a minute to gather myself, you guys can get started and I’ll catch up as you head out of town.”

“Hey.” Sam put an arm around Steve’s shoulders and pulled him in until their foreheads met. “You’re doing the right thing, Sheriff, giving him a little time to settle down. Once we’re out of here and safe, then you can hold him.”

Steve seemed to crumple a little bit, and Sam caught him as he sagged in relief. “You’re fine.” he murmured, knowing the Alpha needed to hear it just as much as Tony did at that point. “You’re fine. We got him, he’s safe, and we’ll take him home.”

“Right.” Steve closed his eyes for just a second, then straightened his shoulders and pulled
away. “Thank you, Sam. For everything.”

“I got you.” He watched as Steve broke the lock on a storage shed in the alley. “No more than two hours, alright? We don’t want to be too far ahead of you.”

“I’ll catch up.” Steve snapped a set of cuffs one of the unconscious Betas before hefting him over his shoulder and carrying him towards the shed. “Just get Tony out of here.”

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It was easy enough to get a horse for Tony, and less than an hour later, Sam and the two Omegas were riding West again.

They moved quickly but not too quickly, needing Steve to catch up and knowing that with the sun going down, it would be just now that Sunset realized Tony was missing. They had at least another hour before anyone found the bodies— or at least an hour before the unconscious Beta’s woke up and managed to break out of the shed— and by then it would be too late for Sunset to send out a search team.

By the time the sun rose, Tony would be miles away, well on his way to being safe, and they would all be able to breathe a little easier.

Steve caught up as they crossed the river and started into the hills, Nomad thundering up behind them and taking the lead position, Sam falling back to the rear to keep the Omegas visible and protected in the middle.

They rode as long as the could, pushing further and further into the hills until it was too dark to continue on safely, and only then did Steve lead them off the path and into the trees for a place to camp for the night.

The Omega’s dismounted and Clint grabbed Tony close again, working his fingers through Tony’s hair and purring into his neck until Tony was melting against him, the stress from the day trickling away in reassuring arms.

Steve pulled the roll of Tony’s clothes from his saddle bag and passed it to Sam before heading out to find some firewood, giving Tony the chance to change in private and giving himself a few more minutes to calm down.

Tony watched him go with a worried look in his eye, but Sam hushed with him a comforting rumble, bringing him in for a long hug and letting the Omega scent up and down his neck. “Steve brought you some clean clothes.” He said once Tony had gone limp against him. “Didn’t know if you had been able to bring any with you when they snatched you or—”

“Thank you.” Tony finally smiled, a shadow of his usual grin. “I’ve been wearing the same clothes for almost a week. I’ll- I’ll be right back.”

Clint watched him go, then turned to his mate. “He’s missing something.” he murmured. “It’s like being around that Alpha crushed something of his spirit.”

“Or maybe the sassy carefree Tony we know was a front he projected so no one would know anything was wrong.” Sam corrected. “I’d bet good money that this Tony? Subdued and quiet and a little afraid— I’d bet good money that this is how he usually is and he was pretending in Wildrock.”
“Nah.” Clint disagreed and went to his saddle to pull out a few things for a quick supper. “Nah, I think who he is in Wildrock is who he was before he mated that frigid bitch–”

“Clint.” Sam said disapprovingly.

“No no, I stand by what I called her. I think our Tony is the real Tony and she just sucked all the fun right out of him. Now that she showed back up he’s having a hard time being himself again.”

“Well, either way time will tell.” Sam unscrewed his flask and took a sip before passing it to his mate. “Right now we just need to focus on keeping Steve sane and getting everyone back to Wildrock before Sunset catches up with us.”

“What do you mean, keeping Steve sane?” Tony spoke from behind them and they both jumped. “Is he alright? What’s wrong with him?”

“Feel better now that you’ve gotten some clean clothes?” Clint kissed his cheek and handed him the flask. “Hm?

“What’s wrong with Steve?” Tony repeated, shuddering as the whiskey burned down his throat. “What happened to him?”

“Nothing happened to him.” Sam explained slowly. “He’s just– he’s real close to his edge right now, Tony. He about lost his mind when he found out you were gone, he’s been sick with worry, angry over the situation–lots going on and he’s having a hard time keeping it under wraps is all.”

“Is he angry with me?” Tony picked at the hem of his shirt anxiously. “Is that what’s wrong? Me?”

“Sheriff’s angry about a lot of things right now.” Sam motioned for Tony to take another drink. “But I can promise that none of them are you. Go talk to him, at least let him know that you’re okay so he can breathe a little easier, yeah?”

Tony took an extra drink for courage, dark eyes worried as he headed towards Steve, skirting the edge of the fire pit where the Alpha was stacking wood and kindling.

“Steve?” Tony hesitated a few steps away and offered him a cautious smile. “Um. Hi.”

“Tony.” Steve stood to his feet and started to reach for the Omega, catching himself mid motion and letting his hand drop awkwardly to his side. “How are you?”

“As good as I can be, I guess.” Tony scratched at his chin self consciously. “Um– thank you. For the clothes, I mean, it’s nice not to have to wear those torn ones. And they scent like you.” Tony turned and sniffed at his shirt collar. “I like it.”

“It was Clint’s idea.” Steve’s eyes warmed at the display, his heart squeezing when Tony smiled again. “But you’re welcome.”

Tony kicked at the dirt a few times, then whispered, “And thank you for coming to get me.”

“I wasn’t going to let them take you away, Tony.” Steve took a hesitant step forward, then another when Tony didn’t flinch away. “Not when you didn’t want to go. I mean, you didn’t want to go, right? Not with Sunset?”

“No!” Tony blurted. “Oh god, no, I didn’t want to go with her! Not at all!”

“Well that’s real good to hear.” Steve cocked his head and grinned. “Because it sure would make it
awkward if I came to bring you home and you didn’t want to go.”

“Home?” Tony’s smile dimmed, and he gestured out towards the hills. “Wildrock isn’t— I mean, that isn’t my home. New York is my home. That’s where I was born and raised and where I lived when I was married and—”

Steve’s smile faltered and Tony thought he might cry again. “Home is where my Alpha is, you know?” God he hated those words. “I have to deal with it all eventually and until then—”

“I know you do.” Steve’s voice was soft and he took another step forward. “But you’re right, Tony, home is where your Alpha is.”

He held out his hand hopefully, coaxingly, curling his fingers in a come here motion. “Let me take you home, sweetheart.”

“I—I—” Tony’s mouth fell open, and he covered it with both hands, the words muffled as he said, “But I thought you would be furious with me. All the lies, and how much I hid from you. And I never thought you would come after me? I didn’t know you cared so mu—”

“Yes you did.” Tony startled when Steve was suddenly right in front of him, carefully pulling Tony’s hands away from his face so they were staring into each other’s eyes. “Tony, yes you did. Whether you want to admit it or not, whether you want to say we were courting or not, you knew how I felt about you.”

Tony sucked in a sharp breath and Steve whispered, “How I feel about you, Tony. You know how I feel about you, how I’ve felt about you since we started doing this whole thing.”

The Omega didn’t answer, but when Steve put an arm around his waist, he went willingly forward until their foreheads were touching, noses bumping, breathing each other in.

Steve kept one arm secure around Tony’s waist, and let the other hand creep up Tony’s side to rest over his heart, spreading his fingers out until he could feel the raised edges of the scars beneath the shirt.

Tony flinched away, and Steve murmured, “Does it hurt? Did she hurt you?”

“No.” Tears in Tony’s eyes then, catching on his lashes and spilling down his cheeks. “It’s just ugly.”

“There isn’t a single inch of you that’s ugly.” The Alpha denied, pressing closer until there was barely any space between them at all. “Not a single inch.”

“Sheriff Rogers.” Tony sniffed quietly and the Alpha rumbled in his ear. “Sheriff Rogers, you really shouldn’t lie. That’s an awful character trait.”

“Mr. Carbonell—” Steve paused and Tony gave a tiny nod. “Mr. Carbonell, what kind of Sheriff do you take me for? I never lie, and I’d certainly never lie about something as important as this.”

Tony whined then, anxious and a little heartbroken but when Steve held him tighter, fitting a big hand to the back of his neck, fingers tangling in his hair, gentle and possessive and safe, the whine turned into a shaky purr.

My Omega. It didn’t take any effort at all for Steve to pick Tony right up, cradling him close to his chest and carrying him across the campsite to where Clint had laid out their bedrolls.
“Sleep here next to Clint tonight.” He lay Tony down on the blankets, brushing the dark hair away from his eyes. “Sam and I will keep watch and once you’re rested, we’ll head towards home. Feels like we’re real over due for a talk, so maybe tomorrow we can ride together, alright?”

“Alright.” Tony went into Clint’s arms willingly, snuggling close and closing his eyes. “Thank you.”

Steve bent and kissed his forehead, lingering close for a long moment before giving them some space. My Omega.

“Are you alright?” Clint whispered and Tony nodded without opening his eyes.

“I just want to go home.”
“So you mean to tell me.” Sunset drummed her fingers on the table irritably. “That my Omega, my mate, who isn’t good for much more than tinkering in his workshop and reading books, that Omega somehow escaped four guards and is no longer in town?”

“Apparently.” Tiberius spread his hands in a vague gesture. “But you know, it’s not like either of us were there, so who’s to say what really happened?”

“Right.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “Well. Either that Omega overpowered and killed two guards, rendering the other two unconscious, somehow commandeered a horse and is now gallivanting through the hills, or his Sheriff–” she nearly spat the word. “– followed us here to Littlehill with a posse and took him from right under our noses.”

“But that doesn’t make sense.” The male Alpha poured himself a drink, and Sunset briefly considered throwing it at him simply because his blase attitude was pissing her off. “How would the Sheriff know about your railway? It’s not even on any maps.”

“I don’t know!” She shouted and Tiberius curled his lip in her direction. “You should more concerned, Tiberius, getting him back was going to guarantee money in your pocket as well, you know.”

“Not to mention,” Tiberius drawled, “he knows everything that happened with Hammer and the tunnel and all the slaves that are dead, even though we told the investigators that we were only silent investors and had no idea about any of it?”

“Well, he can’t prove we were more involved.” She said crossly, crossing her legs angrily. “It’s his word against ours and since I’m his Alpha, I’d probably be able to refute most of it as my Omega being over emotional and hysterical over a fight but–”

“But?” Tiberius raised an eyebrow. “But what?”

“But–” she said again. “He made friends while he was in that horrible little town. Other Alpha’s that would vouch that we snatched him against his will. He obviously had someone patch him up, so there might be a doctor that would testify that he had been branded against his will.”

A frustrated sigh. “Not to mention, we told him that we followed Colonel Rhodes out West, so there’s another witness.”

“Yeah but he’s a negr–”

“It doesn’t matter.” she cut him off, slicing her hand through the air to silence him. “He grew up in the Stark household, all the money in the Stark name goes to him– my two years as his mate will be overlooked by an Alpha with a life long friendship.”

“So what do you propose we do?” Tiberius finally asked. “Because it seems like every way we look at it, Tony being alive is basically going to ruin us.”

“Us?” Sunset shook her head. “No no no. This would be where we part ways. I’m going to go back to New York and liquidate every asset I have and I don’t care what you do.”

“So let me get this straight.” Tiberius’ eyes flashed red. “When you wanted me to come along on this little cross country trek and hunt down your runaway mate, it was we? We were looking for
him. *We* were following the Colonel. *We* had to find a way to get *our* money back. But now that the situation has changed, it’s every man for himself?*

“Every woman.” She corrected. “But either way you say it, the fact remains the same– I want nothing to do with you from now on, so I suggest you—”

A knock on the train car door interrupted her rant, and the Alpha stopped mid sentence, pivoting in her seat to lay a heated glare at the Beta guard standing in the entryway.

“I cannot fathom *any* reason so important for you to be interrupting me right now.” She said calmly, coolly, in that oddly terrifying way that all women seem to have– quiet and collected and leaving some unfortunate person a few seconds from certain death. “So whatever that reason is? You need to say it now and say it quickly.”

“Uh–” to the Beta’s credit, he heard every bit of *deadly* in the Alpha’s tone, and instead of venturing further into the car, he lay a telegram on the nearest table and backed out as quickly as he could.

“Bring that to me.” She ordered and Tiberius outright *laughed* at her.

“Right. Because after your entire ‘*no it’s just me*’ speech you think I’m still going to play errand boy for you?” The Alpha stood to his feet and straightened his jacket with a quick jerk. “No thanks. Have a nice ride back to New York. I’m going to whole up at ye old whore house for a few days and then mosey on my way.”

As he passed the table, Tiberius knocked the telegram to a ground in a show of complete pettiness, and if Sunset wouldn’t have been so paralyzingly angry, she might have thrown a chair through the window at him.

*Infuriating Alpha.* He had never been as invested as she was in this project, spending his family’s money without a care, just as happy slumming it with the filth as he was dancing and sipping champagne at the White house and *ugh* Sunset loathed him.

When the deal with Hammer had gone south, Tiberius had rolled his eyes and sighed over it and would have been perfectly content to leave it be. He had ships after all, trading routes all over the world with his family name attached to them. It would be a few lean years in the Stone household, but he would recover, so he wasn’t stressing out.

Sunset on the other hand, would have to sell everything she owned just to get by, and if Tony decided to go public with the truth of her involvement with Hammer’s unintentional massacre, and how she’d hurt him and kidnapped him– once that all went public she would be need every penny possible to try and flee the States.

She had friends in England that could set her up, old family friends who would help her re-establish a business… she could survive this if she could just get back to New York and get things moving.

Calmed down, a plan forming in her mind, Sunset crossed the car and knelt to pick up the telegram, unfolding it and scanning the contents quickly.

*Ms Bain.*

*At the request of one of my family’s close personal friends, I have decided it has become necessary to pay you and Mr. Tiberius Stone a visit. Please sit back and enjoy your train ride, I look forward to our upcoming rendezvous in St. Louis.*
Regards.

JARVIS.

“Jarvis.” Sunset repeated on an exhale, and the telegram fell from suddenly trembling fingers. “Oh, fucking hell–”

She gathered her skirts up and made a dash for front of the train, wrenching the door to the dining car open and knocking over chairs as she went, banging on the engine car door frantically. “Open up! Open up now!”

“Ms. Bain.” The Alpha that opened the door looked her over calmly. “Did you need something?”

“I need my train moving now.” She forced herself to straighten, take a deep breath so the conductor wouldn’t think anything was amiss. “I’ve had a slight change of plans and we are no longer going to St. Louis. I would like to go South first, and then North along the coast until we reach–”

“Apologies.” The Alpha tipped his hat but his stony expression never changed. “But we will be going directly to St. Louis.”

“The hell we will!” She snapped. “I own this train and that means you work for me so–” her eyes widened when she caught sight of the monogram on his uniform, a scripted J in bright blue thread, standing out against the black of his uniform.

“Oh.” she murmured. “Oh no.”

“Sit back and enjoy the train ride, ma’am.” he tipped his hat again. “But be sure we will rendezvousing with my employer in St. Louis.”

“Oh.” Sunset said again, still trying to wrap her mind around how quickly her plan had gone to shit. “Um–”

“This way, Ms. Bain.” An Alpha she had never seen before, also in the black uniform with a blue monogram, stepped up behind her. “I think you’ll enjoy the train ride more from either your sleeping car or even your sitting room, but you will be confined to one or the other for the duration of the journey.”

“I–I–” Sunset couldn’t do more than gape when the Alpha took her elbow and started walking her back towards the car.

Out the window, she caught sight of Tiberius struggling between two more Alpha’s, shouting, “Let me go! Let me go! I wasn’t breaking any rules, the Madame knows me! She knows me, I wasn’t doing–” He oofed when they tossed him into the dining car. “What the hell!!?”

“It’s mildly amusing that you assume we are bringing you back to the train because you offended the Madame.” One of the Alpha’s said blandly. “And yet you are completely unconcerned about the deaths you caused and the kidnapping charges being brought against you.”

“Oh fucking hell.” Tiberius thunked his head back on the floor. “You’re with Jarvis, aren’t you?”

“Enjoy the train ride.” Was all the Alpha said, locking the door behind him as he went.

“Jarvis?” Tiberius leveled an exasperated look at Sunset. “You failed to mention Jarvis knew about us. Do you know what kind of trouble we are in?!”
Sunset didn’t answer, folding her arms tightly across her chest, eyes wide and skin pale.

She knew exactly what kind of trouble they were in.

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“You need to eat something.” Clint handed Tony a piece of jerky. “It’s not exactly Valkyries usual fare but it’s edible. Sam’s special blend of spices.”

“Salt and pepper?” Tony quipped, and Sam turned from saddling his horse long enough to send him a dirty look.

“And paprika.” Clint defended his Alpha and blew Sam a kiss. “Really though Tony, please eat something, I haven’t seen you take a single bite since our whole snatch and toss routine and I can’t have you expiring out here on the trail yeah? That will really piss Steve off.”

Tony grimaced at the thought of the Alpha being pissed off, and took the offered snack.

“I was only teasing, you know.” Clint peered a little closer at Tony. “About Steve being pissed off? Don’t look so worried baby, you know he’d never be more than a little cross where you’re concerned.”

Tony didn’t answer, and the other Omega pushed into his space, weaving his fingers through the thick hair and bumping their noses. “Tony. Tony. What’s wrong?”

“Alpha’s being angry makes me nervous.” Tony mumbled, trying to avoid Clint’s gaze. “I don’t like it.”

“I’ve watched you stand there and shout back at a red eyed, spitting Alpha with six inches and a hundred pounds on you.” Clint denied. “No way that’s the problem. What’s going on?”

Tony sighed, tried to pull away but Clint held him fast. “Nu-uh, tell me the truth. What this thing with you and being jumpy around Steve?”

Silence for a few minutes as Tony tried to find the right words, and just as Clint was going to ask again, he whispered, “I’m not the same person Steve thought I was. If he would have been angry with me before, I probably could brush it off because it would be petty things, small disagreements, nothing important. But now–”

“But now what?”

“Now there’s all these lies.” Tony made a helpless sort of gesture. “I’m not the same person and if he’s angry at me now there’s all these things behind it, all these valid reasons for him to take a small thing like being upset that I’m not eating and blow it up into a fight that makes him never want to talk to me again and–”

“Whoa whoa whoa.” Clint shook his head. “Nope. Tony, stop that. Stop that. I thought you and Steve made up last night? I overheard something sappy and gross about him taking you home? Where is all this coming from?”

“He says he wants to take me home.” He closed his eyes wearily. “But what happens when we get to Wildrock and people start asking questions and he has to remember everything I lied about? What happens when he starts to resent me in a month? In a week? When we try to be intimate and he sees
the scars and–"

“First of all.” Clint held him tighter, his heart breaking for his friend. “First of all, Wildrock is home, yeah? And it might be nosiest, most gossip mongering burg this side of Charleston–”

“Charleston?”

“Have you ever heard Southern women gossip, Tony? It’s practically a sport down there. But listen, Wildrock might be town full of busybodies, but if you think for one second that they aren’t going to pull together and support you? You’re wrong. Everyone is going to hope you and Steve ran away to get married and Sam and I were witnesses, and those that know different aren’t going to open their mouths.”

“Well yeah, but–”

“And as far as Steve?” Clint purred something soft and reassuring when Tony’s eyes filled with tears. “Honey, if you flashed those puppy dog eyes at him and pulled him towards a bed I guarantee there wouldn’t be an issue ever with that sort of thing.”

“But what about–”

“And about the secrets.” The deputy sighed. “Can’t say we weren’t all shocked Tony, but I’ll be real honest with you right now. Steve probably never learned your name at all. From the moment you and he had that romance novel first meeting where he got to see you shouting at the mayor? You’ve been labeled ‘mine’ in that Alpha’s brain, and your actual name don’t matter at all. He calls you Mr. Carbonell because that’s what everyone else call you, not because that’s how he sees you.”

“Never learned my name, huh?” Tony finally smiled a little bit. “You think?”

“I promise.” Clint said earnestly. “But the only way you’re going to know for sure is if you give him a little encouragement. Just a look, Tony, and that Alpha will be tripping over himself to prove to you how much you are his. That’s what you want, right?”

A blush, painting across Tony’s cheeks accompanied by a shy, hopeful smile, and Clint grinned before planting a rather loud kiss on Tony’s mouth.

“That’s what I thought.”

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Steve led their group across the territory at a brisk pace, as fast as they could push the horses without over-tiring them too quickly since there was at least another day and a half of solid riding ahead of them.

A quick break for lunch, Sam and Steve keeping watch while the horses rested and Tony and Clint curled up together for a short nap, and then they were on the trail again, heading West and then South in as straight a line they could manage to get them back to Wildrock.

Steve let Sam take point after another quick stop for water, pulling Nomad back until he was riding next to Tony, close enough that they could talk.

“You doing alright?” He asked, blue eyes taking in the tired droop to Tony’s shoulders, the listlessness in his movements. “You look exhausted.”
“I uh–” Tony cleared his throat and sat a little straighter on his horse. “I haven’t been sleeping real well. Not since Rhody left, so you know. A week or more?”

“You didn’t sleep last night? I thought you’d be relaxed with Clint around.”

“Sheriff Rogers.” Tony managed a little snark in his tone. “If fresh air burns my nose and I’m terrified of freckles, how do you think I feel about sleeping outside?”

“Right.” Steve tried not to smile so big, but it was so good to hear Tony teasing him, even if it was just a tiny bit. “What was I thinking?”

“I can’t imagine.” Tony returned, but then he hesitated. “Um, Steve. Where’s Bucky?”

Silence from the Alpha, and Tony’s heart sank. “Oh no. What happened? Is he– Steve, is he–!”

“No.” Steve interrupted when he heard the panic in Tony’s voice. “No, Tony, he’s not– he’s fine. I mean not fine, but fine enough. There was a shoot out in Lofsgreen when we went after you and Bucky took one to the shoulder. Doc had to take his arm but–”

“Shit.” Tony jerked in his seat and the horse nickered in alarm. “Is that my fault? Is that because of me?”

“No.” Steve reached over and steadied the gelding. “Tony, it happened because Bucky is a good Deputy and went after the bad guys when a citizen of his town was kidnapped. He was doing his job, and he got hurt for it, but he would have done the same for any one of the people in Wildrock, do you understand?”

“I–I–” Tony ran a hand through his hair in agitation. “But–”

“Natasha’s been there with him the entire time.” Steve added, knowing it would make Tony feel better. “She was in there with Doc, was there when he woke up, spent the night with him. He’s fine, Tony.”

“If you say so.” He said quietly.

“So.” Steve clicked his tongue at Nomad to keep the big horse moving, and changed the subject. “You’re a Stark, huh?”

“Uh, yep.” Tony scratched at his chin self consciously. “I’m a Stark.”

“So where did Carbonell come from?”

“That’s my Ma’s family name.” Tony explained. “Italian. She never really fit the mold of what a Stark Omega was supposed to be, or at least she never did according to Grandma Stark. I never really fit the mold either, so when I ran away I thought it seemed appropriate. And you know, it’s familiar enough that I wouldn’t forget to answer to it.”

“What do you mean, fit the mold.”

“Ma was–” he smiled wistfully. “She was wild. Never wore her hair back like she was supposed to. Would hold her skirts up and chase after me even though the stuffy matriarchs of the other families thought it was indecent. Dad would say something and Ma would disagree and she would take him to task right then and there instead of staying quiet like a good Omega. She once walked right up to an Alpha and threw a glass of wine in his face and walked away and when we asked her why–”

Tony’s smile grew. “She said it was because he had been eyeing her like she was a piece of meat.
and she was tired of it.”

“I can see you doing all of those things.” Steve said warmly, **approvingly**, and Tony blushed a little bit.

“My problem was I wasn’t as business minded as my father would have liked. He didn’t have an issue with an Omega taking over his company, but he wanted me to be as ruthless as he was, as focused and relentless when it came to making money, and I’m not like that all. I preferred to tinker on my projects and mess around in my work shop and invent things and--”

“**Invent?**”

“Mm-hmm.” Tony steered his horse around a rocky patch and sent an uncertain glance towards the Alpha. “I designed the engines that run in the big trains on the coast, and several aspects of the new, smaller engines as well.”

When the Alpha only stared at him, Tony twisted his lips into an uneasy smirk and asked, “Come now Sheriff Rogers. Surely you didn’t think I was teaching school because it’s easy! I’m something of a genius, teaching children about basic maths is about as complicated as tying my boots.”

“I dunno, Tony.” Steve took a chance and sent him a wicked look. “When Omega’s come as pretty as you, we don’t expect them to have any brains.”

“My god.” More relieved than he wanted to admit over Steve teasing him, Tony snarked right back, “Do you flatter all the Omegas like this? How on earth are you still single?”

Steve wet his lips and grinned. “Tony, I don’t have to flatter anyone else. There isn’t a single Omega in Wildrock who thinks they have a chance at getting my attention, not since you rode into town.”

Tony didn’t answer that, but the pink in his cheeks was pretty enough to make the Alpha want to **howl**.

“You looked nervous when you told me you invent things.” Steve commented after another moment and watched the Omega stiffen. “Why?”

“In my experience, most Alpha’s don’t like to talk to Omega’s that are smarter than them by leaps and bounds.” Tony said dryly. “Hard to impress a potential mate who knows words longer than both your names put together.”

“Sunset didn’t like your intelligence.” Steve gathered. “Intimidated by it or just annoyed?”

“She’s smart in her own right.” Tony shrugged. “Just like Tiberius– all of our families are above average intelligence to some extent, how else would we be rich? But no, she uh– she didn’t like it when I could show her up.”

“And you being **you** showed her up every chance you got, didn’t you?” Steve winked at him and Tony couldn’t hide a smile.

“Sheriff Rogers, what exactly are you saying about my personality?”

“You know exactly what I’m saying, Mr. Carbonell.” He retorted. “It shouldn’t come as any surprise that I’m not shocked at all by your being--”

“Sunset and I were arranged.” Tony suddenly blurted, and just that quickly, every bit of lightheartedness was sucked from the conversation. “We were arranged, I didn’t choose her. And as
the Omega, I didn’t really have a choice or reason to back out of the marriage, and even though she could have broken off our engagement, she never did.”

“Oh.” Thrown by the change in direction, Steve worked to keep his tone even. “I… see.”

“I know this probably isn’t the best time to say all this.” Tony winced apologetically. “And I know that I’m ruining the moment between us, but I need to get it out, alright? I need you to– to at least know a few things before we get back to Wildrock, if that’s alright.”

“It’s fine, Tony.” Steve tried not to let any of his trepidation bleed into his words, but this was a conversation he wasn’t looking forward to having at all, not to mention one he had hoped to have when they were snuggled together somewhere safe and warm, not trotting across the countryside on horse back. “So you were arranged. That’s— I mean, I see why that would see like a good option for you.”

“No you don’t.” Tony shook his head, but not unkindly. “It’s different, when you’re as wealthy as we are, when the family lines go back that far. We are practically royalty, as far Society is concerned and that comes with certain rules and expectations and marrying into the right families to keep the money in the right hands… it’s a whole big thing.”

“…Okay.”

“I had no reason to think she and I wouldn’t match.” he hurried on. “But right before we were supposed to be wed, I couldn’t shake an awful feeling that something wasn’t right, so I wrote up contracts that transferred all my money and assets to Rhodey in case anything happened to me, and after we were married I–” the words faltered. “After we were married, I was glad that I put those safeguards in place.”

A muscle in Steve's jaw jumped as he ground his teeth. “When did she start hurting you, Tony?”

“Not right away.” Tony whispered, and Steve had to move Nomad closer to even catch it. “And not physically. It was little things— possessiveness at weird times and not at others. Wanting to control what I was doing, and then acting as if she didn’t give a damn what I did with my day. Taking things away from me, locking me away from my library and my workshop. Things that could always be explained if anyone asked about them, things that were so random and small that I started thinking I was imagining them, or maybe just over-reacting.”

“I would– I would argue with her? And somehow end up sharing her opinion and not knowing how she changed my mind. We would fight over something she did, and I would end up apologizing. It was weird, it was like—” Tony chewed at his lip as he tried to find the right words. “It was like things would happen, and then we would talk about it and she could convince me that they hadn’t happened and for whatever reason, I would believe her. I started doubting my own sanity for a while.”

“Tony–”

“I tried to be a good Omega.” he continued, even softer now. “Told myself that if I tried harder then things would change and they never did. She never did. I was never quite good enough to make it all stop.”

“Tony.” Anguished this time, the Alpha wanting to break something, thinking of Tony being manipulated like that.

“And then one day, it just changed.” Tony lifted one shoulder in a helpless shrug. “I found out about
one of her business ventures that would end up at least displacing an entire town, most likely killing people in the process and I lost it on her. Shouting and screaming and I made a scene in front of her business partners and she was furious with me.”

Steve didn’t respond, something awful curling in his stomach as he realized what was coming next.

“She had her men strap me to a bed and inked her family’s crest onto my skin.” Tony touched his chest gingerly. “As a reminder that I was hers. Hurt me like that just to prove a point, so that the next time I thought to open my mouth, I wouldn’t be quite so eager to share my opinion.”

“That’s what Colonel Rhodes wasn’t there to save you from.” Steve muttered and Tony nodded miserably.

“The first time was my wedding– he wasn’t there to stand up with me and for some reason he thinks that if he would have been there, things would have been different? And then the branding. I sent a message for him after it happened, and by the time he got to me an infection had set in.” Another touch at his chest. “I got so sick I couldn’t even get out of bed. I almost died.”

“What did you–” Steve swallowed back the rage and tried again. “You never reported her? Never tried to tell anyone what happened?”

“What could I say?” Tony shook his head. “Lots of Omega’s take their mate’s brand, and no one thinks anything of it. I couldn’t prove that it was done maliciously, and anything I did say could be chalked up to fever talk because of the infection. Everything she ever did could always be explained away as an accident, and it’s not a battle I could win, so I just gave up.”

“So when Colonel Rhodes showed up–”

“I told him to get me out of there.” Tony finished. “He nearly died trying to rescue me. The guards thought I was being kidnapped, so they fired at him and he took one through the leg, it’s why he walks with a limp when he’s tired. He got me to St. Louis and I contacted Pepper from there and–”

“And that’s how you ended up in Wildrock.”

“And that’s how I ended up in Wildrock.”

Steve was quiet, and Tony ventured a glance at him, fully expecting to see sadness or pity or disgust written across the Alpha’s face.

He could handle the sadness, of course any Alpha would be sad to hear about an Omega being abused. And he could handle the pity because it was a pitiful story- an Omega trapped in a marriage with an abusive-yet-not-abusive-enough-to-be-noticed mate.

What he couldn’t handle was the disgust, because Steve usually looked at him as if he were head over heels, as if Tony was the prettiest Omega he’d ever seen, as if the times they laughed together were Steve’s favorite. Only once had Steve looked at him different, and it was when Tony had stood in the doorway and told him the truth about who he was, and about who Sunset was.

Tony didn’t know if he could handle seeing that look again, but he would rather see it now than when they got back to Wildrock, so he risked a glance over at the Alpha.

But Steve didn’t look disgusted. There wasn’t a drop of pity in his eyes, or sadness in his expression or an ounce of disgust anywhere.

Instead, his eyes were blazing red, his voice just a notch above a rumble and as serious as death
when he promised, “Tony, she is never going to hurt you ever again. No one is ever going to hurt you again, do you understand?”

For the first time in a very long time, Tony actually believed it.

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Clint was the one to notice they had changed directions, and he urged his horse up to Sam’s to ask about it.

“Pepper has a house out here.” Sam said in explanation. “It’s a little cold to be sleeping on the ground, and on the off chance anyone is following us, it will throw them off the trail since we aren’t going right home.”

“Pepper has a house out here.” Clint repeated. “In the middle of nowhere in the middle of the territories?” Sam shrugged so the Omega shrugged too. “Yeah alright. After everything we’ve learned about her, a secret house isn’t actually all the surprising. So that’s where we are headed?”

“It will give Tony a chance to get some decent sleep, too.” Sam added. “A real bath, sleep in a bed, and if he and Steve need some alone time together…”

“Ah, I see.” Clint nodded sagely. “But what about me? What if I feel the need for some decent sleep, a real bath and some alone time?”

“Does your alone time include me?”

“It’s not really alone time if there’s an Alpha present.” Clint griped, but let his eyes trail slowly down his mate’s body, lingering specifically over his lap. “But I will make an exception if you do that one specific thing that I like so much.”

“High maintenance Omega, you like all the specific things I do.”

Clint sighed happily and kneed his horse on a little faster. “You’re damn right about that.”

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“What is this?” Tony asked as they crested a hill and started down into a shallow valley, heading towards a house nearly invisible in the trees below. “Where are we?”

“The house belongs to Pepper.” Steve turned Nomad towards the small stables. “And apparently, so does most of the land we just crossed. She told us we could use the house if we needed to and it got pretty cold last night.” A side ways glance at the Omega. “I figured you would rather sleep in a bed than out on the ground, right?”

“A real bed after a week on the train sounds amazing.” Tony admitted. “I knew she was buying land up around Wildrock but I didn’t realize how much. This is all hers?”

“You should see the map.” Steve slid off Nomad and reached to help Tony off as well, not able to ignore the way Tony’s eyes went wide and then very very fragile when Steve’s hands landed around his waist. “Why don’t you and Clint get inside the house and Steve will take care of the horses.”

“Steve.” from the Omega, barely audible, and Steve bent to brush their noses together.
“Tony. Get inside, get warm, get cleaned up. I’ll be in soon.”

“Steve–” Tony said again, just as quietly, standing on his toes so their foreheads touched too. “Are you angry with me?”

“No.” A quick shake of the Alpha’s head. “No, Tony. I have questions. Lots and lots of questions, but they can all wait, alright? We don’t have to deal with it tonight.”

“Are you sure?”

“Sweetheart.” Steve rumbled and Tony’s eyes fell at the endearment. “Tony, tonight I’d really like it if we could skip the talking and just lay together. I’d love to just hold you for a little bit, because a few days ago I didn’t know if I’d ever see you again. I won’t stay in your room the whole night, or very long at all if you don’t want me to but please–”

“Stay with me.” Tony whispered, flattening his hand over Steve’s chest. “I don’t want to sleep alone.”

The Alpha picked up Tony’s hand and kissed his knuckles, then his palm and put it back over his own heart, gathering him close. “I’ll stay with you, baby.”

Tony let himself melt against Steve’s body, let himself lean into warm and solid and safe, and when Steve bent to rumble in his ear, crooning something unintelligible but sweetly comforting, Tony tipped his head back and purred until the Alpha held him even tighter.

“I didn’t choose her.” Tony murmured. “But if I had a choice in the matter…” he let the words trail off but Steve heard it loud and clear.

*If I had a choice, I’d choose you.*

“I’ll be in soon.” Steve whispered when Clint came to find Tony, and didn’t look away until the Omega’s disappeared into the house.

“Sheriff?” Sam said, and Steve turned around. “You gonna take care of that Omega, right? Make things right between you?”

“Is this a shovel talk, Sam?” Steve grinned and pulled Nomad’s saddle off so he could start wiping the horse down. “Where you threaten me if I don’t treat Tony right?”

“Hey.” Sam’s voice dropped. “The Colonel ain’t the only one that’s got a spot to bury asshole Alpha’s, you know?”

“I’ll take care of him, Sam.” Steve held his friends stare until Sam nodded in satisfaction. “I promised him no one was ever going to hurt him again, and I meant it.”

“See that you keep that promise.” Sam warned. “He might not be my Omega, but he was my friend before you even knew he existed, you know?”

“I know, Sam.” Steve moved to Tony’s horse and started wiping him down as well. “But he is my Omega, and if I have my way, he’s going to be nothing but smiling and happy and taken care of for the rest of his life.”

Another glance towards the house. “I aim to start working on the plan just as soon as I get inside.”
Chapter Summary

Surprise! (no one is surprised, I know) there is now 23 chapters to this fic! Two more left after this one! I needed more words to finish up their happily ever after.
Yeehaw for some smut!

Also, if the feels in this chapter don’t fuck you up, you have no heart and that’s just the truth.

It took almost an hour for the Alpha’s to finish taking care of the horses, to track down food, haul fresh water from the well and carry in extra firewood to keep two bedrooms warm until the sun rose. By that time, both of the Omegas had taken quick baths in semi-warm water and were snuggled together in blankets in front of the fire Clint had started in the living room, curled up on the couch with their legs entwined.

“Pretty boy here had contributed exactly nothing to the evening.” Clint ruffled Tony’s hair fondly when Steve and Sam got into the house for the night, barring the door behind them. “But we love him any way.”

“Why would I ever need to learn how to build a fire?” Tony retorted, smacking Clint’s hand away. “I don’t like the outdoors so it’s not like I spend time camping, and I have people to build me fires so–”

“People?” Clint started laughing. “Who are these people?”

“Tonight it was you.” He huffed. “You built a fire, didn’t you? Tonight you’re my people.”

“My god, he gets to admit he’s rich and now he’s a prima donna.” Clint messed with Tony’s hair again just to make him squawk. “Does this mean that my humble abode will no longer be an acceptable place for us to be naked together? Now we’re gonna need silk sheets and velvet curtains before your rich New York ass comes over?”

“Have you ever laid on silk sheets, Clint?” Tony rolled his eyes. “You’ll slide right off of them. Not as fun as you would think. And if you start calling me New York I’m going to start calling you–mmph!”

He shut up when Clint leaned over and smooshed their mouths together in a long kiss. “What was that for?”

“Just glad to have you back, Tony.” Clint murmured and kissed him again. “Been a hell of a week and for a while there we didn’t know if everything would work out, so–”

“It has been a hell of a week.” Sam interrupted and the Omega’s smiled at each other before pulling apart. “So why don’t we get started on our night, huh? Come on, mate. I picked out the big bedroom for us.”

“Oooh the big bedroom!” Clint waggled his eyebrows and laughed when his Alpha bent and
scooped him right up from the floor, calling a goodbye over his shoulder as they went, a door down the hall shutting behind them.

“So they got the big bedroom, huh?” Tony smiled shyly, more nervous than he wanted to admit over spending the night with Steve. “Are we stuck sleeping in the broom closet then?”

“No, honey.” Surprisingly, Steve looked just as nervous as Tony did, crouching down in front of him and reaching for his hand. “Nothing close to a broom closet. This house has got a bedroom on this floor, and two or three above us, so Sam and Clint are sleeping down here and you and I are upstairs. It’s been a stressful few days for them, and a stressful several days for us so I figured we all needed our privacy, yeah?”

“Yeah.” Tony tilted his head, wondering why the usually unflappable Alpha sounded anxious. “Some privacy sounds good. Sleeping in the sitting car of the train wasn’t exactly comfortable and we all know how I feel about sleeping outside. I got to say, I’m really looking forward to a pillow and a half decent mattress.”

When the Alpha only nodded, Tony tilted his head and asked, “Steve, is everything alright?”

“Everything’s fine.” Steve budged closer, his hand hovering above Tony’s knee for a few seconds before rubbing at his thigh carefully. “Um, Tony, will you tell me—when you were with Sunset did you two—? I mean did she ever—? You two are mated or were mated, I mean, so did you—?”

“No.” Tony interrupted, trying to meet Steve’s eyes and frowning when the Alpha kept looking away. “No, we didn’t. I didn’t want anything like that with her.” A pause, and then, “Why are you asking? Would it matter if we…had?”

“No.” He turned Tony’s hand over and kissed his palm. “Nothing that’s happened in the past few weeks changes anything between us, Tony, not as far as I’m concerned. I don’t care about any of that. About anything that didn’t happen or anything that—might have happened.”

“Well then why did you ask?” Tony knew he sounded defensive, but he couldn’t help it. He didn’t know why Steve had switched from confident and sweet in the stables to nervous and unsure here in the house and it was making him jumpy, his heart rate picking up as he waited for the Alpha to explain. “If it doesn’t matter then why did you ask? Why are you bringing it up now after we decided to spend the night together.”

“You said you didn’t choose her.” Steve said softly, worriedly. “And I know you meant for marriage but I didn’t know if you meant anything else, too.”

“If I meant anything—Oh.” Tony sagged back against the couch in realization. “Oh no, you thought I meant—”

The Alpha’s blue eyes filled with something a lot like fear and Tony shook his head quickly. “No, Steve. Don’t do that. Don’t think like that. Sunset was never very interested in that sort of thing with me unless I was in heat, and since I’m not in heat—” he raised his eyebrows meaningfully. “—other than talking at me, she left me alone. Okay? Okay? She left me alone. Oh, Alpha—”

Tony’s voice broke, too floored by what was so clearly love in Steve’s eyes to realize what he’d said, too stunned by the enormity of everything that had happened to care.

“Alpha.” Tony scooted off the couch and onto his knees in front of Steve, putting them eye to eye and nose to nose so he could reach for the Alpha with both hands, trilling into his ear and murmuring, “I’m fine. I’m fine, you came for me and rescued me and no one hurt me and now I’m
here and safe and you’re going to keep me warm–”

“I’m sorry I asked.” Steve scooted even closer, quietly loving the way the Omega shifted to hold him so tight. “I’m sorry I asked Tony, but I was so worried about you, I almost lost my mind. I kept imagining all these terrible things and I didn’t know what she or that other Alpha would do to you and I didn’t want to ask you about it in front of Sam or Clint but I had to know if you were okay–”

The words roughened into a growl. “I know I should be the one comforting you, you’re the one that has been scared, but damn it, I was so worried I had lost you for good and I didn’t know what I would do if that happened.” Steve was trembling now, his big frame quaking beneath Tony’s hands.

“I didn’t know how the hell I would go back to Wildrock if you weren’t coming home with me, sweetheart.” He pushed the blanket off Tony’s shoulders and buried his nose in the Omega’s neck, taking deep breaths in to catch every bit of Tony’s muted scent, lips moving against the scarred skin as he murmured, “Tony, Tony, honey I need–”

He stopped, dragged in a shaky breath and whispered, “You called me Alpha?”

“I–” Feeling foolish, Tony started to say he hadn’t meant to say it, that it was just a slip up, but then Steve’s teeth landed over his pulse point, over his bonding spot, digging in enough to make him gasp, the Alpha mumbling a quiet please, please, honey against his heart beat.


Tony waited for the irritation that had always flooded him after calling Sunset Alpha, the way it felt like he had to force the word out, the way it had always sat like sand at the back of his throat, but it didn’t happen this time.

“Alpha.” he said again, just so see, and there was nothing but an overwhelming sense of right, so he put his lips on Steve’s ear and purred, “Alpha…”

“Let me take you to bed.” Steve stood to his feet abruptly and brought Tony with him, the Omega’s slight weight barely registering in his arms. “Take you to bed and keep you warm and safe and then I’m never letting you go, do you understand me?”

“Sheriff Rogers.” Tony tried for snark, he really did, but it came out breathy and a little wanton as Steve started climbing the stairs. “Carrying an Omega up the stairs is a little wild don’t you think? I’m a civilized Omega from the East Coast, I’m not used to this sort of thing!”

“A civilized Omega from the East Coast, hm?” Steve didn’t put Tony down until they had made it into the bedroom, setting him carefully on his feet next to the bed, and Tony’s eyes widened when the Alpha put a possessive hand at the back of his neck, the blue eyes sliding dark red.

“Well Mr. Carbonell, this is the wild wild West. And around here, there’s only one way for an Alpha to show an Omega exactly how he feels.”

“And it starts with carrying me up the stairs?”

“And it starts with carrying you up the stairs.” Steve confirmed, bending to lay a light kiss on Tony’s lips. “But I want you to be warm, so I’m going to stoke this fire up. And I want you to be comfortable, so why don’t you fix the bed the way you want. And I want you to be happy–” another kiss and Tony stood on his toes to chase it. “– so if there’s something you want or don’t want or anything like that, I want you to tell me because I’m going to do whatever it takes to keep you smiling tonight, sweetheart.”
“Steve–”

“I told you months ago.” Steve whispered. “I told you months ago that I wanted to take care of you in any way you’d let me. I meant it then and I mean it now. Are you going to let me take care of you like this, Tony?”

Tony didn’t know how even begin to find the words to answer that, so instead he did what any Omega in love would do—tipped his head back and then to the side, closing his eyes and purring low in his throat until the Alpha growled.

“Omega.”

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“Christ you’re beautiful.” Steve breathed the words into Tony’s neck, palm resting feather light over the Omega’s heart, thumb stroking over the scars. “Sweetheart, you are so beautiful.”

“Steve…” Tony fell back into the pillows and moaned when teeth scraped over his bonding mark. “You don’t have to–don’t feel like you have to–”

“Don’t have to what?” Steve scooted down on the bed until his could get his mouth over the ragged skin, tracing the harsh lines with his tongue and then his lips, and Tony dug his fingers into the short blond hair and keened when the Alpha lay harder against him.

“What don’t I have to do, honey?” Steve trailed his hand down the curve of Tony’s back to his hip, then patted at his leg, encouraging him to open further. “Don’t have to get my mouth on every inch of you like I’ve wanted to do since we met?”

“Since we met?” Tony arched his back and swore under his breath when Steve rocked into him. “Do you mean that?”

“Tony, if you don’t think I was gone on you from the moment we met, you’re wrong.” Steve shifted so he was up on his knees, bending over Tony’s body to crush a kiss to his mouth, tongue tracing the seam of the Omega’s lips until Tony opened beneath him with a quiet moan. “Pretty Omega, I’ve wanted you for so long.”

“You like calling me Omega.” Tony realized and Steve nodded over a hungry groan, sucking Tony’s bottom lip into his mouth and biting down hard enough to make the Omega squeal before soothing the hurt with his tongue. “I didn’t realize–” Tony’s voice softened. “I didn’t realize how much of yourself you were holding back, how little you were acting like an Alpha around me.”

“You didn’t want me to act like an Alpha with you.” Steve pulled away so he could run his hands over Tony’s chest, down his ribs to the soft stomach, circling his fingers around Tony’s cock and stroking him lightly. “You were so adamant about not being courted, not being matched, that I tried not to do anything that would come across too forward but–”

Tony surged up to meet him, muffling whatever else Steve was saying in favor of wrapping both arms around the Alpha’s neck and kissing him lovingly.

“You were such a good Alpha to me even when I didn’t want you to.” Tony mumbled against his lips and Steve put both hands low on the Omega’s ass to yank him right up into his lap, both of them groaning when heated flesh met heated flesh. “You were courting me without actually courting me.”
“I was trying to give you what you wanted.” Steve tipped Tony’s head back and sealed his lips over the bonding spot at the base of his throat, mouthing over the scars and worrying a bruise onto the clear skin, one big hand spread over the perfectly round curve of Tony’s rear, squeezing and kneading until the Omega whined and spread his legs further, wriggling closer so they were fit tight together.

“Alpha’s know right away—” a sweet lap over his earlobe, Steve sucking on it lightly and a shudder ran through the Omega. “We know right away when we find the Omega we want. But you still deserved to be chased and courted and wooed and spoiled and treated right, so that’s what I tried to do, in all the ways you would let me.”

“But what—” Tony mewed when the thick Alpha cock pulsed against his own, a trail of pre-come sliding between them and easing the motion. “What about what you—” Steve thrust up against him and the whiskey warm eyes snapped shut in pure pleasure. “Alpha, what about what you want?”

“I want you to call me Alpha again.” Steve rumbled, and bit down hard, hard enough that Tony tossed his head back and screamed when his body lit up with sparks, the Alpha’s teeth in his neck making him wet.

“Oh, Omega.” Steve groaned when the scent of Omega arousal hit his nose, his nostrils flaring and eyes shading when he felt drops of slick trickle onto his thighs. “Omega, you taste so good, scent so sweet, I need—I need—”

Tony yelped when Steve pinned him back onto the pillows, pushing the blankets and pillows away until Tony’s nest of blankets had been destroyed and they were the only two on the bed, Tony eyes wide as he stared up at the Alpha, Steve’s eyes dark red as he stared back down at him.

“Call me Alpha.” he rumbled, nudging Tony’s thighs apart with his knees, and stretching out on top of him again, lining their bodies up from feet to shoulders. “Sweet, perfect Omega call me Alpha again.”

“Alpha.” Tony whispered, and then arching his back and crying “Alpha!” when blunt fingers swiped through the wet between his legs and pressed at his entrance. “Ah ah Steve–!”

“Alpha.” He growled, and the Omega whimpered “Alpha…” when first one then two fingers split him, his cock jumping and spurting against his stomach when Steve stroked him just right. “Oh fuck that’s good– Alpha that’s so good–”

“Pretty Omega.” Steve hummed and leaned down to nuzzle at Tony’s cheek, running his nose along his jaw and up to the soft spot behind his ear to croon, “I’ve wanted to be with you for so long.” His fingers kept scissoring and stretching inside Tony’s wet heat until the Omega was tearing at the sheets and rolling his hips to force him deeper. “Tony, Tony, Tony I can’t wait to be inside you, I want to feel you coming around my knot.”

“Yes.” Tony dug his fingers into Steve’s shoulders, turning his head so Steve would kiss him, nibbling and licking through the Alpha’s mouth. “Yes, Steve, Alpha, yes.”

“You’re sure?” A groan punched from the Alpha’s chest when Tony bit over his bonding mark, tonguing over the clear skin and purring happily. They couldn’t officially bond yet not without Tony being in heat and not with Sunset still out there somewhere, but knowing the Omega wanted to bite him was enough to make Steve’s cock throb, the base aching as his knot started to form.

“Almost six months.” Tony breathed out, hooking a leg around Steve’s waist and rubbing against him languidly, thoroughly enjoying watching the Alpha’s eyes dilate as they moved together.
“Almost six months we’ve been doing this and I kept telling you no to knotting me or biting because there was so many secrets and I didn’t know how to tell you all of them but now—” he bit down again and the Alpha jolted, heavy hands pinning him to the bed as Steve’s instincts took over, the need to claim rising in his chest. “–now there aren’t any secrets between us so–”

He moaned into a long kiss, falling willingly pliant when Steve murmured “Settle” and started moving down his body again, feeling around for a pillow to slide under Tony’s hips, pulling his fingers free and sucking them into his mouth to collect every bit of slick, moaning and twisting his tongue in a way that had Tony shifting his hips and whimining eagerly.

“Next time, beautiful.” Steve promised and Tony’s mouth fell open in a desperate little pant. “Next time I’ll use my mouth, I know you love that, but this time–”

The first push between Omega’s legs, the blunt pressure at his hole was almost too much, and Steve had to pull Tony’s hands from his face, pressing their foreheads together and covering his mouth in a sweet kiss, whispering, “No baby, no don’t hide from me, let me see you, let me see all of you, hold onto me instead, don’t hide from me, I’ve got you.”

Tony kissed Steve back as hard as he could, scratching down the Alpha’s back and whimpering as he opened wet and tight around the Alpha’s cock, heavy and hot and thick moving into him in a steady slide until Steve was seated as deep as he could be, the edge of his knot bumping into Tony’s rim.

“Oh oh oh.” Tony’s chest was heaving, his eyes shut tight, fingers digging into Steve’s side. “Oh fuck, Steve–”

“You feel good, baby.” Steve dotted kissed everywhere he could reach on the Omega, across Tony’s forehead and down his nose and along his chin. “Tony, you feel amazing, so good around me.”

“Is this what it’s supposed to feel like?” Tony whispered and Steve pulled away to stare down at him. “Is this what it’s supposed to feel like? Warm and soft and– and–” he moaned when Steve inched closer, filling him even more. “–and close?”

“This is what it’s supposed to feel like, sweetheart.” Another kiss, slow and lingering. “When it’s right between a pair. When it’s right between us.”

“Tell me I’m a good Omega.” Even in this moment, when they were this connected, Tony looked vulnerable, bitter memories washing over him and tinging his faint scent sour. “Please?”

“You’re such a good Omega.” Steve promised, keeping the heartbreak from his eyes so Tony wouldn’t see it. “Such a good Omega, so sweet for me and perfect–God you’re so perfect, Tony, never been with an Omega so perfect, and so pretty.” Without pulling away, their mouths still nearly touching, Steve started to move, with drawing from Tony far enough that the Omega whined in protest, then sinking back in until their hips met, pulling out until Tony grabbed for him before stroking into the Omega’s core.

“You feel good, sweetheart.” Steve rasped as they moved together, slow and deep and easy, their bodies fitting together without even having to adjust, Tony’s knees falling open to accommodate the Alpha, the stretch just this side of too much but so good Tony could barely breathe over it, digging his nails into Steve’s back and panting for more.

“Such a good Omega, made for me, aren’t you? Made to be mine.” Steve kept talking, whispering into Tony’s ear, mouthing the words into his skin, the same thing over and over and over– “So pretty, Omega, every single bit of you, every inch of you is perfect.”
The Alpha braced himself over Tony’s body, holding most of his weight on one arm to leave his other free to circle Tony’s cock with his palm, pulling over him in steady strokes until the Omega was hooking his ankles around his waist and trying to force him closer, tightening to his center just to hear the Alpha curse.

“S’good.” Tony’s breath hitched, a flush rising in his cheeks. “S’good, Alpha, I need– can I have–”

Steve couldn’t help kissing him, words failing for the moment because he couldn’t remember a single time Tony hadn’t known what to ask for when they were together, the Omega usually so snarky and demanding and perfect– but like this, vulnerable and soft and needy and trusting– oh this was perfect too.

“I’ve got you.” Steve kissed him again and scooted up onto his knees, hands landing at Tony’s waist to hold him still, rolling his hips so each shallow stroke stabbed over a spot that had Tony nearly wailing, fistng at the sheets and arching his back, cock red and leaking from the tip, bouncing against his stomach with every thrust, so wet between his thighs that Steve was almost drunk on the scent, on the slick sound of them sliding together.

“Please–” Tony’s eyes snapped shut when Steve’s knot caught on his rim and tugged before giving again, the pressure making him shout. “Steve!”

“I’ve got you.” Steve promised. “I’ll take care of you, Tony, I promise, I promise–”

He snapped his hips forward, burying every inch of himself and his swelling knot as deep as he could and Tony shouted again, voice rising to a scream when Steve started stroking his cock again, slick soaked fingers circling the base and squeezing along the length, twisting over the sensitive head until the Omega was writhing on the bed, shoving his hips up to meet every one of the Alpha’s thrusts, automatically turning his head to bare his neck as he got closer, his basest instincts telling him that an Alpha would give him anything if he was being submissive and–

“Yes, Omega.” Almost frantic over the submissive display, Steve jolted forward, scenting up and down Tony’s neck and rutting into him hard and fast, his knot too swollen to even pull out now, tugging and stretching at Tony’s entrance until the Alpha was seeing stars, the pressure around his cock almost too much but not quite enough yet.

No, it wouldn’t be enough until Tony was coming first, squeezing tight around him, locked on his knot and purring in satisfaction so he rumbled, “Come for me, Omega, pretty Omega, perfect Omega so good you are so good for me, come on sweetheart, let me feel you come on my knot, come on–”

Tony’s whole body tightened as he came, his mouth falling open in a sweet, needy cry, spilling into Steve’s hand and all over his stomach, and then he was crying out again when Steve bit down into his neck, not quite breaking the skin but coming close, the sharp mix of pleasure and pain pushing him over the edge a second time, his cock pulsing weakly through another orgasm before he’d even come down from the first.

“Alpha.” Tony moaned, going boneless beneath Steve’s hands, heat rolling through him, up his spine and down to his toes, spreading through his veins until he was limp on the bed, head lolling into the pillows as he murmured, “Alpha yes…yes…”

“Tony–” Steve buried his face in the Tony’s neck, thrusting once, twice and finally coming with a growl that vibrated through his chest and into the trembling Omega, shaking through every pulse deep into Tony’s body, his knot locking them together as Tony whined over being so full.

“Tony, Tony–” Steve kept coming back again and again to Tony’s scarred bonding mark, nibbling at
the sensitive skin and wanting nothing more than to leave his own mark there, the knowledge that he had to wait driving his hips forward again and again in a subconscious primal attempt to make the Omega his in every way he could, to leave his mark some how, even if it wasn’t with his teeth.

“Sweet Omega.” he sighed, kissing away a muffled protest from Tony over him trying to get his knot deeper. “M’sorry, honey, I know you’re full but—” another light thrust and Tony whined louder, bumping their foreheads until Steve relaxed, easing the pressure inside the Omega. “I can’t help it.” he chuckled when Tony bit at his lip. “I can’t help it, I love being with you like this.”

“So I don’t– I don’t stink?” Tony was whispering, barely audible, fear lacing the words even though he was still slurring through the pleasure. “Steve, Alpha, do I stink? Because of—” he didn’t say her name, but he touched the faint lines of the mark Sunset had left on his neck.

“No.” Steve shook his head firmly, breathing in deep of the sweet scent that had just barely broke in the air as Tony had come. “No, sweetheart you don’t stink. You smell so sweet, so sweet, feels like I’ve been waiting forever to know what you scent like.”

“What do I scent like?” Tony was still whispering, weaving his fingers through Steve’s hair and tugging him back for a kiss. “Will you tell me?”

Steve started to tell Tony he scented like apples and cinnamon and cloves, the flavors of fall that the Omega loved so much, sweet and a little spicy, warm and comforting, but he changed his mind, framing Tony’s face in both of his hands and rubbing their noses together and whispered back. “You scent like mine, Omega. You scent like mine.”

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Tony whimpered when Steve pulled his knot free, but the Alpha hushed with him a sweet kiss, leaving the bed only long enough to find something to clean up with, wiping Tony’s stomach off and dabbing gently between his legs before pulling him back into his arms, spooning up behind him and holding the Omega tight.

“Steve.” Tony murmured, and Steve lay a sweet kiss on the back of Tony’s neck, his hand creeping up to rest over the scars on his chest. “That was— “

“I know.” Steve kissed him again. “Sweet Omega, I know. I’ve been waiting so long to be able to hold you like this.”

“M’sorry.” Tony was already falling asleep, predictably useless after coming and Steve smiled to himself over it. “M’sorry I made you wait.”

“You were worth the wait, baby.” he whispered. “Worth every time I had to hold myself back, worth every time I had to wonder what you were thinking, every time I wanted to call you Omega and couldn’t. You were worth it. I can’t wait to get you home.”

“Home.” Tony repeated over a yawn. “Can I still teach school?”

“Of course you can, Tony, why wouldn’t you be able to?”

“Sometimes Alpha’s don’t want their Omega to work.”

Steve crooned sweetly into Tony’s ear, having caught the their Omega, but knowing Tony was so tired that he probably hadn’t realized he said it. “The students would be upset if you came back home
but didn’t teach anymore. You’re everyone’s favorite school teacher, Mr. Carbonell.”

“I like that you still call me Mr. Carbonell.” Another yawn and Tony wriggled closer, a happy purr when the Alpha held him tighter. “Instead of Mr. Stark.”

“It’s just a name Tony. There are a whole list of sweet things I can call you that have nothing to do with your name.” Steve kissed Tony’s hair, then the soft spot behind his ear. “But if you really want to be called *Mister*—how do you feel about the last name Rogers?”

Tony hid his pleased smile in the pillow. “Let’s take it one day at a time, Sheriff Rogers. No need to rush things.”

“I wouldn’t dream of rushing things, Mr. Carbonell. I’ll wait as long as you need.”
Steve woke after a wonderful night’s sleep to a cold room, the sun just barely rising through the far window, and a warm Omega wrapped in his arms.

There was a pert bottom fit tight at his hips, a hand resting low on his thigh, and when Steve shifted away so he could go relieve himself, the Omega scrunched his nose sleepily and inched back until they were plastered together again, the hand at Steve’s thigh trying to keep the Alpha still.

“Good morning, beautiful.” Steve whispered, letting a growl curl the edge of the words, and Tony fought against a smile, burying his face in the pillow and squeezing at Steve’s leg again. “Let me up to use the bathroom and I’ll come right back.”

“You will?” Tony didn’t open his eyes, but his brow wrinkled and Steve’s heart hurt all over again, wondering how many times he had woken up alone in bed, or gone to sleep without anyone there when there should have been someone there.

“Sweet Omega.” he moved so he was leaning over Tony, pressing a long kiss to his cheek and nuzzling along his jaw line. “Sweet Omega, I will be right back.”

He was back in no more than a few minutes, but the Omega was already mostly asleep again, rolled over onto his half of the bed and hugging a pillow tight, so Steve slipped into the other side and pulled Tony back into his arms.

“Mmm.” A sleepy noise from the Omega, something content and trusting as he snuggled his rear back into Steve’s hips, and when fingers crept back to rest on Steve’s thigh again, they lingered at the curls at the base of his cock for a few seconds before dropping lower.

Steve’s breath hitched, but he mouthed a gentle kiss at the base of Tony’s neck and forced himself to settle.

Tony was definitely exhausted after everything that had happened in the past week or so, understandably emotionally raw after dealing with his unwanted Alpha for several days and most likely unsure of what was happening between them after all the things that had been said last night, and the last thing the Omega needed was some randy, possessive Alpha wanting to knot him before the sun even–

Tony moved again, and this time he shifted enough that Steve’s cock nestled between his cheeks, and as the Alpha hardened against him– rubbed over his hole.

“Tony–” Steve tried not to groan but oh Tony was still wet from the night before, fresh slick mixed with leftover strings of come dripping onto his cock and easing the way when he couldn’t stop a helpless thrust, wanting nothing more than to push the Omega onto his stomach and drive into him.

Settle. He told himself, but Jesus, Tony’s scent was all over the bed, apples and cloves mixed with the heavy scent of them, reeking of Alpha and sex and addicting enough that Steve started feeling light headed. It didn’t stop him from burying his nose in Tony’s throat and breathing in as deep as he could though, his hand creeping up from Tony’s waist to rest over his heart, then further up to curl around his neck in an instinctual, possessive hold.

Just as Steve was cursing under his breath, pulling himself out of a scent-induced haze to remember that putting his hand at Tony’s neck was something he should have asked about first, the Omega
tipped his head back further, enough that Steve could see that his eyes were still closed, a half smile on his lips and when Steve whispered, “Omega…?” Tony only purred, soft and sweet.

It was easy after that, for Steve to get a hand at Tony’s knee to hold him open enough to make room for him, filling him in a slow push, Tony gasping as he stretched around the thick length. There was a steady rumble coming from the Alpha by the time they were fully connected, moving in slow, shallow strokes so his hands were free to roam. Steve learned the lines of the scars across Tony’s chest and soothed them with his finger tips, palmed over the slender cock jutting against the Omega’s stomach and traced the sharp vee of the lean hips, all the while pressing into the softness of Tony’s ass, groaning over the tempting curves and lines of his Omega’s body.

“Alpha…” Tony mumbled, content to be held and touched and loved like this, with the sun slowly filling their room, the cold air banished as the heat between their bodies sparked, his memories of the time on the train seeming less and less important as the rumble from the Alpha grew into a growl, blunt teeth landing at his throat again and again as Steve fought the need to bite him.

Spooned together, weighted down by several blankets and with Steve’s heartbeat at his ear, Tony could have closed his eyes and drifted back to sleep if it weren’t for the steady pressure at his entrance, the Alpha’s knot tugging at his rim with every stroke. Pleasure built slowly between them, neither one wanting to rush the moment, but both still strung tight, overwhelmed by every light touch and shared breath.

After several minutes, Tony started to push his hips back against every gentle thrust, tightening around the Alpha rhythmically until Steve sucked in a hard breath and whispered, “M’close, Tony, close. Can I knot you?”

“Yes, Alpha.” Tony sighed and when Steve patted at his hip, rolled until he was lying on his stomach and spread his legs obediently, making room for the Alpha settle between his thighs again, smiling to himself when Steve caged him in with his arms.

He used to hate being face down on the bed, always preferring to see his Alpha when in bed, but Steve was murmuring in his ear, “Sweet, pretty Omega, so good for me. So good, baby, I love you like this, so beautiful, so damn beautiful.” and Tony thought he might very well love this position now.

It was easier to move when they lay like this, and Steve took him harder, his knot swelling faster and Tony gasped, grabbing at the sheets when it swelled to full size and locked them together. Full like this, the knot was shoved just right into Tony, pressing into him until he was right on the edge, lifting his hips up and rocking into the Alpha as best he could and mewling in frustration when Steve pushed him back to the bed, the Alpha’s weight forcing him still.

“Come on my knot.” Steve rasped, more of a growl than anything. “Perfect Omega, I know you can do it, show me. Come on my knot, show me that I’m enough for you.”

Tony didn’t stop to think about vulnerability in the Alpha’s voice right then, but he knew what Steve was asking for and was determined to give it to him, arching his back until every minute shift of the Alpha’s hips hit him perfectly, turning his head and purring coaxingly until Steve leaned down to leave another bruise on his neck, working his teeth over the pale skin until Tony’s eyes were fluttering closed and his toes were curling.

And then Steve whispered, “Tony Tony Tony, I need you—”

—and the Omega was coming, rubbing his cock into the sheets until he was spilling, his vision whitening out and eyes rolling back as he shook through his orgasm.
Steve was still talking to him, crooning soft things against his skin when Tony came back to himself and he startled when he realized they were on their sides again, stuck together around Steve’s knot, an uncomfortable twinge in his core telling him that the Alpha had already come.

“Oh.” Tony flushed. “Steve, I’m sorry I didn’t mean to blank out like that.”

“No.” Steve said hoarsely, mouthing a line of kisses up Tony’s neck to his ear. “No, sweetheart, don’t do that. That was beautiful, you are beautiful, the way you let go for me like that. Lovely. Gorgeous.” His voice roughened. “Perfect. Tony, you’re so perfect.”

He held Tony tight, one hand protectively over the Omega’s heart, the other low on his stomach, ignoring the mess in favor of cradling the swell of Tony’s belly, something primal telling him to hold where the Omega was fertile, where life would grow if they were mated, if this was heat, if Tony was his.

God. The thought made Steve drive his hips forward again, cock pulsing through a second rush of pleasure and Tony shuddered in his arms, trilling when the Alpha murmured a quiet apology.

“Sleep.” Steve managed after another minute, forcing the words out even though his mind was still reeling. “Sleep, sweetheart, it’s still early and we aren’t in a rush to get anywhere yet. I’ll be here when you wake up.”

“You will?” Tony asked again, not because he doubted Steve, but because he absolutely loved it when Steve whispered, “Of course.” as he was drifting off again.

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The next time Tony woke, the sun was up completely and Steve was smiling down at him before leaving a kiss on his nose and heading for the bathroom.

Always a sucker for warm spots, Tony rolled right into Steve’s, grabbing at the Alpha’s pillow to hug it tight and humming over the ache low in his core. They hadn’t really cleaned up last night, not wanting to be apart long enough to take care of it properly, and they had fallen asleep before cleaning up this morning so Tony was sticky and sore and covered in Steve’s scent and he loved it.

He hummed again, rubbing his nose into the sheets and sighing happily.

All the times with Sunset– even the good times, the times before he had realized what she was really like– none of them had been as good as it was with Steve. The Alpha had been sweet and gentle, handling Tony like he was precious and also like he couldn’t live without him, a desperate edge to each touch, his mouth nothing but worshipful, sweet words and lingering kisses even as Tony was coming apart.

Incredible.

This is what it’s supposed to feel like.

“Is that a smile I see?” Steve got back in bed, shaking his head over Tony taking his spot again and hauling the Omega back against his chest. “Hm, Omega? You happy this morning?”

“Sheriff Rogers, the sun is barely up, you can’t see my smile.” Tony denied, and the bed shook as Steve laughed into his hair. “Besides, I’m still sleeping. Go away and leave me alone.”

“Still sleeping.” Steve chuckled again, his lips trailing down Tony’s neck to the bruises he had left last night and the newer ones from this morning, tsking over the dark blue and purple. “Was I too
“I’m not sore I’m sleepy.” Tony snarked, and then quieter, “And a little sore. But I don’t care about that. You weren’t too rough.”

“Good.” Steve nibbled over Tony’s bonding spot, flicking his tongue out over the scars. “Because we’ve got to be on horses for the next eight hours or so—” Tony groaned out loud and Steve grinned. “– and I’d hate to think you were uncomfortable because of little ol’ me.”

“Sheriff Rogers.” Tony stretched and groaned, wincing as everything pulled. “I’m sure you’re well aware that there is nothing little about you.”

“I’m well aware, Mr. Carbonell.” Steve’s blue eyes were wicked, sparking with laughter and Tony briefly considered winging a pillow at him. “Now come on. Let’s go find some food and hit the road– it’s high time I got you home where you belong.”

Tony grumbled some more, and it took several minutes and quite a few coaxing kisses, but Steve finally got him out of bed and dressed, linking their fingers together as they headed downstairs.

“Tony!” Clint yelped when they finally made an appearance, vaulting out of his chair and dragging Tony closer to a window. “Were you attacked by a wild animal last night? Something tried to eat you! Look at all these bite marks! How did you survive?! Is that why I heard screaming?”

“You’re one to talk.” Tony rolled his eyes and flicked at the rather impressive hickey that Clint was sporting. “You look like you tried to wrestle with a sucker fish and lost.”

“Did he just call me a sucker fish?” Sam asked in the background and the Omega’s burst out laughing, wrapping each other in a long hug.

“He was good to you, right?” Clint muttered into Tony’s ear. “Because I’ll beat him black and blue if he wasn’t, I swear I will.”

“You know he was.” Tony whispered back, holding Clint tighter. “It was amazing.”

“So—” Clint leaned away and squinted at him. “Was it an apple or an orange?”

Tony pretended to think about it for a moment. “I’d say an apple.”

“Well they say one a day keeps the doctor away!” Clint cracked, and they both dissolved into laughter again, leaning against each other for support and letting the stress of the last several days wash away in the wake of such a terrible joke.

“Apple or orange?” Steve repeated. “Sam, did Clint just ask about the size of my—”

“Yep.” Sam finished his coffee and put his cup in the sink. “Yep he did, Sheriff. You know, Omega’s fuss all the time about us objectifying them? But I can guarantee I have never stood in a market and held up various pieces of fruit and compared my mate to them.”

“They do that in the market?!” Steve cried and Sam laughed clear out the door as he headed to get the horses.

“Okay, really.” As soon as the Alpha’s had left, Clint sobered up. “Really, was everything alright? Did you guys talk or anything? Do you at least feel like there aren’t any more secrets between you?”

“What needed to be said was said.” Tony leaned in to press their foreheads together. “And the things
that didn’t need to be said out loud were there too. I didn’t know that it was supposed to be like that
with an Alpha, Clint. I assumed what you and Sam have is special and it didn’t exist anywhere else
but—” a deep breath. “Oh my. The entire night was—”

“What Sam and I have is special, but you’re right, it is supposed to be like that with your Alpha. But
you know, you smell good.” Clint ducked his head to sniff over Tony’s neck. “I mean, you smell
like sex and Alpha which isn’t a bad scent on you anyway but you smell like—” a deep breath. “Like
apples. And cinnamon. Did you know your scent changed?”

“No.” Tony touched his neck self consciously. “When I asked Steve what I scented like when we
were knotted he said—” he blushed then. “Um, he said—”

“Hey.” Clint cut him off again with a sweet kiss to his lips. “Hey, there’s some things that are just
supposed to stay between mates. We can talk dirty about our Alpha’s and compare knots and dicks
and how good they are with their tongue all day long but when it comes to the sweet things, the
vulnerable things that they say when they hold us, that’s just for us, yeah? No one else needs to
know.”

“Yeah.” Tony blushed again, remembering Steve’s plea from the morning—Show me I’m enough for
you. “Yeah some things should just be between mates.”

“Or soon-to-be-mates?” Clint raised his eyebrows. “As soon as the Sunset issue stops stressing you
out, you should have a regular heat and that can happen, right?”

“Soon-to-be-mates.” Tony’s heart started pounding, an excited tremor running through him. “Right.”

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When they stopped for a noon break, Sam and Tony fixed up a few sandwiches and refilled water at
a stream while Steve pulled Clint to the side for a talk.

“I owe you an apology.” he began quietly. “When we were in Littlehill trying to find Tony, you
were trying to comfort me and I snapped at you and shoved you away and I never should have put
my hands on you at all, much less talked to you like that.”

“Ain’t no thing, Sheriff.” Clint waved off his apology. “You had every right to be snappy with me,
and it’s not like I don’t get all hot and bothered watching my Alpha be growly, and we got Tony
back anyway so it all ended up alright, yeah?”

“Clint.” Steve stepped forward and touched their foreheads together. “I’m sorry. As an Alpha I had
no right talking to you, an Omega, like that much less pushing you. As your boss, I had no right
talking to one of my Deputies that way and as your friend—” he softened his voice and Clint grinned,
trilling at him comfortingly. “As your friend, I’m sorry. You saddled up without hesitating at all and
rode out with me to track down my Omega and I am so thankful for you and your mate.”

“As your friend, I’m telling you it’s fine.” The Omega assured him. “As your Deputy, you can just
give me a small ‘having to deal with bullshit’ raise, and as an Omega, you can buy me something
pretty the next time you buy Tony something pretty, hm? We’ll call it even.”

“Thank you.” Steve rumbled and Clint shoved him away.

“Save that for your Omega. I don’t want your rumbles. I have my own Alpha for that noise.”
Steve was still laughing when they made it back to the make shift camp, and when Tony looked up curiously, Steve just reached out and snatched him into his lap, settling back against the tree with his arms full of Omega and a mouthful of sandwich.

Across the way, Sam did the same thing, sharing his lunch with his mate and trading kisses and teasing comments until they had to pack up again, the four of them content in the relative peace after so much stress.

“We should make Wildrock after dark.” Steve said, unhooking Nomad’s bags and putting them over Tony’s mount. “We don’t need to stop again unless you want to—”

“I don’t want to.” Tony cut in and Clint echoed his agreement.

“–Alright then.” Steve motioned for Tony and boosted him up onto Nomad before swinging up behind him. “Let’s go.”

“Can Nomad carry both of us?” Tony asked worriedly. “Won’t he tire out too quickly?”

“He’s fine for a few hours.” Steve looped the other horses reins through his saddle and clicked his tongue so Nomad would get moving. “But I don’t know if I’d last that long without being able to hold you.”

“Oh.” Tony bit his tongue when a strong arm snaked around his waist and pulled him right back into the vee between the Alpha’s thick thighs, shivering when Steve not-so-subtly coasted his palm along the front of his trousers. “My oh my Sheriff, you didn’t strike me as the type to be so forward with what you are thinking.”

“I never got the chance to say what I was thinking before.” Steve leaned in so his mouth was brushing Tony’s ear when he spoke, the brim of the Stetson messing his hair. “But I thought after last night I should start doing it more often.” Plucking at Tony’s shirt until it came free of his pants, Steve slipped his hand beneath the material to get to skin, humming quietly when Tony melted against him.

“I’ve wanted to be with you like this for so long, Tony. To be able to call you Omega, to be able to call you mine.” He hesitated. “You are mine, right? It seems silly to ask after everything that’s happened, and I know it can;t be official until—”

“You’re enough for me, Alpha.” Tony said simply, and purred in response to whatever sweetness the Alpha crooned into his ear. “You’re enough.”

From several yards behind, Sam and Clint watched as Tony twisted on the saddle so he and Steve could kiss, breaking away with a smile before and saying something quiet before putting both arms around Steve’s neck and kissing him again.

“Looks like they finally figured some things out.” Sam said approvingly. “Or at least whatever they didn’t figure out while they were trying to hump the bed through the floor.”

Clint spit his water out as he cracked up laughing. “Alpha! How could you hear their bed shaking when we were so busy trying to break ours?!”

“I meant this morning.” Sam said dryly. “How come the Sheriff got morning time loving and I didn’t?”

“Because you were doing the right thing and making me breakfast.” Clint reminded him. “I’ll make it up to you tonight though.”
Sam grinned over at his mate and Clint winked back.

_Damn_ it was good to have things back to normal in their world.

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It was surreal to be back in his apartment again, and Tony spent the better part of an hour just wandering through the space, running his fingers over his table and noting the papers that he had graded the night he had been snatched, the clothes that were still folded because he hadn’t had time to put them away before the Beta’s had dragged him off to Sunset’s train.

It was surreal, because his entire life had changed, had been turned upside down and inside out and all of secrets laid out for everyone to see, and yet his cup still sat at the stove because he’d fully planned on having a cup of tea when he invited Steve back to his apartment so they could reconnect and finish the talk they had started before Rhodey had shown up.

Had it only been ten or eleven days? Was that all it had taken to take this little bubble of _comfortable_ he had established and destroy it? For Sunset to kidnap him and try to take him away, for Steve to come riding into town with Sam and Clint behind him to stage a rescue? Ten or eleven days and he and Steve had gone from stepping carefully around each other and unable to say what either of them wanted to say, to all but confessing their love, doing everything but actually saying the words?

Tony smiled a little, thinking about Steve.

The Alpha had wanted him to ride out to his house, telling him that they could deal with his apartment in the morning, but Tony had insisted he wanted to stay by himself, that he needed the time to process a few things.

He had stood up on his toes and pressed a long kiss to the Alpha’s lips, whispering, “I’ll see you in the morning, Alpha, I just need a night to myself.” and Steve had kissed him back before letting him go, respecting Tony’s wishes even though it was obvious that he hated the idea of being apart.

But Steve had let him go and now Tony was _here_ alone with his thoughts and the ache that had settled in his chest sometime as the sun had started going down, spreading through his chest and up into his shoulder, radiating into his neck.

He hadn’t wanted to tell Steve about it, sure that it had something to do with his mate-connection to Sunset and not wanting to ruin the moment by mentioning her.

He assumed it was punishment of some sort, his Omega biology rebelling against him spending the night with another Alpha even though his scent hadn’t bled sour, and as he fell into bed to try and get some sleep, Tony wondered if he would hurt after every time with Steve, knowing in his heart that it was _worth it_.

Tony had no way of knowing that right when the ache had started, right as the sun was going down in the territories, on the other side of the country Sunset’s train was pulling into St. Louis and grinding to a stop at an empty station.

He didn’t know that she had stepped from the train and onto the platform with her back straight and chin held high, a stark contrast to Tiberius who had emptied every liquor cabinet on the train as it had rushed them towards their inevitable destination.
“Ms. Bain.” A man in a black suit and tie had stepped from the shadows, his words perfectly polite with an unmistakably British accent. “How lovely of you to join me. I’ve been looking forward to this rendezvous for quite some time and was delighted to finally have a reason and opportunity to make it happen.”

“Jarvis.” A tear had rolled down Sunset’s cheek but her voice was steady. “I wish I could say it was a pleasure, but as the circumstances stand…”

“Of course.” Jarvis was too professional to laugh at her barely hid terror, but his little smile said more than enough. “I can assure you, the pleasure is all mine.” He motioned to a carriage that looked more like a hearse, all black with no windows, drawn by a two-pair of matched horses. “Shall we, then?”

Sunset had smacked away the hand of one of the henchmen that reached for her, but Tiberius had to be carried off the train, too drunk to even stand up, and within a few moments the train was moving again, no sign that either of them had ever been on it.

Tony didn’t know any of that, but around three am the pain sharpened enough that it drove him out of bed and to the bathroom to splash some water on his face, telling himself to just breathe until the pain lessened.

He tried to distract himself by staring at the bruises Steve had left up and down his neck, the purple and blue almost enough to cover the scars over his bonding mark.

There was still some silver that showed through it all though— an imprint of Sunset’s teeth that would probably never go away— and Tony grimaced when he touched it, knowing why the pain seemed to come from his bonding mark more than anywhere else.

He was mated but in love with a different Alpha. Of course his mark would hurt.

But at that very moment, somewhere in St. Louis a man in a perfectly tailored black suit and gloves that were now stained red stepped from a non-descript building that backed to a nameless alley. He deposited his dirty gloves in a dumpster and pulled a fresh pair from his pocket before walking from the alley into a waiting carriage.

Back in Wildrock, Tony slumped in relief when the pain suddenly stopped. One second it was sharp enough to bring tears to his eyes and the next second it was gone completely, warmth spreading through his body and soothing any lingering twinges.

And when he looked in the mirror again, the silvered mark at his neck faded away until nothing but the love bites from Steve and the thin scars were left.

Tony cried then, dropping his head and letting them fall into the sink, his shoulders shaking as he sobbed.

It was over.

He didn’t know how, but it was over.

He was free.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Whoohoo! The end! (unless of course I write Bonus Chapters which is very likely lol)

“—Wealthy socialite Sunset Bain was found deceased in an abandoned building in St. Louis alongside an as yet unidentified Alpha male. Authorities are baffled by the discovery and have no leads about how or why this happened…”

“…According to friends and family there was no reason for Ms. Bain to be in St. Louis at all, and the mysterious male found with her is now believed to be her lover. Society is in an uproar as the Lady Alpha already had a mate in society darling Anthony Edward Stark, Omega and inheritor of the entirety of the Stark Industries holdings…”

“…Male Alpha found with Sunset Bain was discovered today to be Tiberius Stone, shipping magnate with ties to England. Rumours continue to circle as to the nature of their partnership. Widowed mate of Sunset Bain, Tony Stark is unavailable for questions…”

“…After three months, Widower Tony Stark breaks his silence about his Alpha’s death. The Omega is reported as saying “I was staying with my dear friend in the Western Territories and news of my mate’s death has changed my entire life. I had suspected for some time my mate was being untruthful, whether it was in her personal affairs or business affairs and am not as shocked as one would hope to be. I can only say I am grateful that we did not have children that would be traumatized by the loss of a parent and the family Alpha.”

“….when asked about his plans for the future, Mr. Stark has no definite answer to give, but since the interview the business mogul has all but disappeared, his business holdings signed over to various solicitors or sold to competitors such as Potts mining, the Vanderbilt family, and large tracts of land sold off to the Rockefeller family as well…..”

“It goes on like this.” Pepper took a sip of her tea and put the latest article down. “Honestly, Tony, Sunset’s demise and your behavior is all the newspapers can talk about! It’s been six months already, you’d think they would get bored of the story!”

“Yeah well we both know there isn’t a whole lot to talk about once the winter rolls in.” Tony popped an entire cookie in his mouth and reached to refill his tea cup. “And there is nothing high society likes more than a scandal involving money, murder, and affairs of the heart.”

“Your quote is very well said.” She remarked. “I’m impressed you didn’t scream and yell and spill all of Sunset’s dirty secrets.”

“Yes, well my quote was very heavily edited.” Tony grinned at her. “Did you know the press has an issue with profanity? Because I didn’t know until my interview but they were very adamant that I rephrase everything I said to not include my particular adjectives.”

“Oh Tony.” Pepper sighed and folded the paper, putting it with the stack of others to be burned in the fireplace. “Either way I hope the gossip mongers have had enough of this particular story, I’m getting tired of fielding questions. Apparently it’s highly suspicious that I purchased so many of the
Stark holdings but if they only knew the discounts you gave me—” she winked. “—they would understand! What did Rockefeller want, anyway? Sort of came out of nowhere, didn’t he? I wasn’t aware that family had any money.”

“He’s got a little bit of money.” Tony shrugged carelessly. “He thinks there is oil in the ground, so I sold him acres and acres at some ridiculous price. Hope he strikes it rich, if he’s going to do all that work. Lord knows I don’t need the money and I definitely don’t want the work that will come with it.”

“So you’ve sold off almost everything.” Pepper counted off on her fingers. “And anything you didn’t want to sell you signed over to lawyers. Plus, you have a monthly stipend deposited in your account to pay for whichever odds and ends you might want, and after several trips back East to deal with the fall out from your former mate, you have decided you are content to stay in Wildrock and be a schoolteacher?”

“I’m content to stay in Wildrock and be a schoolteacher.” Tony agreed. “I’m pretty much set for life as far as money goes, and I made sure Rhodey’s family is taken care of— what else do I need?”

“You’re happy here then?” the pretty Omega asked quietly. “It’s been such a long time since you’ve been happy, Tony, do you think this will be it for you?”

“I am happy here.” Tony rubbed two fingers over the base of his neck, where Sunset’s mating mark had been, before leaning over and kissing her cheek. “Thank you for all your help to make it sure it could happen. I wouldn’t have even made it to Wildrock without you, much less survived while I was waiting for Rhodey.”

“Oh Tony.” Pepper kissed him back, patting at his cheek. “When you and Rhodey wired me for help I certainly wasn’t going to say no. I just assumed it would be for a few months, not that you would fall in love with this little town and the Sheriff.”

A streak of pink crossed the other Omega’s cheeks at the mention of the Sheriff and Pepper grinned at him. “Speaking of a certain Stetson wearing Alpha, how are things on that front? He’s been very patient with all our trips back East and doesn’t seem like he’s going anywhere, hm? Have you put any thought into what happens when you go into heat?” She raised her eyebrows. “You are going into heat soon, aren’t you?”

“Soon.” Tony blushed a little harder. “And yes, I’ll be asking him to share it with—”

“Good luck getting that sentence out without him jumpin’ ya.” Happy interrupted from the door way. “No Alpha in the world is going to turn down the chance to spend a heat with an Omega, specially one he wants to mate.”

Tony thought he would die of embarrassment having the Alpha walk in on this particular conversation, but Pepper gave a glad little cry and ditched her delicate tea glass in favor of throwing herself at the blacksmith.

“My mate.” she purred, tipping her head back and letting the Alpha scent her. “Welcome home.”

“Hey beautiful.” Happy kissed her sweetly, gathering her tiny frame in his big arms. “Enjoyin’ your tea?”

“We were catching up on the latest news from back East.” Pepper urged her mate down on the couch and perched happily in his lap. “Tony is all they can talk about, you know.”

“Still?” Happy snorted. “Ain’t nothin’ that exciting about you.”
“Thanks Happy.” Tony said dryly, and noting the way the newly mated pair was smiling at each other, cleared his throat pointedly and added, “I’ll leave you two in peace. Pepper, thank you for the tea.”

“Good-bye darling.” Pepper waved at him, the diamond Happy had put on her finger just a few months ago sparkling in the light. “Another time!”

Tony closed the door behind him just as Happy started growling something that made the normally proper Omega squeal, and smiled as he set out on his way.

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Spring swept through Wildrock in a rush of color– green grass covering the plains, trees going from barren to full seemingly overnight, tiny flowers cropping up along the winter-snow swollen river, the sun staying out later and later and the cold winds gentling to a warm breeze.

It was calving season, the pastures full of newborn calves and lambs stumbling over their feet and learning to walk on gangly legs. The flocks of birds flew in over the hills and settled in the tree branches, the snow melted in the mountain passes, and visitors started trickling through Wildrock on their way back East, coming down from the mining camps for the first time all winter.

Inside the schoolhouse, Tony had his hands full with the younger children who were so eager to be outside in the sun they would trample each other on the way to recess, and the older children who were following the old adage ‘in the spring a young man’s fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love’ –playfully courting each other and causing a ruckus with their awkward flirting.

“Mr. Keener.” Tony sent the newly presented Alpha a stern look as he leaned over to give RiRi a kiss on her cheek and he sat back down guiltily. “Mr. Parker!” he said louder, and Peter and Liz jumped apart, their pinkies still hooked across the aisle.

“School is for learning not for courting.” he reprimanded them each but amid the catcalls from the younger children, he smiled anyway. “So why don’t we call it an early day and perhaps you can take your sweethearts down to the creek for picnic?”

The schoolhouse emptied in a matter of minutes, and Tony laughed at the children’s excitement, at the not-quiet whispers, of “Mr. Carbonell is so much nicer now that he’s in love! He never would have let us out early before!”

Tony couldn’t argue with their logic– he definitely wouldn’t have done this last spring, but this year it was different. This year the teenagers weren’t the only ones affected by the change in seasons, because love was blooming everywhere in Wildrock.

Pepper and Happy had officially bonded at the end of January with a lavish ceremony held at Pepper’s out of town estate, with everyone in Wildrock invited. Pepper wore a ridiculously ornate gown, and Happy wore his usual trousers and button down and they danced to everything from The Blue Danube Waltz to whichever boot stomping, fiddle plucking hootenanny jangle the band played next. It had been romantic and hilarious and wonderful.

The wedding had apparently given Sam certain ideas and the Alpha set about doing everything he could to encourage Clint’s next heat to happen sooner so they could try for a family—everything from spraying specific aphrodisiac scents around their home to being extra sweet and snuggly with his mate. Clint alternated between fussing about the Alpha’s overt attentiveness and clinginess to
teasing his mate with side looks and *come hither* smiles until they were sneaking off to corners and empty jail cells and any soft surface available to try their damnedest for a baby.

Natasha and Bucky bonded quietly on their own terms, sneaking away for a private weekend and not telling a soul what they were doing. Everyone *knew* what they were doing of course, and when the couple turned back up at Valkyries the following week with matching marks on their necks, there was a pile of presents and shouts of well wishes waiting for them. Natasha blushed wildly at everyone who smiled in their direction— which was adorable in its own right—and Bucky held his mate as tight as he could with his good arm, crooning into her ear and not-playfully-at-all growling at any Alpha who got too close.

Every day after work, the entire Sheriff’s department and any other available volunteer traipsed out to the small plot of land Natasha had bought years before and put in several hours of work building the newly bonded couple their first home. Bucky grumbled about it, insisting that a first home was an Alpha’s responsibility to build. Clint responded by tossing him first a hammer, and then a nail and telling him to *go for it*, and then running over to hug him when the Deputy’s face fell.

“Don’t worry about it.” Clint whispered into his ear. “We’d help your stubborn ass build a house whether you had two arms or not, that’s what friends do. That’s what *families* do. Has nothing to do to with your injury.”

Bucky held the sweet Omega close, nosing through his hair to lay a thankful kiss on his forehead, and that was the last time it was an issue.

Tony didn’t help build the house, but he and Pepper *did* spend an entire weekend shopping on one of their trips back East and managed to outfit Natasha’s kitchen with everything from salt shakers to roasting pans, a new clock and coordinating curtains that matched a stack of dishtowels, and a brand new stove fancy enough to make Valkyrie jealous.

Natasha had insisted it was too much, Tony had declared it wasn’t *near* enough, and Steve had watched his Omega laugh in delight and clap his hands and fallen just that much more in love.

Ever since the rescue and return to Wildrock, he had been trying to be patient, trying to give Tony space to re-establish himself in their little town, to actually settle in the way he should have last summer.

Some days Tony needed the space, going right from the schoolroom to his apartment and spending the evening alone. Other days he walked past the Sheriff’s Department and sent Steve a *look* that had the Alpha tripping over his feet in his rush to get out the door and to the Omega’s side.

Steve hadn’t cried when he saw that Sunset’s mark had been erased but he came close, hiding his face in Tony’s neck and whispering sweet things against his skin, the broad shoulders shaking as he tried to keep himself under control.

Tony was ready to cry for both of them though, letting his tears of joy and relief soak into Steve’s shirt as they held each other close. When the Alpha bent down for a kiss, Tony gave it eagerly, whispering *yes* and *please* and *Alpha* until Steve carried him back into the bedroom, laying him out on the bed and setting out to show his intended exactly how much he loved him.

The box of pretty underthings Steve had ordered before everything had gone so wrong was opened together one evening, Tony shrieking over Steve’s rather *risque* selections, Steve turning a shocking shade of red, which slide from completely embarrassed to entirely aroused when Tony held up a pair that was nothing more than a few strings and a bow and suggested he try it on.
A few weeks later, Steve was ordering another box, having taken extreme pleasure in ruining every single one of the pretty satin pieces as he tried to leave his claim on Tony in every way he could, over and over and over.

And Tony wanted to fuss about it, he really did. He loved his clothes very much, and since dealing with Sunset he had been buying more of the fancy things he used to wear– tight pants and low cut blouses and lacy undershirts– so it hurt a tiny bit every time Steve ruined even just his panties.

But one day Steve came over with a new catalog from Natasha and a hopeful, almost bashful smile, so obviously pleased by the chance to buy his Omega pretty things that Tony had tucked his complaints away and begrudgingly let the Alpha spoil him.

Besides, it made shopping in New York much more fun, thinking about how Steve would look when he saw what Tony bought.

There had been several trips back East over the winter to try and work through the aftermath of Sunset’s death, meetings with lawyers to figure out what to do with what was left of her assets, court appointments to bring Justin Hammer to whatever justice they could, outright lies when asked if he knew anything about how or why Sunset and Tiberius had ended up dead in St. Louis.

The Sheriff and Clint and Sam had gone with Tony on the initial visit as witnesses to the kidnapping, and with the word of the Sheriff and his Deputies as well as a letter from Pepper, Tony was cleared of any suspicion.

After that first trip, Pepper went along with Tony on all the others. She had grown up in the city after all, and enjoyed everything about it, so it wasn’t a chore for her to accompany him to the meetings, and take him out for more fun activities.

She and Tony went to the theater, to concerts, and to all sorts of parties together. Their names were on every invitation to every soiree during the Season, and they were out every night drinking champagne and laughing and dancing until their feet hurt.

Tony loved it all, loved being back in New York without Sunset hanging over him, loved being able to do all the things he wanted, loved reconnecting with the people that his former Alpha had cut out of his life.

But more than anything, Tony loved coming back to Wildrock, loved the way Steve’s blue eyes lit up with happiness every time he stepped from the stage coach, loved the way Steve held him so tight as if he couldn’t bear to let him go.

“I’m home to stay.” Tony whispered after the last trip, tugging his fingers through Steve’s blond hair, scratching down the stubble the Sheriff grew every time he was gone. “There’s no reason for me to go back East anymore, it’s all done so I’m home to stay, home with you.”

“Tony.” Steve growled. “Omega. What about all the things you love there? What about your shopping and the theater and your friends?”

“You’re enough for me, Alpha.” Came the ready answer, and that had been that. Tony had no plans to go East again, and Steve’s kisses grew more possessive every day, their nights together punctuated by whispers of I can’t wait to make you mine and teasing, I might make you buy me more things before I say yes and growled, Anything you want, sweetheart.

Not knowing how Sunset’s death would affect Tony’s heat cycles, whether he would have a heat soon or if it would be years before they returned, Steve never really brought up bonding and Tony
just tried not to stress out about it too much, assuring Steve that when the time came, they would talk about making all of this official.

And finally finally on this warm spring day, when the children were out of school early and the flowers were blooming along the creek–finally, today was the day they could have that talk.

“Sheriff Rogers.” Tony knocked on the door of the Sheriff’s office and waited for his Alpha to look up. “How does the day find you?”

“Mr. Carbonell.” Steve’s smile was easy but his eyes were sharp, taking in Tony’s too-casual-to-actually-be-casual posture, the smile hovering around the Omega’s lips. “My day’s well, how’s yours?”

“As well as can be expected.” Tony let his voice drop suggestively, and predictably, Steve’s blue eyes flickered red. “Are you busy tonight, Alpha? Any plans?”

“Not in the least.” Steve put his pencil down and pushed his chair back, making his way around the desk and heading for the smirking school teacher. “Do you have plans, Mr. Carbonell?”

“I was thinking if you weren’t busy—” Tony leaned back against the doorjamb when Steve stopped in front of him, wetting his lips before asking, “—perhaps you and I could take a walk?”

“A walk?” Steve raised his eyebrows in interest. “You only ask for a walk when you’re feeling extra amorous, Tony. What’s going on?”

“Nothing in particular.” Tony took a deep breath and tipped his head sideways to show off the line of his throat, trailing his fingers along the pulse at the base of his neck. “But maybe you should ask Sam and Bucky and Clint to work a few extra shifts this week.”

“A few extra shifts—” Steve pushed his nose into Tony’s neck and breathed in deep, the Omega laughing when the big Alpha’s knees about gave out, a growl working from his chest when he caught the first undertones of heat in Tony’s scent. “Oh honey, are you going into heat? Are you—oh god you smell good. Tony, when? When?”

“I’d say tomorrow.” Tony’s eyes glazed over a little when Steve grabbed him tight, this close to heat his body already primed and over reacting to every motion the Alpha made. “And if you wanted to spend it with me then—”

Another growl, almost a snarl, sharp teeth landing over Tony bonding spot and biting down hard enough to make him shriek on a normal day, but so close to his heat, it only made him mewl, made him wet, sagging into Steve’s arms.

“Alpha.”

“Omega.” Steve rumbled. “Omega, I’ll take care of you. I’ll take such good care of you, I promise. You won’t need anything, I’ll give you everything. Tell me what need sweetheart and I’ll get it for you.”

“I only need you.” Tony whispered and Steve pulled away to cup Tony’s face between his palms and kiss him tenderly.

“You have me, sweetheart. You have me.” Loathe to let go of Tony for even a second, Steve linked their fingers together while he grabbed his jacket and jammed his hat on his head. “Let’s go, huh? Get you home and in a bath, cleaned up and comfortable and then I’m going to—”
“Steve!” Tony laughed and dug his heels in so the Alpha wouldn’t just hustle him right out the door. “Steve! Nothing is happening until tomorrow at least! I need to pick up a few supplies—”

“I will get the supplies. That’s my job as your Alpha.”

—and you need to lock down the office.” Tony added. “Because that’s actually your job? You can’t just run away from the office because I’m going into heat!”

“The hell I can’t.” Steve was suddenly crooning in Tony’s ear, keeping an arm securely around the Omega’s waist as he led him down the street. “Sweet Omega. Perfect pretty thing, I can’t wait to get you up those stairs and into that bed. Can’t wait to get you stuck on my knot, my teeth in your neck, damn it, Tony—”

“Sheriff?” Clint was just coming out of Valkyries and spotted them, interrupting what was ramping up to be a rated-x conversation. “Sheriff, taking off for a little afternoon delight? I’m almost jealous!”

“Clint!” Tony was giggling as Steve nibbled at his earlobe. “Uh, Steve won’t be available for a few days? So you and Sam need to—”

“I got it!” Clint shot him a double thumbs up, and whooped out loud as Steve dragged Tony away. “You guys enjoy!”

“What’s going on, mate?” Sam came up behind him. “Is everything alright?”

“Tony got his heat.” Clint explained. “He and Steve can finally bond.”

“Oh that’s great!” Sam cupped his hands around his mouth and howled as loud as he could down the street towards the pair. “Whoo! Sheriff! YES!”

“Sheriff Rogers.” Tony hooked his fingers in Steve’s shirt collar. “You say a lot of things, and not all of them require words. I know you love me. You didn’t have to say it for me to be sure.”

Steve gathered him close for a long moment, the urgency of an upcoming heat dampened by the need to be tender with his Omega. “It’s important that you hear it before we do this though. I love you, honey. I love you. And I never thought I’d fall in love with a schoolteacher, but here we are and sweetheart—” a gentle kiss. “Sweetheart, you make me so happy. I’ve never been this happy.”

“Yes, well.” Tony reached for Steve’s hat and set it on his own head. “You say a lot of things, and not all of them require words. I know you love me. You didn’t have to say it for me to be sure.”

Steve gathered him close for a long moment, the urgency of an upcoming heat dampened by the need to be tender with his Omega. “It’s important that you hear it before we do this though. I love you, honey. I love you. And I never thought I’d fall in love with a schoolteacher, but here we are and sweetheart—” a gentle kiss. “Sweetheart, you make me so happy. I’ve never been this happy.”

“For the love of God—” Steve kissed him again. “—Please keep the hat on. Will you keep the hat on for me?”

“You mean during—?” Tony raised his eyebrows and Steve nodded eagerly. “Oh Sheriff Rogers. You aren’t serious.”
“Mr. Carbonell.” Steve swooped Tony up into his arms and started up the stairs. “I’ve never been more serious in my life.”

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EPILOGUE

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It was a Tuesday night, and just like every Tuesday night since Tony had come to Wildrock, everyone was gathered at Valkyries for dinner.

Bucky sat sharing his dinner with Natasha, the petite Omega perched on his lap and tucked snuggly into his chest as he offered her bites off his plate. Sam was working on his third beer, his hand on Clint’s leg under the table as his mate tucked into his second plate of the night, needing the energy after another round of playing ‘let’s make a family’ with his Alpha.

Happy was patiently waiting while Pepper finished up some paperwork, his own dinner growing cold as he quietly reminded her to stop writing and take bites, to pause and drink water so she wouldn’t get a headache.

Steve alternated between picking at his dinner and watching the door, waiting anxiously for Tony to come in. It had only been a few weeks since they bonded and tonight Tony had extra papers to grade so he was late and the Alpha was impatient, the need to get his arms around his mate a physical ache that grew worse with every minute.

Finally, the double doors swung open and Tony rushed in, looking wonderfully unkempt with his shirt unbuttoned and his lace camisole showing through, chalk dust on his black pants, his hair a disaster from running his fingers through it as he worked.

He was a mess, and he was beautiful.

“Hi.” Steve jumped to his feet and grabbed Tony close. “I was starting to get a little anxious.”

“Sheriff Rogers.” Tony stood on his toes to smoosh a kiss to his mate’s lips. “It’s barely six o clock, I promise nothing scary was happening while I was grading the children’s spelling. Did you order me dinner?”

“I’ve got it right here, Tony.” Valkyrie bumped his shoulder lightly as she walked past carrying a plate for him. “Come sit down before the Sheriff’s hair starts falling out from worry.”

Tony laughed and bussed a quick kiss on her cheek before sitting down, and Valkyrie grinned to herself as the table erupted into noise once the Omega had sat down, Clint and Pepper all excitedly chattering at him, the Alpha’s pretending to grumble over the giggling.

Almost ten years she had owned this bar now, and for almost ten years she had watched couples fall in love, out of love, fight and make up, go from friends to lovers and back again at the tables in her restaurant.

Every Tuesday, the Alpha’s came in first and one by one their Omegas came in to find them, each one prettier than the last, full of smiles and sweet words for their mate and Valkyrie loved each of the Deputies and of course she loved their Omegas but sometimes… sometimes she was a little jealous.

“Just once.” the Beta said to herself, wiping down the bar with a rag and sighing a little. “Just once I’d love for someone beautiful to walk through those doors looking for me. Just once! I
feel like that’s not asking—"

The double doors banged open just then, and almost everyone in the restaurant jumped at the noise, heads swiveling to check out the newcomer.

“Oh.” Valkyrie didn’t even bother trying not to stare, dark eyes wide and mouth open as a woman strode across the room and up to the bar. “Oh my.”

But not just any woman. Oh no. She was all Alpha, this one, with a scent spicy and sweet and heavy enough that Valkyrie thought she might actually drool over it. Boots clicked on the floor as she walked strutted through the space, the leather wrapped up to her knees and accenting long long legs. Twin holsters looped over narrow hips, and nothing but a vest covered her top, leaving strong arms bare, tattoos of vines and leaves and flowers winding from the ring finger on her right hand up to her shoulders and disappearing behind her clothing.

She was stunning, if stunning was even enough of a word for it, and Valkyrie was instantly smitten.

“Give me something strong.” The Alpha ordered, long nails tapping at the bar top. “Something good.”

“Uh, yep.” Valkyrie felt behind her for her bottle of tequila, pouring a shot with shaking hands and pushing it towards the strange Alpha. “Here ya go.”

“Thank you.” The Alpha tossed it back in one go and clunked the shot glass back down.

“Now then.” Propping one boot up on the foot rest of a stool and leaning far over the bar, the Alpha parted full lips and slid her tongue over a set of wickedly curved fangs. “Give me something else good.”

“Good Christ, you’re one of those European Alpha’s, aren’t you?” Valkyrie breathed, pouring a second shot for the Alpha and one for herself. “One of them old families that still has their fangs?”

“Do you like them?” A smile, wicked and knowing, flashing her fangs at the Beta.”I think you like them. What’s your name, pretty Beta?”

“Valkyrie.” She tried to sound casual but knew it came out a little squeaky. “They call me Valkyrie.”

“They call me Diana.” The Alpha’s eyes slid dark red as her gaze tracked over Valkyries body. “Do you have an Alpha, my wild Valkyrie? A mate? I’m only in town for a night and would enjoy the company but only—” Another smile, just as sharp as the first. “—only if you are tempted, darling.”

“I– I have work to do?” For once in her life, Valkyries usual composure shot in view of such a beautiful, virile Alpha. “I mean, this is my restaurant, I can’t just leave.”

“But—?”

“But I am tempted.” she finished. “Yes.”

“I’ll be right there.” A long fingernail pointed towards the back table. “Whenever you’re ready, yes?”

“Uh…yes.”

“Wonderful.” The Alpha leaned close and purred into her ear. “Has anyone told you lately how beautiful you are, Beta?” the prick of fangs at Valkyries throat and she grabbed at the bar so her
knees wouldn’t give out. “Don’t keep me waiting.”

Across the room, every Omega at the table watched the Alpha female walk away and drop gracefully into a seat, putting her feet up on the table and surveying them all with a cool, disinterested gaze.

“I’d like to put a solid bet down that Valkyrie is going to be taken by tomorrow morning.” Clint said in shock, eyes wide as he stared. “No way anyone looks at each other like that and isn’t gonna mate, you know?”

“Oh, I certainly wouldn’t let an Alpha like that leave without claiming me.” Natasha agreed. “I’d put money on it.”

“My goodness.” Pepper only took a sip of her water, but the blush on her cheeks said everything else. “My goodness.”

Tony was the only one who went back to eating without commenting, and after a minute, Steve nudged him. “Nothing to say about the new Alpha in town?”

“You’re enough for me, Sheriff Rogers.” Tony reached over and snagged Steve’s hat, winking out from beneath the brim. “Just because you fell head over heels for the new school teacher in Wilrock the second you laid eyes on him doesn’t mean that I’m going to fall in love with a new person the first time I see them. I’m not half as easy as that.”

“Oh, of course you’re not.” Steve bent and kissed him, soft and sweet and slow. “I don’t know what I was thinking, Mr. Carbonell.”

“Alpha.” Tony chased the kiss, whispering to his mate beneath the brim of the Stetson, a purr curling the edge of his words teasingly. “Mr. Carbonell sounds so formal. I think it’s high time you start calling me Mr. Rogers, don’t you?”

The Alpha’s blue eyes slid to red and he growled, “Mr. Rogers. I do believe you’re right.”

Nobody blinked when a few minutes later, Steve and Tony were headed out the door, kissing and grabbing at each other and giggling into each other’s mouths.

Valkyrie watched them go with a fond smile, then risked a look over to the corner table and the Alpha sitting there.

A perfectly arched eyebrow rose in her direction and Valkyrie took a deep breath before shouting, “Oy! Finish your meals! Place is closing early tonight!”

There was a low grumble from the people who had just barely sat down but Valkyrie ignored it. She had plans tonight.
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Received a commission for extra SAS fluff focusing on Sam/Clint so here is a BONUS CHRISTMAS CHAPTER!

It's so fluffy I could die.

Enjoy!

Tony didn’t think twice about letting himself into Sam and Clint’s place, anxious to get out of the cold and eager to share his new package of caramel candies with the other Omega.

Well maybe not eager to share his candies, but Tony had eaten the entire box by himself last time, giving him a stomach ache for a good three days and giving his Alpha plenty of reasons to tease him.

Sharing the sweets meant neither the stomach ache nor the teasing would happen again, and since it had been a few days since he and Clint had spent any time together, binge eating caramel candies would solve both issues.

“Clint?” he called, shrugging out of his jacket and putting the box on the kitchen table. “Clint? Are you home? I brought caramel candy and you have to help me eat it. Steve judged me terribly for eating the box by myself the other day, so we have to split this one.”

Tony warmed his hands by the fire a moment before adding, “Also, we should gossip about Valkyrie and that Alpha she’s been spending time with, yeah? Definitely something going on there.”

“Tony?” Clint’s voice came from the spare bedroom which was… odd. “Uh, hey. Yes, I absolutely want some caramel candy, and my god do we need to gossip about Valkyrie, but can you give me a second? I’m not— I’m not decent.”

“What are you doing in the spare bedroom?” Tony frowned over the bit of panic in the Omega’s voice. “What do you mean you’re not decent? Is everything alright?” he paused, and then with a smirk, “Did you get trapped trying on something risque for your Alpha again? Do I need to cut you out of something lacy and ridiculous?”

“The lingerie thing happened one time!” Clint retorted from behind the closed door. “One time, Tony. Let it go.”

“But I remember it so fondly.” Tony pushed open the spare bedroom door and peeked in. “Besides, friends aren’t supposed to keep secrets from friends. What are you doing back here?”

“Tony!” Clint yelped and started shoving a pile of yarn under the pillow. “Just wait out in the living room for a minute! Why are you such a nosy Omega!”

“You’re one to talk about being nosy.” Tony kissed the other Omega affectionately before blatantly rummaging under the pillow for whatever Clint had been trying to hide. “Is this yarn?”

Completely ignoring Clint’s squawk of protest, Tony picked up the knotted yellow ball and eyed it
“What are you doing with yarn?” He pulled the rest of the mess out and started poking through it. “I didn’t know you could knit. Since when do you do this sort of thing? Do you need help with it?”

“I don’t need help with it.” Clint protested. “I just— I’m just a little out of practice is all!”

“Well what’s it supposed to be?” Tony kept trying to untangle it piece by piece. “The yellow is pretty but not really something Sam would wear. Why didn’t you pick a more masculine color?”

“My Alpha is secure enough in his masculinity to wear pale yellow!” Clint tried to grab for the yarn but Tony slapped his hand away. “Maybe he requested it!”

“You Alpha is very secure in his masculinity.” Tony agreed absentmindedly. “But I highly doubt he requested a pale yellow, fluffy piece of—” Tony’s voice trailed off when he got to the end of the pile of yarn, picking up what looked like the start of a bitty sock.

“Look how adorable this is!” Tony started to coo over the tiny thing, but then the smile slipped from his face and his mouth fell open. “Clint are you knitting a bootie? A baby bootie? Is that was this is?”

“Um…” Clint folded his arms, then unfolded them, scratched at his hair and chewed at his lip and when Tony kept staring at him, gave the tiniest little nod of agreement. “Yeah. It’s a baby bootie.”

“Oh my god.” Tony put both hands over his mouth, tears already filling his eyes. “Are you– are you and Sam–?”

“It’s too early to tell anyone.” Clint was whispering now, as if the secret was too precious to even be spoken aloud. “But I wanted to tell my Alpha right away so I was going to make these and leave them for him to find and—ooph!” He caught an armful of Tony as the other Omega launched at him, wrapping him in a tight hug.

“I won’t tell anyone.” Tony promised, shoving his nose in Clint’s neck and taking deep breaths in. All pregnant Omega’s scented like flowers, and Tony hummed when he found the tiniest bit of cherry blossom under Clint’s usual scent. “I won’t tell anyone at all!”

“Not even your Alpha.” Clint ordered. “I know you and Steve have a whole ‘no more secrets’ thing between you and for good reason, but this is something that no one else can know until my mate and I are ready to talk about it.”

“Oh, okay.” Tony pulled away only enough to frame Clint’s face with both his hands. “I am so happy for you. Clint, I’m so happy for you.”

“I’m happy for me too.” Clint grinned, laying a protective hand over his still flat tummy. “I can’t wait to tell Sam.”

“Hey sweetheart.” Steven bent and kissed Tony hello when he got home that night. “How was your day?”

“It was fine.” Tony stood on his toes to chase the kiss, pursing his lips until his Alpha chuckled and pulled him into his arms for a longer kiss, bumping noses affectionately. “But oh! Oh I got the best news! Oh my god! I can’t wait to tell you!”

“What’s that?” Steve couldn’t resist his mate bright eyed and smiling, so he stole another kiss before
letting him go. “What news did you get?”

“I found out that—!” Tony clapped a hand over his mouth, his eyes dimming as he remembered his promise to Clint. “Oh. Oh, nothing. I found out nothing. Never mind.”

“Wait what?” The Alpha laughed and pinched at Tony’s side. “Don’t do that! Tell me what you found out! You were so excited and now I want to know!”

“I found out nothing!” Tony repeated and whirled around to start preparing some dinner. “Nothing at all. Don’t be so nosy, Sheriff Rogers!”

“Uh—” Steve blinked after Tony for a minute. “Alright?”

“Yes that’s right, alright.” Tony huffed. “Now do you want mashed or baked potatoes with dinner?”

“Um… mashed?”

“Well alright then.”

Steve watched his mate for another moment, thoroughly perplexed over the odd behavior, and then shrugged it off.

It wasn’t the first time Tony had been a little flighty and mysterious, it certainly wouldn’t be the last. Besides, there were a million reasons why Steve loved his mate, and Tony being good at keeping secrets wasn’t one of them. Once the big secret of Sunset had come out into the open, Tony had become completely transparent, entirely unable of keeping anything at all from his Alpha.

It was just a matter of time before the Omega spilled the beans, and as Steve watched his mate open and close his mouth, start and then stop before blurting out the news, he knew it wouldn’t be long at all.

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It took three days for Clint to finish making the booties, piecing them together with painstakingly careful stitches and sewing a little bow onto each one, and then it took another three days for him to get up the courage to give them to his mate.

Almost ten years they’d been together now, gone through just about everything and could talk about anything, but Clint didn’t know how to say this, so he decided to just let the booties speak for themselves, propping them up in a conspicuous place and waiting for his Alpha to find them.

“My mate, where are my boots?” Sam called that morning, entirely confused because he had definitely left them just outside the front door like he always did. “Did you move them?”

“I cleaned them for you last night!” Clint said from the kitchen, hiding his nervousness behind a slurp of coffee. “They’re on the bench by the fire, I wanted them to be warm when you put them on.”

“Sweet Omega.” Sam popped into the kitchen to kiss him. “You know you don’t have to clean my boots, you are such a good mate to me.”

“Just go put your boots on.” Clint tried not to sound anxious. “We have to get to the office soon.”

There were sounds of general rummaging from the other room, and Clint held his coffee cup tighter as he waited, putting it down when his hands started shaking and folding his arms tight over his chest so it wouldn’t be so obvious.
There wasn’t a shout, or even a surprised question from the living room. No running as if Sam was bolting to the kitchen to celebrate, not a thud as if the Alpha had passed out from shock. There wasn’t any of those things.

Instead, there were very very slow footsteps across the floor and when Clint looked up, Sam was standing in the door way, the booties looking so very tiny cradled in his big hands.

“Omega?” he asked quietly, his eyes wide as he stared down at his hands in awe. “My mate, are you–? Is this–?” he held up one of the bitty things, ran his thumb over the teeny bow. “Are you sure?”

“It’s still a little early to tell anyone.” Clint said, already blinking back tears. “You know how these things are, always have to be careful but–”

“But?”

“But yes.” He bit at his lip to try and hide what was probably a goofy, watery smile. “Yes, we’re pregnant.”

“Oh.” The Alpha’s voice broke, and he crossed the kitchen in three big steps, falling to his knees in front of his mate and wrapping his arms around Clint’s waist to hide his face in his stomach. “OhOmega.”

“Are you happy, Alpha?” Clint ran careful fingers over his mate’s head, trailing down his neck to press lightly at the silvered bonding mark, his own tears making the words wobble. “This is what you wanted, isn’t it? A family?”

Sam didn’t answer, only held him tighter, his shoulders shaking as he cried, wetting the front of Clint’s shirt.

“Oh you big blubbering baby.” Clint tried to chuckle and urged his Alpha up. “Come here and hold me properly, come on. It’s too early to talk to the baby yet, get your head off my stomach and use all that sweetness on me.”

Sam was up in an instant, setting the booties aside as gently as he could before sweeping Clint into his arms and kissing him soundly, crooning soft things into his mate’s skin, rumbling deep in his chest in satisfaction when the Omega purred back at him.

“How far along are you?” He mumbled, nose buried in Clint’s neck to search for the flowers sure to be mixed in with his scent. “Two months?”

“Almost three probably.” Clint shivered when the Alpha growled over the sweet scent of cherry blossoms lacing his scent. “Hard to tell if it happened at the beginning of my heat or took the next week to catch.”

“I can’t believe I didn’t notice the difference in your scent.” Sam kept taking deep breaths in, his mouth latched over his mate’s bonding mark as if he could taste him through his skin. “When did you know for certain?”

“About a week ago-OH!” The Omega squeaked when Sam’s arms tightened around him. “I wanted to have the booties done before I told you, that’s all.”

“Back to bed.” Sam decided, and picked Clint right up off his feet. “We’re going back to bed right now. Come on. Expecting Omegas need their rest.”
“Alpha!” Clint protested over a laugh, grabbing onto his Alpha clumsily as Sam took off for the bedroom. “We’re supposed to be at work! I don’t need more rest yet, I barely even feel different, and I’m certainly not tired—”

“The rest is just an excuse to get you back in our bed.” Another long kiss, stealing Clint’s breath and leaving him panting for more. “I’m not tired either, my mate. Not tired in the least and I have no intention of sleeping.”

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“So does anyone else know?” Sam drew his fingers up and over Clint’s bare shoulders, lingering over the silvered mating mark before tangling in his Omega’s hair. “Or just us?”

“Tony walked in when I was trying to knit the booties.” Clint started purring, shifting further onto his mate so his ear was over Sam’s heart, letting the steady beat bring him back down from the pleasure still zinging through his body. “He cried too, dramatic little Omega, but promised not to tell anyone, not even Steve.”

“You sure he won’t say anything?”

“I’m sure.” Clint snuggled closer. “The question is, Alpha, can you keep it a secret? Because it’s only been an hour and I can tell that you are already bursting to shout it out the window.”

“Well can you blame me?” Sam pinched his mate, then kissed Clint’s head when the Omega squealed at him. “This is the best news, sweetheart. It goes right up there with finding out that you were an unbonded Omega that night in Durango, and with you saying yes to being my mate a year later. Of course I want to shout this out the window. I want to climb the clock tower and yell it to the entire town.”

“Okay, don’t do that.” Clint started laughing, hearing the excitement in his mate’s voice. “No shouting from clock towers.”

“How long do I have to keep it a secret then?” Sam rolled them in the bed so Clint was laying back against the pillows, spreading a protective hand over the Omega’s stomach. “How long until it’s safe to tell people?”

“I think a couple more weeks.” Clint said decisively. “I’ve been sure for at least a week, if we can give it two more, then we can tell everyone at the Christmas party Steve has every year.”

“Alright.” Sam kissed him sweetly, longingly. “Alright we’ll wait.”

“Promise.” Clint said firmly. “If something happens— I don’t want to have told people and then have to tell them that—”

“Nothing’s going to happen.” Sam rubbed his nose into Clint’s navel and growled teasingly, instantly putting his ear to Clint’s belly to listen for anything he could hear. “And I won’t tell anyone.”

“Did you just—” Clint narrowed his eyes at his mate. “Did you just growl into my belly button and then try and see if the baby growled back? Seriously?”

“I—” Sam opened his mouth to protest, then shrugged it off with a sheepish grin. “Yeah. I did.”

“My god.” Clint flopped back in the pillows as Sam did it again. “And they say Omegas are wacky.”
Tony poked his head into the Sheriff’s office later that same day, eyebrows raised and a hopeful smile on his face. “Well hello there, Sheriff Rogers. Busy working?”

“Hi, honey!” Steve looked up in surprise, always pleased when his mate dropped by in the middle of the day. “How’s your day going? Did you let the children out early?”

“We had a late recess.” Tony stood on his toes when Steve got up from the desk and reached for him, pursing his lips obediently for a kiss and trying not to make it quite so obvious that he was looking over Steve’s shoulder for anyone else in the station.

“You’re distracted.” Steve thumbed over Tony’s bottom lip and stole another kiss. “What’s on your mind?”

“Nothing much.” Tony straightened Steve’s vest absentmindedly. “Where are Clint and Sam?”

“They stayed home today, Sam came in only long enough to say that Clint wasn’t feeling good and could barely get out of bed.” Steve clicked his tongue. “Poor Omega, sick right before Christmas. It isn’t fair.”

“Mmm-hmm. He’s definitely sick. Yep. A real shame. Alright, thank you. Bye.” Tony ducked out of Steve’s arms and was back out the door before the Alpha even realized what had happened.

“Wait, wait sweetheart.” Steve scrambled after him, just barely getting his fingers in the back of Tony’s jacket and wheeling the Omega towards him again. “Where are you going? I thought you were coming by to see me!”

“I did see you.” Tony pointed out. “But I was actually hoping to see Clint.”

“Clint’s sick.” Steve rumbled coaxing, pulling Tony closer. “So come spend your lunch with me. Maybe I’ll take you in the back and–”

“Sheriff Rogers!” Tony smacked his hand away, a completely offended expression on his face. “What kind of Omega do you think I am!”

“Mr. Rogers.” Steve rolled his eyes and lay a loud kiss on his mate’s lips. “I know exactly what kind of Omega you are.”

Tony burst out laughing, and Steve patted his ass before reluctantly sending him on his way.

“Wacky Omega.” he whispered and turned back to the station with a sigh, stopping abruptly when he saw Bucky in the doorway. “Heya Buck, I didn’t even know you were back from Natasha’s.”

“Obviously.” Bucky leaned out the door so he could watch Tony hightailing it towards Sam and Clint’s place. “How long it’s been, Stevie? Eight months since you and he mated and he’s already picking sick Omegas and other Alpha’s over you?”

He cracked up laughing when Steve’s eyes shot red at his terrible joke.

“I will kill you.” Steve growled, and Bucky only laughed harder as the Sheriff stomped past.

“Knock knock!” Tony called, poking his head into Clint and Sam’s place. “Are you two decent?”
“Actually that doesn’t really matter, I’ve seen you both naked lots of times.” Tony pushed open the door to the bedroom, ignoring Sam’s squawk of surprise and the way the Alpha scrambled for a blanket to cover himself in favor of diving onto the bed next to Clint. “Hey preggers.”

“Oh my god.” Clint started laughing and kissed Tony soundly on the lips. “You nosy Omega. What if we’d still been knotted?”

“If you were really sick like you told the Sheriff you were, you wouldn’t be letting your Alpha knot you!” Tony shot back, working a hand beneath the blankets to flatten over Clint’s stomach. “Plus, I’ve seen you two mid-coitus—” Sam choked halfway through a drink of water and Clint laughed again. “— so there’s no reason to play shy.”

“That’s fair.” The Alpha allowed, and slipped into a pair of pants before climbing back into bed. “Now Tony, listen, my mate and I were just saying—”

“Did he cry?” Tony interrupted, whispering at Clint. “When you told Sam, did he cry over the booties? What did he say?”

“Some moments are just between mates.” Clint whispered back. “Our Alpha’s don’t like anyone else knowing how soft they can be in moments like that.”

“I cried.” Sam said confidently, kissing Clint’s shoulder. “It’s fine, you can tell him. Any Alpha would cry over something like that, I’m not embarrassed. When you and Steve start a family you can bet his big ass will be crying at the drop of a hat anytime he sees anything even remotely baby related. No shame.”

“Such a sweet Alpha.” Clint purred approvingly and Tony smiled over how sweet they were together.

“But seriously, Tony. We aren’t telling anyone yet.” Sam pointed a stern finger at the Omega. “So don’t say anything.”

“I won’t.”

“Promise.”

“I promise!”

“Tony? Because you’re literally the worst at keeping secrets now.”

“I PROMISE!”

*******************

The very next day Tony dragged Clint to the back of the tailors shop to giggle and awww over soft yellow fabric and pale blue satin that would make adorable jammies for the little one and when Mr. Lee came over to see what they were doing, Tony hit the floor and army crawled over to the plaid while Clint just bolted for the front door.

A few days after that, Clint stopped by the school room while the children were copying vocabulary and he and Tony spend a good forty-five minutes doodling various baby names in a notebook.

“What are you working on, Mr. Rogers?” RiRi asked politely, and was answered with a panicked, “NOTHING!” and the notebook being chucked in the trash.
Tuesday night at Valkyries restaurant everyone was gathered around their usual table, the Omega’s on their respective Alpha’s laps, picking off their mate’s plates and laughing together.

Clint kept coming back to Steve’s noodles, taking huge forkfuls at a time until the Sheriff sighed and just pushed the plate towards him with a muttered, “Greedy thing, take it.”

“It’s not greedy!” Clint protested over a mouthful. “I’m trying to keep my energy up! It’s surprisingly exhausting to be–”

“To be what?” Valkyrie came by with more drinks and Clint shut his mouth, sending a panicked look towards Sam.

“To be this precious.” Sam finished quickly, kissing his mate sweetly. “To be this wonderful and this beautiful and to be someone who deserves a hundred different Christmas presents and–”

“Ugh, forget I asked.” Valkyrie laughed and ran her fingers through Clint’s hair. “Pretty Omega, I love you to bits but I don’t want to hear your Alpha being mooshy about it.”

Everyone else laughed too, and Clint breathed a sigh of relief, jumping when Sam pinched his thigh, and blushing when Tony waggled his eyebrows imperiously and mouthed, “I can keep a secret better than you.”

That night, Sam picked his mate up and tossed him in the bed like he’d done a thousand times before, fully intent on getting naked as quickly as possible. Then he shouted out an apology and dashed over to help Clint sit up, smoothing the dark hair down and crooning apologies into his mate’s belly while the Omega rolled his eyes hard enough to hurt.

The next time they crossed the street, Sam cradled Clint bridal style and carried him carefully over each and every puddle while Clint fussed and smacked at him to “Put me the hell down, you obnoxious Alpha!”

Tony snatched each and every catalogue from Pepper’s house and Steve walked in the front door one evening to see the two Omega’s snuggled up and giggling to themselves and when he asked to see what they were looking at– not so secretly hoping Tony was ordering another one of those lacy skirted things he had bought for their six month bonding anniversary– he was chased away by howls of “You nosy Alpha! Let us shop in peace! Leave us alone! Stop harassing us!”

Thoroughly disgruntled, and more than a little confused, Steve went outside to chop some wood, and Tony flipped back several pages to the part of the catalogue that offered patterns for maternity wear for male Omegas.

“I want to see you in ruffles!” he insisted and Clint argued, “I’m not wearing ruffles, Tony.”

“I will ruffle every piece of clothing that baby has!” Tony threatened and Clint resolutely turned the page to the baby outfits.

“Wonderful. Between your ruffles and Sam’s insistence on bows, no one will know whether it’s a baby or a doll.”

********************

“They’re being weird.” Bucky narrowed his eyes at Clint and Sam, watching as Sam fed Clint a bite of his dessert then leaned in to kiss the sweetness away. “And that’s sayin’ something for those two.”

“Stop that.” Tony leaned over and flicked Bucky on the ear. “They aren’t being weird. They are in
love and it’s beautiful, so leave them alone.”

Bucky blinked a few times, not sure if he was more thrown by Tony flicking his ear, or the unexpectedly schmoopsy answer from the usually practical Omega. “Um, alright now that was weird.”

“It was a little weird, honey.” Steve kissed Tony’s forehead and sat down next to him with a plate of food. “And Buck’s right, Sam and Clint have been acting strange for a few weeks now. At work, around the town, all of that.”

“They’re in love!” Tony insisted. “There’s nothing weird about their behavior! Maybe you two should take a hint from Sam and treat your Omegas that way!”

“Hey! I treat Natasha wonderful!” Bucky said defensively, just as Steve asked, “Do I need to spoil you more, Tony? What’s going on with you lately?”

“Nothing’s going on.” Tony sniffed and stole a piece of food from Steve’s plate. “I’m just saying, you should treat me and Tasha how Sam treats Clint.”

“Yesterday Sam carried Clint all the way across the street because there was snow on the ground.” Bucky said flatly. “This morning, Clint sneezed and Sam brought him three different hankies and rubbed his back for five minutes.”

“I think you’re only complaining about it because you’re staring hard enough to notice.” Tony argued. “If you were doing your work, then you wouldn’t have time to gossip about them!”

“If I were doin’ my work?” Bucky’s jaw dropped. “What? Stevie! Are you listening to your mate!”

“Did you lose your nose, Bucky?” the sassy Omega retorted. “Because I found it right right over here in Sam and Clint’s business!”

“That’s quite enough out of you, my mate.” Steve laughed out loud over Bucky’s confused expression and the primly offended one from Tony. “Bucky doesn’t mean anything by it, Tony. It’s a small office, you notice things. That’s all there is to it.”

“There’s nothing to–” Tony started to protest but Steve wrapped an arm around his waist and hauled him into his lap, smooshing a kiss to his mate’s lips to shut him up.

“No really there is nothing to–” another kiss and he sighed into it. “Steve, I’m just saying that they aren’t–” a third kiss, and Tony grumbled under his breath but curled close into his Alpha. “There’s nothing going on. Nothing at all.”

“Tony’s right, you know.” Natasha came up to the table, resting her hand lightly on Bucky’s left shoulder and helping herself to a bite off his plate, purring into her mate’s ear when he offered her more. “Sam and Clint are maybe being a bit more demonstrative of their affection, but both you Alpha’s would carry one of us across the street if we didn’t want to get our shoes wet, don’t act like you wouldn’t. It’s really not that out of character.”

“‘Course I’d carry ya.” Bucky said quickly. “But you only weigh–” his mate’s green eyes flashed warningly and he cleared his throat, “I mean you’re so delicate and pretty, it ain’t nothin’ to carry you. Clint weighs–” Tony growled at him, and the big Alpha put up his hands in defeat. “Nevermind. I give up.”

“Yeah, Buck that’s probably for the best.” Steve nuzzled at Tony’s cheek to get him to settle. “This close to Christmas they are probably just feeling sweeter than usual. I’m sure that’s all it is.”
“Whatever it is don’t need to be happenin’ so close to my desk.” Bucky grumbled, and went back to eating. “Gonna hafta burn the thing if they get any more lovey dovey.”

“It’s ‘I’m going to have to burn my desk’” Tony corrected snippishly and Steve snatched his Stetson off and plumped it on Tony’s head, effectively shutting the Omega up.

“That’s *enough* out of you, Schoolteacher!”

When Sam and Clint came back to the table, Tony was mullishly quiet, Bucky looked baffled, and Steve looked as if he’d been referring a fight for the past hour.

“Uh– everything alright?” Clint asked, shooting a suspicious look at Tony.

“Everything’s fine.” Tony said quickly, and made a zipping motion over his lips. “Nothing to talk about here.”

The Christmas party was held at Steve’s place every year, and had grown from being just the Sheriff’s department in the beginning to include Happy, Valkyrie and Natasha, and now that Tony lived there, Pepper was on the invite list as well as Doc Yinsen, Mrs. Parker and Mrs. Keener and the children, and there was a standing invitation for Valkyrie’s on-and-off-again Alpha, Diana.

The small home that had been the perfect size for two bachelor Alphas was definitely too small for a party this size, and Tony put a piece of mistletoe behind his mate’s ear and kissed him for a long minute before shouting over the music, “Next year we are doing this at Valkyries! There are way too many coats piled up in the spare bedroom!”

Steve bent down and bumped their noses with a loud, “Whatever you want, sweetheart!”

Tony smiled, entirely pleased with the answer, and Steve kissed him again just because he could.

“Oy!” Valkyrie jumped up on the table and stomped her foot a few times to get everyone’s attention. “Oy listen! I’ve got a speech to make!”

It took a few minutes, but the noise finally died down, the adults turning with their champagne, the kids holding up cups of apple juice.

“It isn’t really a speech.” She grinned at the crowd. “But we should raise a glass anyway to our Sheriff and his deputies who put up with our drunk asses tonight and keep us safe all the other nights. And of course to our sweet schoolteacher, who distracts Steve enough that we all get away with more shenanigans more than we used to.”

“Here here!” May Parker said loudly and everyone laughed. “I’ll drink to that!”

Glasses were clinking, hugs being exchanged, shout outs to the Sheriff and the Deputies, and in the middle of it all, Sam snatched Clint’s glass and said just a hair too loudly—“Mate! Only *sips* of champagne! Are you trying to get the baby drunk?!”—

—And the room went perfectly, pin-drop, quiet.

Clint’s eyes flew open wide, and Sam covered his mouth with both hands because he couldn’t believe he had just said what he had said.

“Sam?” Steve was the first one to break the silence. “Or maybe I should be asking Clint. Um— tell us
again why you can’t drink too much champagne?”

“Well.” Clint went his lips nervously, then detached a bow from one of the presents on the mantle and placed it on his stomach. “Surprise? And um… Merry Christmas?”

Valkyrie screamed in excitement and launched herself at the pair, thankfully landing on Sam, and snagged Clint in for a long hug, everyone else crowding in close to try and get hugs, to pat the Omega on the belly, to slap Sam on the back in congratulations, to ask a million questions about how far along he was, when was the baby due, if they had any names picked out.

Steve hung back with Tony, grinning over the pandemonium, a possessive hand at the back of his Omega’s neck. “You already knew, didn’t you? That’s why you two have been so giggly and weird lately.”

“I’ve known for like three weeks.” Tony admitted. “I walked in on Clint knitting baby booties.”

“Christ, that’s cute.”

“Adorable. Yep. It’s the hardest secret I’ve ever had to keep.” Tony leaned his head on his mate’s shoulder, eyes softening as Sam bent to kiss Clint happily. “Look how happy they are.”

Steve shifted so he was holding Tony closer to his chest, burying his face in the thick hair and breathing in deep. He hadn’t told Tony how badly he wanted to start a family, but maybe now that Clint was expecting, he could bring it up.

Tony pushed his nose into his Alpha’s neck and smiled to himself, thinking about the baby-sized Stetson that was wrapped and sitting beneath the tree on the other side of the living room.

What a Christmas this would be.
A tiny Stetson hat sat on the mantle above the fireplace in Steve and Tony’s home, no bigger than the palm of Steve’s hand, not useful in the least but still the most important thing in the entire house.

It had been very carefully placed there Christmas morning, mere minutes after Steve had opened his present from Tony, the big Alpha’s knees literally giving out when he saw the little thing, his mate not knowing whether to laugh or to cry over the joy on the Sheriff’s face.

“Yes?” Steve had asked, shaky and uncertain and almost afraid to hope but Tony had nodded, and then Steve’s knees really had gone out, all two hundred plus pounds of him dropping to the floor in an unconscious heap, brought low by the mere sight of a baby hat.

Steve had come to as Tony was laughing hysterically, the sassy Omega nearly howling, holding his sides so they wouldn’t split, but Steve was too happy to care, snatching up the little hat and carrying it carefully over to the mantle so he would see it every day, and that’s where it had stayed for the past six weeks or so.

Tony ran his fingers over the soft leather brim as he dusted a cloth along the shelf, humming to himself as he cleaned, replacing the hat in the exact same spot as he went. For an Alpha who had yet to discover that dirty socks went in the hamper, Steve was surprisingly fastidious about making sure the hat was put back in the same exact place every single time and Tony was more than happy to accommodate his Alpha in this one, fairly adorable act.

“Tony, are you cleaning again?” Clint walked through the door without knocking, ambling over to the other Omega and turning him around for a quick kiss. “You get mated and knocked up and you turn right into a little helper wife, don’t you?”

“I hate everything you just said.” Tony replied flatly, but he kissed Clint back anyway, combing his fingers through the shaggy hair and down to Clint’s belly. “Are you ready for some lunch at Valkyries? How are you feeling?”

“Same as I’ve been for the past five months, round and waddling.” Clint grimaced when Tony bent and purred at his stomach. “Stop doing that. Purring at my belly isn’t going to make the baby an Omega no more than Sam growling at it will make it an Alpha, you’re both ridiculous.”

“Oh I’m ridiculous?” Tony raised his eyebrows meaningfully. “I’m ridiculous? You changed clothes four times yesterday morning because you hated everything in your closet and yet you ended up wearing the same boring khaki you always do.”

“Just because I prefer not to dress like a dandy—” Clint eyed Tony’s ruffled top and coordinating pants, the entire outfit shades of soft blue. “—doesn’t mean I’m boring.”

“You’re very boring.” Tony kissed him again and put the dust rag away, resting a palm over the still nearly indiscernible bump beneath his shirt. “And practical as hell. This is your chance to dress
anyway you want and still have everyone tell you that you’re a sweet, pretty Omega. Literally no one would ever say anything about what you’re wearing—"

“Which is why you’ve thrown anything that isn’t covered in lace and ruffles out the window?”

“–which is why I’ve thrown anything that isn’t covered in lace and ruffles out the window, and yet you decide to wear a khaki Sheriff’s Deputy uniform with a few seams taken out to give your belly room.” Tony clicked his tongue in disapproval. “You should try being high maintenance Clint, it’s much more fun than you think it is.”

“I’ll have you know people already tell me I’m a sweet, pretty Omega no matter what I’m wearing.” Clint said dryly. “And I think you’re high enough maintenance for the both of us. Where did you even get that outfit, did Pepper bring it from back East for you?”

“She did!” Tony gave a little twirl, the layers of ruffles on his top flaring out around him in a cloud of pale blue. “She brought me three different sets and I love her for it. And my Alpha can’t get enough of seeing me in them.” his cheeks went a little pink. “So that’s nice too.”

“It’s both adorable and gross that you still blush when you call the Sheriff your Alpha.” Clint muttered begrudgingly. “When is that going to stop?”

“Probably never.” Tony shrugged into his jacket and slipped on sturdy boots so he wouldn’t slip and fall on the ice outside. “It took us long enough to get to the point where we could call each other ours, and I hope we never get tired of it.”

“Adorable and gross.” Clint repeated, but his blue eyes softened. “I’ve never seen Steve even close to half this happy, you know? Known that Alpha for years and he smiled more in the first few weeks of knowing you than he ever had before.”

“I know.” Tony reached for Clint’s hand so they could help each other down the few stairs. “But why wouldn’t he smile about me? I’m delightful.”

“You’re delightfully a pain in my ass.” Clint teased. “Come on, I’m starving and Valkyrie promised to cook us something good for lunch. My favorite thing about—” a gentle pat to his stomach. “–is that I can eat for a whole posse and no one would dare say anything about it. They just put more food on my plate and tell me I’m glowing.”

“You’re not glowing, you’re sweating.” Tony informed him, and Clint squawked in outrage. “But don’t worry, I won’t let anyone else tell you that.”

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“Hello lovelies.” Valkyrie was over to see Clint and Tony before they had even sat down at a table, kissing both Omegas on both cheeks and trilling in happiness as she smoothed her palms over their bellies. “Pretty Omegas, I have something special just for you to eat, hm? Have to keep your energy up, don’t we! I’ll bring you water and Tony, I have ginger ale for your morning sickness. Clint, you’ll be drinking orange juice.”

“I don’t want orange juice!” Clint complained. “Can I have ginger ale instead?”

“You need your vitamins.” The Beta said flatly, and Clint knew better than to argue. “Juice and water and then I’ll start your lunches.”

“Thank you, Valkyrie.” Tony lifted his head for another kiss, and Valkyrie gave it to him gladly, running her fingers through his hair and smiling in approval over the length.
“Don’t do that.” Tony fussled, trying to smooth his hair back down. “It’s gotten so thick lately I feel like it’s permanently fluffed out! I look half crazy all the time!”

“Well I’m sure your Alpha loves pulling on it, don’t he?” Valkyrie gave the same treatment to Clint’s hair, ruffling up the strands until it was standing a good two inches off his head. “Same with you, hm? If I were your Alpha I’d do all sorts of things when your hair got long like this.”

“Valkyrie, don’t you have an Alpha doing things to you?” Clint emphasized, tipping his head back to encourage the impromptu head massage. “I’m sure Diana likes your hair.”

“Diana loves my hair.” Valkyrie flushed the tiniest bit over the mention of the wild Alpha that had literally walked through the doors of the tavern the year before and won herself both Valkyries heart and body before the night was over. “But that doesn’t mean I can’t think of wicked things to do to the two of you.”

“Valkyrie, are you trying to steal my Omega from me again?” Sam interrupted the conversation with a good natured jab at the Beta’s side. “Hand off, Beta.”

“If you kept your hands on, you wouldn’t have so much to worry about Alpha.” Valkyrie tossed back, but she stepped aside with an indulgent smile so Sam could kiss his mate, the smile growing when the Alpha growled possessively over Clint’s bump. “You want lunch, Deputy?”

“Please.” Sam turned so he could kiss Tony as well before sitting down next to Clint, slipping an arm around the wonderfully-not-trim waist. “What are you two up to today? Causing trouble?”

“I have never caused a day of trouble in my life.” Clint insisted over an insulted sniff, and Tony added a petulant-- “I can’t believe you would ever even think we would--”

“Hey Omegas.” Bucky flopped into the chair at the other side of the table. “Causing trouble?”

Loudly offended gasps from both Omegas, Sam smothering a laugh into his hand, and Bucky immediately took his words back, rumbling low and coaxing so Clint and Tony would relax.

No Alpha in the world was immune to the flower-laced scent of an expecting Omega, and no Alpha in his or her right mind would do anything to upset one, so he growled real sweet at them until first Clint and then Tony smiled.

“That’s better.” he muttered, discarding his hat and running his hand through his hair. “Tasha would have my head if I got you two all worked up. Sam, where’s the Sheriff? I thought he was going to meet us here.”

“He got called out to the Baker’s farm.” Sam supplied. “Gonna try and make lunch but who knows. They called him for help with a loose horse, could be ol’Granny Baker got in the moonshine again and wandered off. That family is like a barrel of monkeys, you never know what’s gonna come tumbling out, but it’s always shenanigans.”

“Hullo Deputy.” Valkyrie flicked Bucky’s ear as she passed, setting down a glass of juice for Clint and ginger ale for Tony. “You boys want lunch?”

“Starving.” Bucky confirmed. “Have you seen my mate yet today?”

“Should be down any minute!” she called over her shoulder as she headed back towards the kitchen. “Be right back with food!”

Natasha came down the stairs before Valkyrie returned, sweeping through the dining room in a teal
gown gathered tight in all the right places, plunging in all the other places, and trailing the ground behind her as she headed right for her Alpha.

“Mate.” Bucky’s eyes lit, scooting his chair away from the table so she could fit on his lap, holding her close with his one good arm. “I miss you today.”

“I miss you today too, darling.” She murmured, then straightened with a smile when she noticed the other Omegas at the table. “Well well, look who thought to come for lunch. How are the most beautiful Omega’s in the world?”

Tony and Clint preened under the attention, but Bucky grunted, “Don’t ask questions y’know the answers too, Tash. You’re th’most beautiful Omega in the world.”

“I love you viciously.” She whispered into his ear, and then to Tony, “Where is your Alpha? Surely he isn’t letting you run about town by yourself, not in your condition. I’m surprised he isn’t carrying you around like Sam did with Clint for first few months.”

“I’m barely in any condition at all.” Tony waved her off. “And he knows better than to carry me around like Sam did, I’d shred that stupid hat he loves to wear if he so much as thought about—eeep!”

He shrieked a little when strong arms suddenly swooped him up out of his chair and he found himself held tight against his mate.

“You would shred my favorite hat?” Steve sounded horrified but that didn’t stop him from cuddling his Omega close and kissing him breathless. “But what if I want to carry you everywhere?”

“Sheriff Rogers.” Tony pushed halfheartedly at an immovable chest. “I am not about to let you carry me anywhere at all, much less everywhere I go.”

“Not even on our walks, Mr. Rogers?” Steve lowered his voice into a rumble and Tony shivered in delight. “What if I want to carry you on our walks?”

“Sheriff Rogers.” Tony purred teasingly. “What kind of Omega do you take me for, willing to take walks in the middle of the afternoon?”

“You were willing to take a walk last night when I joined you in your bath.” Steve countered, keeping his voice very soft as he set Tony back down in the chair, a protective hand over the barely there bump. He ran his nose over the curve of Tony’s neck, breathing in the scent of blossoms that filled the Omega’s usual apple and spice scent, sighing contentedly. “And again early this morning, and if I remember correctly you asked for another—”

“That’s quite enough from you!” Tony interrupted loudly and Steve pulled away with one last lingering kiss.

“Uh yeah.” Bucky cut in. “That is quite enough. No one wants’ta see that when we’re waiting for our lunch. S’bad enough your Omega’s all picky and finicky now that he’s expectin’ don’t wanna see you two get all gross together too.”

Everyone around the table laughed, but Steve’s voice had an edge of a growl to it when he replied, “I’d be careful what you say about my mate, Deputy. Tony has every right to be as finicky as he wants about whatever he wants right now, you understand?”

“Holy shit man, take it back.” Sam elbowed Bucky. “Sheriff ain’t joking around.”

“Right.” Bucky grumbled. “I forgot that Stevie lost every bit of of his sense’a humor now that Tony is—”
A warning growl from the blonde Alpha, blue eyes tinging red, and Natasha clapped a hand over her mate's mouth. “Bucky is apologizing, Sheriff.” She said, eyes twinkling with laughter. “No one is making fun of your mate. Now stop growling before you make my and Valkyrie’s customers nervous.”

“My god.” Clint whispered to Tony. “There’s something so hot about a protective Alpha.”

“Yeah.” Tony whispered back, doing a little wiggle in his seat. “Tell me about it.”

“Foods up, darlings.” Valkyrie came back with arms laden with plates, setting the first one down in front of Clint, the other in front of Tony. “Alright Clint, your noodles were made with butter and no garlic but I added onions for flavor. No spinach because it makes you sick but more broccoli because you need your greens, and you better drink your juice.”

“Thank you.” Clint beamed up at her before digging in happily.

“Tony, yours has no noodles because you hate them right now so I made a red sauce with extra garlic but only a few onions and poured it over some chicken and tossed the whole mess over some toast.”

“Oh, toast.” Tony hesitated, poking at his food with a fork. “Valkyrie—”

“I picked all the seeds out of your bread.” She told him and Tony sighed in relief. “And there’s no butter on it, but I added extra peas in your veggies and don’t worry, no carrots touched your plate at all.”

“You’re a darling.” Tony said seriously, and she kissed his forehead. “I mean it.”

“I know you do.” Three plates plunked down in front of the Alpha’s, a smaller portion placed in front of Natasha. “Enjoy.”

“Um, Valkyrie?” Bucky frowned down at his plate. “What is this? Where’s my steak?”

“The Omega’s aren’t eating steak right now, the smell makes them sick so everyone is eating chicken or lamb.” Valkyrie answered authoritatively. “Is there a problem?”

“Uh—no, but if I could just—” Sam spoke up this time, pushing some of the salad off to the corner of his plate. “Why is there so many leaves with my lunch? I don’t do salad.”

“Well, you do salad when I gave all the other veggies to the Omega’s, don’t you?” Valkyrie pinned the Alpha’s with a look. “Eat it or leave.”

“My god, I can’t wait until I can eat normal food again—” Bucky started to complain but Steve snarled and he switched immediately to— “My god, I just love chicken and salad, it’s my favorite.”

Valkyrie grinned triumphantly and Clint and Tony tried to hide their smirk. Steve dug into his food without even pausing and Sam and Bucky only sighed a little as they crunched through their salad.

Natasha watched it all from her perch on Bucky’s lap, nibbling at her own food and wondering to herself if any of the catalogs upstairs had options for maternity lingerie. Expecting Omega’s deserved pretty things, and even thought Clint dressed boring and practical, she knew that Tony had swayed the Deputy over to the ruffled side of intimate wear, which meant she could order all sorts of fun things for them.

“What are you thinking about, mate?” Bucky looked up from his lunch and she dotted a kiss onto his
nose.

“Nothing, my love.”

“Alright.” Bucky’s blue eyes flickered with something she couldn’t quite read. “We should talk later, hm? You and me?”

Natasha nodded, her heart picking up nervously. “Of course, Alpha.”

Monday morning brought a new day of school and Tony hated that he didn’t want to go, but lately it was taking most of his energy just to make it through the day by himself, much less to also coach a dozen and a half rowdy children through a day of learning as well.

February was the worst month in Wildrock, winter coming over the hills in the distance to lock their little town down with cold and wind and ice, the sun still setting early enough to make the days feel all too short, the children cranky from being stuck inside for most of the days since Christmas.

In an attempt to alleviate the boredom– and to distract himself from bouts of nausea and exhaustion– Tony broke the children into different groups and gave them different crafts to do instead of slogging through yet another vocabulary lesson. It was February after all, and Valentines Day was coming up, so hand making valentines for their parents and friends and perhaps even a crush was a good way to pass some time.

But even with paper supplies and bits of ribbons and lace, the children were still rowdy and Tony rubbed at his temples and counted to a hundred when yet another crudely constructed confetti ball was rained down on the girls heads, leading to screams and shrieks and general mayhem.

“Children!” Tony stood and clapped his hands loudly. “Valentine’s Day is not a time for calamity and war, it is a time for sweetly spoken words given in hushed tones alongside gentle touches! Do not turn my classroom into a war zone when I’d really rather it resemble a Parisian garden.”

Usually a clever turn of phrase had the children settling down and listening attentively, but today Tony’s words had no effect at all, in fact they might have made the noise worse as the boys in the class started chanting for war and hastily assembling more paper bombs and the girls chattered excitedly about going to Paris and seeing gardens and Tony—

—Well Tony was starting to wonder if he could make it upstairs to the apartment above the school so he could vomit in peace because apparently his morning sickness also extended through to lunchtime and wasn’t that fantastic?

Tony prided himself on hardly ever having to raise his voice with the children, but when a desk cracked because Harley had physically tackled Peter in an attempt to get a piece of red construction paper, enough was enough.

Damn it, he was exhausted but that sort of behavior couldn’t be tolerated in his classroom, so Tony straightened up and readied himself to actually shout at the boys, to demand they settle down.

But before Tony even took in a full breath, before he could figure out what he wanted to shout, a low growl rolled over the classroom, rumbling through the floor and laden with enough Alpha to send even the rowdiest of students scrambling for their seats.

Thank God.
Before taking Steve as his mate, Tony never would have shown any sort of weakness at all, preferring to deflect any insecurity or uncertainty with a quippy comment or sarcastic remark. But after nearly a year of being bonded to Steve, he had no problem sagging against the desk in relief, dropping his head into his hands when he saw the Sheriff standing in the doorway to the classroom.

“Children.” Steve was still growling, the words curling heavy and authoritative as he spoke. “I am positive that Mr. Rogers requires better behavior than this in his classroom, isn’t that correct?”

The children shuffled nervously and the Alpha straightened up, folding powerful arms over his broad chest as he pinned the boys with a look. “Mr. Parker. Mr. Keener. Instead of recess today I think you’ll be taking that desk to the wood shop and fixing it, don’t you?”

“Yes Sheriff.” Peter said instantly, echoed by a quiet, “Yes, Sheriff.” from Harley.

“Why don’t you all bundle up and go outside for a few moments now that the sun is up.” Steve said then and the children obediently shuffled over for their heavy coats and gloves, nearly tip toeing out of the classroom and down the front stairs.

As soon as the class was empty, Steve dropped the Alpha Sheriff routine and about ran to Tony, gathering him close and crooning softly. “Sweetheart, are you okay? What’s wrong? Tell me what’s wrong.”

“Nothing’s wrong.” Tony turned his head so he could hear Steve’s steady heartbeat, burrowing closer to his mate. “I’m just tired today. Tired and I’ve been nauseous and I can’t blame the children for being so antsy but I don’t have any patience and—”

“Hush hush.” Steve gave him a quick kiss, running his nose through Tony’s hair before guiding the Omega to his own throat, tilting his head so Tony could scent him. “It’s alright, honey. My Omega. It’s alright.”

“I can’t believe you growled at the children.” A shiver went through Tony as his body started calming, the scent of his Alpha filling his senses and settling his nerves “I’ve never seen them get so quiet so quickly.”

“I didn’t mean to growl at them.” Steve admitted. “But I peeked through the window and you looked overwhelmed that I might have gotten a little protective and over reacted.”

“A little protective?” Tony repeated, hiding a pleased smile in Steve’s shoulder. “Like you did the other day when Bucky poked me and you almost broke his finger.”

“He shouldn’t be touching my mate.” Steve snarled, and then instantly, “Sorry, sorry. I didn’t mean to growl again.”

“Oh my god.” Tony hooked his arms a little more securely around the Sheriff’s neck. “I’m fine, Steve. I’m tired, that’s all. Just tired and maybe… maybe hungry?” he finished hopefully, his stomach suddenly growling. “I’m hungry? Do you have a snack?”

“I thought you would be hungry, so I do have snacks, they are just out in Nomad’s bag.” Steve leaned away just far enough to kiss his Omega soundly, rubbing slow circles over the gentle curve of Tony’s stomach. “I’ll be right back, honey. Please sit down, get off your feet. I’ll bring the children back in.”

No less than ten minutes later, the children were settled quietly in their groups again, diligently making Valentines and only speaking in whispers. Harley and Peter were sitting back to back to avoid any more shenanigans, and Tony was happily munching through a box of his favorite caramel
candies. His lips were still tingling from the last kiss Steve had given him, a hand was resting comfortably on his belly, and an extra blanket from Nomad’s saddlebags was tucked around his legs and waist.

Sheriff Rogers was ridiculously overprotective and entirely too concerned about every little thing about Tony’s condition, but good Christ did Tony love him.

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“So he just growled at the children?” Clint asked over a mouthful of caramel candies, snuggling deeper into the covers next to Tony. “Stood at the door and growled at them?”

“And they were suddenly the most well behaved children for the rest of the day.” Tony confirmed, snagging the box from Clint and stuffing a handful into his mouth. “And then he went out to Nomad because he’d brought me an extra blanket and some candies since he thought I would want a snack.”

“Hey, remember when you first came to Wildrock and declared that you didn’t need an Alpha and had no interest in being taken care of by one?” Clint jostled the other Omega lightly. “And how you only wanted Steve for his knot, but had no use for the rest of him?”

“Sure do.” Tony unwrapped another candy. “What the hell was I thinking? Letting Steve wait on me hand and foot is so much better than all that.”

“We all wondered the same thing.” Clint dropped a kiss on Tony’s nose and pulled the blankets up higher. “Speaking of not needing Alpha’s at all, when the hell is mine going to get home and build me a fire?”

“You might be practical but you are worthless!” Tony accused, then squealed when Clint tickled at him. “Just go start a fire! I know you know how to!”

“Why don’t you know how to?” Careful to avoid any pressure on either of their bellies, Clint wrestled Tony down against the bed and pinned him there with a kiss. “I’m further along than you are, you should be spoiling me!”

“You know damn well that sharing my candy is as much spoiling as I will ever do.” Tony retorted, and wove his fingers through Clint’s hair to bring him back for another kiss. “Wacky Omega.”

“I didn’t say you had to spoil me with candy.” Clint’s eyes lit wickedly. “I’m sure I could think of another way or two for you to spoil me.”

“Oh yeah?” Tony raised his eyebrows when Clint started pulling at his pants. “Horny thing, doesn’t your Alpha keep you satisfied?”

“Uhhhh in my delicate condition I need more satisfying than usual?” Clint offered and Tony burst out laughing, sliding into a moan as hands started wandering, their lips meeting again and again. “Besides.” Clint mumbled against Tony’s mouth. “Your Alpha has been so protective lately we haven’t had two seconds together and–”

“What on earth is happening in my own bed?!?” Loudly, from the door and both Omegas jumped apart guiltily, peeking up at Sam from beneath the blankets. “I am out there working to put food on the table and my mate and his friend are messing around behind my back?”

“Um—” Tony’s voice squeaked a little. “I mean, technically it’s not behind your back if you’re facing us.”
“That’s–” The Alpha’s dark eyes narrowed. “Alright fine, that makes sense. Damn school teacher and your logic.”

“Hi Alpha.” Clint sat up and motioned for his Alpha, pursing his lips for a kiss and sighing when Sam held him tight. “I was just wondering when you were going to get home.”

“Yeah, so I could build you a fire so you and Tony could canoodle together?” Sam answered and Tony snorted when Clint tried to look offended. “That’s about what I thought.”

“Tony?” Steve knocked on the door, but didn’t come in, not one to just walk into another Alpha’s bedroom. “Sweetheart, you ready to go home?”

Tony kissed Clint one last time and slid out from beneath the covers, gathering his boots and coat as he headed towards his mate. “I was sharing my candy with Clint and definitely not trying to get naked.” he said mock-seriously, and Steve caught him in a rough kiss, murmuring, “I don’t care, as long as you saved some of it for me.”

“Don’t forget the box Natasha gave you!” Sam called as Steve carried Tony from the house. “She was very adamant our mates get their present!”

“Presents?!” Clint cried and Tony shrieked– “Presents?!” and the Alpha’s just rolled their eyes. High maintenance mates.

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The next day brought about two Omegas giggling and blushing as they ate their breakfast perched on their mate’s laps, and two Alpha’s who growled in satisfaction every time their Omega wiggled or sighed or smiled or snuggled back tighter against their chest.

“Alright, I know I cook good food, but it’s not that good.” Valkyrie said bluntly, eyeing the couples from her spot at the bar. “No way those eggs are good enough to have those two Omegas looking like that.”

“Your eggs are amazing, darling.” Natasha said smoothly. “But I will take credit for this one. I sent the Sheriff and Deputy Wilson home with a box for their mates last night.”

“A box?” Valkyrie repeated. “Or do you mean a box?”

“I mean, a box.” Natasha emphasized. “Full of lacy wear for expecting Omegas and—ahem—marital aids in case they are not feeling up to accommodating their Alpha in the usual way.”

“You are a wicked woman!” Valkyrie threw back her head and nearly shouted with laughter. “No wonder those two Alpha’s look all stupid! They probably had the time of their lives last night!”

“I wouldn’t be quite so good at my job if I didn’t know how to please both Alphas and Omegas.” Natasha adjusted the rather risque neckline of her gown and winked at the tavern owner. “And Beta’s too, of course. If you and that wild Alpha of yours were so inclined to need a helping hand.”

“Trust me.” Valkyrie’s cheeks tinted pink. “Diana and I do not need any help at all.”

“If you say so.” Natasha turned from the bar in time to see Bucky stroll through the double doors of the tavern, and she stood to greet him. “Good morning, Alpha.”
“My mate.” Bucky breathed, burying his nose in her neck and breathing in deep. “Mmmmm. Let’s go back home and start our morning over. Not get out of bed at all this time.”

“Why Deputy Barnes.” Natasha pushed at his shoulder playfully. “What on earth could be on your mind?”

“One guess, Ms. Tasha.” the Alpha rumbled and the tiny Omega purred in delight. “In fact, if I wasn’t here on an errand I’d--” he bent to croon something that was obviously enough to shock even the Madame judging by the noise Natasha made and the way her knees went weak.

Whatever the moment would have turned into was interrupted by a shout from Tony and a bark of laughter from Sam, and when Bucky and Natasha turned to look, Sam was kissing Clint’s palm while Steve was wresting a fork from Tony’s hand, the last piece of blueberry french toast obviously what had started the fight.

“Good god does bein’ in that condition make those two crazy.” Bucky remarked, sitting back on a stool and hauling Natasha into his lap easily, his one arm more than strong enough to hold his petite mate.

“They’re adorable.” Natasha said quietly, almost wistfully. “Sam and Steve are so smitten and Clint and Tony are so beautiful right now and--”

“You want a couple?” Bucky interrupted and the Omega went very very still on his lap. “Boy and a girl? Maybe two boys and a girl so she has big brothers to protect her. What d’ya think?”

“Deputy Barnes.” Natasha’s voice was almost a whisper, hurt leeching into the words though she tried to stop it, her heart seizing in her chest. It hadn’t come up since they were mated, the topic of children. She had figured Bucky knew she…couldn’t… and he’d never said he wanted any so she had been content not to speak of it. Why would they speak of it when it wasn’t an option?

“Hear me out.” Bucky’s arm tightened protectively around her waist, nosing comfortingly over her jawline. “We could go to the city and adopt a few, pick out our favorites? I’m real partial to redheads, but I could see bein’ daddy to a set of little blond girls. Boys I teach to wrassle? What do you think?”

Oh. Natasha wanted to break down crying, but instead she tipped her chin and cocked an eyebrow and replied, “I don’t think we get to just pick out our favorites, darling, that sort of thing isn’t quite like shopping. I’d think we would fall in love with whichever one needs us.”

“Whichever one needs us.” Bucky agreed. “Or whichever two or three or however many you want, yeah?” The Alpha didn’t say anything about the tears that filled the green eyes and spilled down Natasha’s cheeks, but he kissed each one away as gently as he could. “What do you think, my mate?”

“I think I love you viciously.” Natasha whispered, purring shakily when her Alpha held her even tighter. “And I want six.”

“Well then, six it is.” Bucky decided. “Gonna need a bigger house, aren’t we?”

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