The Devil You Know

by shetlandowl

Summary

Best selling author Tony Stark revives the bodice ripper genre for a modern audience. From frisky gay cowboys to ravenous lesbian pirate queens, he consistently delivers riveting thrillers full of romance, drama, and the filthy, unapologetically kinky sex that has become his trademark specialty.

Tony has everything a man could dream of - horny, adoring fans, and boatloads of money. Or that's what he thought, until Detective Steve Rogers walks into his life and turns it all upside down.

Notes

This story came to me out of the blue, and it is a WIP in a way that none of my other stories are. For this one, I have a general ending in mind. To make it worse, the ending is a giant mystery.
I'm sharing this story because I feel it's a fun idea, and maybe with your help it can really become something exciting(!). The ending will be Steve/Tony, for sure, and it will be a happy ending. If you'd like to help, post questions in comments about things you'd like to see/know. I can't promise I'll incorporate everything, but I can't think of a better way of getting ideas and inspiration than from you all! <3

**Update:** I'm so excited to say the story is all ironed out!! Thank you all for your help, I couldn't have done it without you! <3
“I was always afraid you’d end up dragging me to one of these,” Bucky muttered under his breath while the middle-aged woman ahead of them in line asked to have six books signed. “Never thought I’d be forced to say yes.”

Steve gave him a long-suffering look, but said nothing.

“Is it just like you always imagined it?” Bucky wondered with morbid curiosity. “Surrounded by housewives and miscellaneous virgins?”

“If you don’t want to be here, get out of the line, asshole,” the stranger waiting behind them said, loud and irritated. She was short, curvy, and beautiful, and Bucky had no comeback.

“NYPD, police business,” Steve said quietly and flashed her his badge. “As you were.”

The woman ahead of them in line picked up her stack of books, thanked the whole collection of people who’d made the signing possible, and shuffled away with an animated bounce in her step. A helpful staff member waved them to the table and reached for a book to get the process started, except neither Steve nor Bucky were carrying a copy of the latest Stark sensation.

There was a momentary interruption to the otherwise smooth operation, and without anything in front of him to sign, Tony Stark looked up. Steve tried to keep a cool head about him, but he couldn’t quite get the words out.

“Oh, wow,” Stark said softly in his surprise, his gaze catching on their detective’s badges as he eyed them both curiously. “What can I do for New York’s Finest?”

“That depends, Mr. Stark,” Steve said with a calm that surprised even himself. “Have you ever used a ghostwriter?”

The pleasantly amused expression on Tony Stark’s face chilled like sunshine on a bitter winter day. “Not to tell you how to do your job, detective,” he drawled, “but even if I did, a book signing would be the last place I’d admit it.”

“And here we thought we were being quite clever,” Bucky admitted with a sarcastic, feigned ignorance. “If you do use a ghostwriter, you can stick around and finish your signing, and probably sell hundreds of your latest bodice ripper—”

Stark glared up at him and opened his mouth to bite back when Steve put a hand out to shut Bucky up before it all got worse. “—your latest novel,” Steve corrected diplomatically. “But as my partner said, seeing as you don’t employ a ghostwriter, we must ask you to come with us to the station.”

“What—what the hell for? This can’t wait forty minutes?” Tony asked in utter bemusement. “People have been waiting a long time, some people don’t even live in the city. Twenty minutes?” he offered, before Steve or Bucky had a chance to say no to his first question. “Just, twenty minutes.”

Bucky gave him a flat look. “This isn’t a debate,” he drawled at the same time as Steve said, “You have ten.”

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“Mr. Stark, you are here to answer a few questions about some recent murders, including one that
took place earlier tonight,” Steve informed Tony from across the interrogation room. Bucky loomed behind him, fundamentally committed to his bad cop persona.

“Nick Giordani. Amy Nguyen. Tara Jones,” Steve said their names slowly as he laid out blown up copies of their drivers license photos, giving each of them the firm emphasis they deserved. “Do any of them ring a bell?”

Tony eyed Steve like he couldn’t be sure if this was a joke. He glanced at the pictures for the sake of having done it, but all he could do was shrug. “They look like people that could have appeared at my book signings, sure. He looks like he could have appeared in my bed. But I’ve never seen them before in my life.”

Steve squeezed the heel of his boots into the legs of his chair to contain his reaction to Tony’s oh so casual admission that he was into men. He cleared his throat, willed the blush from his face to the extent that he could, and carried on.

“You sound very sure of yourself for a quick glance, Mr. Stark,” he observed. “Look again.”

“I don’t have to, detective. I have what you call an eidetic memory. It makes… research that much more enjoyable. Every face, every voice, every smell,” Tony listed slowly in his reply, shamelessly undressing Steve from across the table with nothing but a look. “Every touch.”

Bucky slammed his hands down on the table with a terrible bang, and wide-eyed, Tony jumped back in his seat. “For someone so smart you seem to have a tough time remembering you’re our lead suspect.”

“So, what you’re saying is that your investigation is in a lot of trouble,” Tony replied with an unimpressed huff, looking both shaken and newly irritated. “I’ve been in Vancouver for the past five weeks, I just got into town this morning. If I’m the best you’ve got right now—”

Steve jumped in before Bucky made a grab for Tony’s face. With a grunt of effort, he shoved Bucky a safer distance from the table. “Mr. Stark, this is the third victim found in seven days. Each of their bodies were posed—”

Tony stiffened as if he’d been struck, and Steve stopped talking immediately. He watched as Tony’s expression changed from a confident smugness to sickening understanding. Pale and increasingly uncomfortable, Tony couldn’t bear to look away from the three pleasant faces Steve had introduced him to earlier. “You mean…”

“Nick Giordani, November 29th,” Steve said with a quiet sigh. “His body was discovered two days later at GMD Shipyard, posed nude. Amy Nyugen, December 7th, posed nude in an alley between 86th and 85th; her case was initially with the 62nd until the 20th found Tara Jones in the Seventy-ninth Street Boat Basin, also nude, also posed. That’s when we noticed the pattern.”

One after another, he laid out photos of each crime scene. “Tied down over a barrel, lathered and paddled, page 159 out of Treasure Trail. Amy Nguyen, posed in a bed of flowers in the dumpster behind a flower shop using computer cords. Page 142 of Fathers in History.”

“Then earlier tonight,” Steve said with reluctant finality as he laid out a photograph of the third murder. Another young woman who couldn’t have been more than 30, so full of life for someone so pale. “Page 34 of Sweeping Tide.”

Pale and unblinking, Tony stared at the three new photographs. His face took on a green nauseous tinge when he reached for the photograph of Tara Jones. Her arms were threaded through the vintage
steering wheel of a sailboat, a smile painted and smeared over his lips with blood red lipstick.

“...is this,” he whispered, clumsily shuffling through the photos to get to the photograph of how Nick Giordani was found. Why had he written spanking into that scene? Red cuts down the back of Giordani’s legs aggressively mimicked the use of sharpened spurs, but Tony never wrote anything so violent. He wasn’t tame, but he sure as hell didn’t write non-consensual scenes.

“Was—is someone using my books?” he choked out, presumably addressing his questions to the detectives even if he couldn’t stop looking at the horror put in front of him. “Were they killed like this? Were they—did, oh god,” he gasped with a sudden whimper, scrubbing a hand over his eyes and covering his mouth as the shock turned to overwhelming distress.

“There is no current evidence tying the three victims together, Mr. Stark. Different occupations, hobbies, backgrounds. Nothing, except for your books,” Steve said in a firm, patient tone. Tony’s gaze and attention returned to Steve, bewildered but suddenly focused. “If you are not the connection, then what is?”

Tony blinked wildly at the question, visibly struggling to think. “They were written years apart,” he said so quietly Steve could only wonder if Tony realized he was speaking out loud. “They’re all best sellers, but... I wrote Fathers in History in 97. Sweeping Tide, 2003; Treasure Trail, 2016. Different cities, different... different settings, orientations. I wrote Fathers in History in LA, Sweeping Tide in New Orleans, Treasure Trail in, in Nashville. I can’t think of anything that ties them... except me?”

“That will be all for now, Mr. Stark,” Steve said loudly before whatever curses Bucky was chewing on became a problem. “We will have a patrol car take you home. We will be in touch if we need further answers, but in the meantime, if you think of anything,” he said as he pulled his card out of the evidence folder. “My personal number is on the back. Day or night, if you think of anything, call me.”

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That night, Tony was too shaken to even look at his liquor cabinet. He called Pepper first and told
her all about what had happened. He called Happy to be sure he could escort Pepper to and from the 88th Precinct the next day.

Hours later in a warm bath and absolute silence, Tony stared at Detective Rogers’ business card. It could have been minutes or hours before Tony accepted that he would have to make the call if he wanted answers to the questions haunting him.

He punched in Steve’s number. His thumb hovered over the taunting green circle. It would be so easy.

The next thing he knew, a newly familiar voice filled the room.

“Rogers.”

Tony swallowed against the bile and the guilt and the fear. “Did they suffer?”

There was a pause on the other end of the line. “Mr. Stark?” Steve asked, alert but audibly confused.

“Giordani, Nguyen, Jones,” Tony said their names as if they’d been family, people whose welfare were dear to him. “Did they suffer?”

“There… Mr. Stark, with all due respect, there is no answer I can give you that will make you feel better,” Steve answered kindly but honestly, and still Tony wanted to be sick. It was too easy to read between the lines.

There was no fate in hell bad enough for the man responsible for writing those lines.

“Mr. Stark, are you there?” he heard Steve call through the phone. “This is not your fault. The murderer is to blame, not you. But you can be a part of ending it. Each of the victims deserve justice, Mr. Stark. You can help us give them that. Give closure to their families.”

Families. Nick, Amy, Tara, they all had families. People who loved them, people who cared about them. People waiting to hear back from them.

“If the murderer is so obsessed about me, why couldn’t he just come after me?” Tony whispered. “I’m alone, I live in a brownstone - I make an easy target, I… they were all so young.”

“Mr. Stark, you can’t think that way,” Steve said, but he ended his statement with a tired sigh that caught Tony’s attention. “I understand where you’re coming from, Mr. Stark. Trust me, there’s sometimes, what we do doesn’t feel like enough. Burglars whose escalating crimes are seen as unrelated and dismissed with probation; violent exes who only go away for a few months on attempted murder charges because we caught them before they had a chance to go through with it. Times like that, I wish I could operate without a badge. Bend the rules. But we don’t play the parts we wish we could,” he finished softly. “Our choice is only to make the best of what we are.”

The familiar words caught Tony off guard. “…what’s that? Gandalf?”

“Wisdom is wisdom, doesn’t matter who said it,” Steve countered with a smile in his voice. “But yes, if you must know, it’s adapted from Gandalf. Cops read, too, you know.”

“Clearly. I mean, someone tied these crimes back to my books,” Tony whispered with a huff of wry amusement. “You said they were handled by three different precincts, too, right?”

“At first they were, that’s right,” Steve confirmed. “It appears you have at least one big fan in the NYPD, Mr. Stark. I have to hope that gives us an advantage.”
“Could you point them out? Introduce me? Next time I’m there, I mean,” Tony said. “To remember my books that well, and to be clever enough to put it together, that’s… that’s exceptional.”

“Oh. Uh, well. Thank you, Mr. Stark,” Steve faltered awkwardly over his words, “but we’ve already been introduced.”
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

To all of you who responded to the first chapter and shared your ideas and suggestions with me, I can't thank you enough!! Thank you so much for your response to this fic! I hope it continues to be an enjoyable read for you all! <33

P.S. Mind the updated tags.

“He asked about the cases being picked up by different precincts?” Bucky said, echoing Steve in his disbelief. “That specific detail? Steve, are you sure we want to discount him as a suspect?”

“It's not him, Buck,” Steve said with a sigh. The interdepartmental task force pulled together for this investigation had officially been turned over to him forty hours ago, and Steve needed to finish delegating responsibilities and familiarizing himself with update memos before he could get to his own part of the investigation.

It already felt like all eyes at 1PP were collectively turned on him. Steve could all but feel them breathing down his neck for breaks in the case and viable suspects. The last thing he needed was Bucky perched on his desk smelling like bacon rolls he hadn’t brought to share and grumbling about Tony Stark’s late night call.

Steve sent off his last email while Bucky grunted and groaned and tried not to pull his hair in frustration. “So what if he’s read the Fellowship? What half-assed hipster hasn’t read Tolkien by now? Besides, he’s an author—”

“Buck, come on. That’s enough. First, we live in Brooklyn: everyone is a hipster. Second,” Steve continued before Bucky challenged his own inclusion in that category, “Ms. Potts corroborated everything he said. She provided invoices for his alibi, she even brought the whole catalogue of his fan letters from 1994.”

“I’m not saying she is a suspect,” Bucky muttered, but before he got any further, he was interrupted by a conspicuous clearing of the throat. Both Steve and Bucky looked up to see a uniformed officer and Tony Stark waiting for their attention.

“Detectives, Mr. Stark to see you,” the officer said before leaving them to handle the awkward conversation on their own. Bucky gaped after the damn traitor, while Steve could only stare at Tony. Handsome Tony in his fitted jeans and bundled up in silk, cashmere, and leather. Steve’s fingers itched to explore the divine textures of his luxurious sweater, his silken scarf, and the contrast of his soft, smooth skin with his meticulously shaped beard.

“Maybe I should go?” Tony said into the silence. It almost sounded like a peace offering.

Bucky gave Steve a tired look then dismissed Tony’s offer with a reluctant shake of his head. “How can we help you, Mr. Stark?”

“Pepper, she sent me a picture of the boxes she left with you. I’m a fast reader,” Tony explained. “I thought I could help.”
“Mr. Stark, this is the NYPD, not the PTA. Just because you have time to volunteer doesn’t mean we can accept—”

“Buck, hang on,” Steve quietly disagreed. “Nobody will know the references in those letters better than Mr. Stark. The others are tied up following up on the three victims, so we don’t have enough man hours to get through these quickly.”

Steve and his partner could disagree until they were blue in the face, but the facts were clear. The three victims had been murdered within days of each other. Steve’s detectives in Manhattan were following up on Jones, while detectives from the 62nd were on Nyugen’s case. Maybe they’d be able to help with the letters during lulls in their investigations, but they couldn’t count on it. Steve and Bucky were alone to tease any leverage out of decades worth of Stark’s fan letters. They needed help. In the end, Bucky reluctantly thanked Tony for his volunteered time and offered to talk to the captain while Steve showed Tony to the conference room they had commandeered for their task.

It was easy to stay organized with the structure Pepper had developed over the years. Over the next several hours, Tony and the two detectives pored over box after box of nasty fan letters, only coming up for breath when lunch arrived, courtesy of Tony Stark. He hadn’t known what to get, so he’d ordered a little of everything - Chinese, pizza, sushi - but he’d made sure to include the one universal police food: powdered jelly donuts.

They quickly learned that the letter writers ranged from mildly irritated to wildly unstable. Some were only irritated by the ‘gay agenda’ or the erasure of women in a Western novel, while a handful of people were outraged by explicit sexual relations between humans and androids. But the nastiest letters were from those personally offended that Tony did not return their affection and interest. Many such letters detailed precisely how they would be the perfect partner for Tony, and what sins they would gladly perform for their favorite erotic novelist.

Some even included photographs.

“This is sick,” Bucky said with a horrified shudder. Tony and Steve looked up to watch him leafing through an envelope of photographs. “Who sends strangers pictures of their opened vagina?”

Even after six hours of similar horrors, Tony shuddered involuntarily. Steve didn’t flinch.

“Better than sending pictures of strangers’ vaginas,” he muttered, only partially invested in the conversation. “Opened or otherwise.”

Bucky whined to himself and marked the envelope as harmless so he could push it aside. He opened another, and immediately a set of professionally done boudoir photographs fell into his lap. It took a second before he realized what had happened. He glared at Tony like he was personally responsible for Bucky’s current fate.

“Stark, your fans are the kinkiest, horniest, most lonely people I’ve ever known.”

Steve could feel Tony looking at him, so he very pointedly did not looking up from the letter in his hands. Before Tony had a chance to reply, Bucky and Steve’s phones rang. They both rushed to answer, but Bucky reached his phone first.

“They finally found Giordani’s car, hauled it out of the East River,” he said and got up for his coat. “It’s on its way to the lab, I’ll call in if anything turns up.”

Steve and Tony both watched Bucky grab two donuts and march out. Again Steve felt Tony looking at him, but this time he gave in and met his questioning gaze.
“You’re not going with him?”

“We have too much to do here,” Steve explained, gesturing at the tower of unopened boxes. “And between the two of us, I’m more familiar with your books.”

Tony frowned to himself. “I got this, if you need to, I don’t know, question people, knock down doors, examine clues. Isn’t that what detectives do?”

“Mostly detectives do paper work,” Steve replied dryly, packing one letter back into its envelope and marking it as harmless. Tony’s lips curved up into a bashful grin, but he didn’t look away from Steve as he waited and listened. Steve watched him for a minute, then calmly elaborated. “How’s it going, Mr. Stark? Found anything?”

“You’ve read passionate haikus about my testicles, detective. Call me Tony,” Tony observed with a wry grin. He shuffled a few of his piles - most letters were harmless, a few qualified as burn for sake of humanity - until he got to a short stack of four letters that felt unusually malicious. “These… made me uncomfortable. Top one especially.”

Steve’s expression turned grim as he looked over the letters Tony had pulled aside. They weren’t typical examples of one-sided love or desperate cries for attention. They weren’t even homophobic rants. The first letter was chock-full of vitriolic attacks on Tony personally, presumably from a collaborator who felt inadequately compensated for her research and input. In her letter, she outlined her fantasy of engaging a gun for hire not to kill Tony, but to make his life so miserable that he would only end his misery by taking his own life. In the next letter, a man accused Tony of rape after he did not feature their sexual encounter in his books. By not following through with his presumptions, Tony had taken advantage of him in a vulnerable state and the man vowed vengeance on Tony for his assault.

While Tony felt the first letter was most troubling, Steve found the fourth letter most disconcerting. In it, a man who had recognized his philandering wife’s behavior in one of Tony’s books blamed Tony for his ruined marriage, his lost fortune, and his limited custodial rights. He was exactly what they were looking for: an avid reader of Stark Adventure novels with a clear motive. A man with nothing to lose.

“Tony, this… this might be it,” Steve said slowly. In a rush, he turned over the original envelope to find it had been sent on October 23rd from Long Island City. Suspicious, and conveniently local.

“I have to get someone on this right away. Stay here,” Steve said by way of excusing himself. He shouldn’t leave Tony alone in a room full of evidence, and he shouldn’t let this one potential lead go to his head so quickly, but protocol did not feel half as important as rallying some junior detectives to start a preliminary look into Antonovich.

“Wait! Detective?” Tony called after him, and Steve spun on his heel to face him. “All this time… if I had seen it, would he—”

“Tony, you can’t think that way,” Steve tried to remind him, but Tony wouldn’t have it. The blood had drained from his face, and he only seemed compelled to stand by the power of his surging guilt.

But Tony insisted. “If I had reported this, would he have hurt them? Would they be alive?”

Steve took a steadying breath. He wanted to move on with the investigation—he needed to know more about Antonovich. But Tony was close to tears. He looked as miserable as Steve had feared he was on their first phone call. As urgent as his work was, Steve couldn’t leave Tony in such a state.
He closed the conference room door behind him and made his way around the table until he could pull a chair up for Tony to sit in again. Tony eventually complied, and Steve sat down beside him.

“Tony, you can’t do this to yourself. You are not responsible for the actions of others. You can’t blame yourself in hindsight,” he patiently said, lowering his voice in an effort to calm Tony down. “Millions of people cheat every year, millions divorce every year. If this is our guy, there is nothing special about him except his petty cruelty and his disregard for human life. It is only human to want to be the hero in your own narrative, and if this is our guy, Tony, you’re no more than a convenient outlet for his rationalization.”

Tony pinched his lips together in a tight line of discomfort, but slowly, Steve noticed he breathed more easily. Color slowly returned to his face until he was practically blushing. Whether Tony believed him or Steve’s deliberate tone of voice helped calm him, Tony seemed to have found an even keel again.

“I should go,” Tony whispered. He could barely meet Steve’s gaze anymore, and the sudden shift from the confident, motivated Tony Stark to this bashful, anxious man left Steve wishing he could do more.

“Tony, maybe you should stay? If you—”

“No, I’m alright, detective. I’m okay,” he promised in a hurry, not that Steve bought it. “I’ll, I just need to go home, I think. I’ll be fine.”

Except, he didn’t move. Tony sat as if rooted to his chair, staring at his own hands where he slowly clenched and relaxed his fingers in an effort to calm himself.

“You have my number, Tony,” Steve reminded him in a soft whisper. “Don’t hesitate to use it.”

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Antonovich was a ghost. His neighbors hadn’t seen him for weeks, and his credit cards and his cell phone showed no signs of activity since late October. Steve put out an APB, but Long Island City was out of his jurisdiction. Even with the local precinct's cooperation, it felt wrong not to be directly involved in the hunt. His previous crimes had only been days apart, and Steve could feel time slipping through his fingers. He needed this bastard caught before three victims became four or five or six.

Steve was going over the last few briefs of the day when Bucky came in to report where they were on the car. The lab was still working on the car itself, but two witnesses had seen a man dumping the car into the river. It had been dark and rainy that night, but they were both convinced it was a man in a grey hoodie, and he wasn’t noticeably tall or short, or obese. He was average in every way.

After updating Bucky on the four letters Tony had identified and on the Ivan Antonovich, Steve called it a day. It was well past nine when he left the building, over thirteen hours since he’d gotten in that morning. He knew he needed sleep; he was tired, he could feel it in the tension in his back, the headache behind his eyes. He walked the whole way home in the hopes of feeling sleepier by the time he got home, but it was no use. The last thing he wanted to do was get into bed.

He could drop in front of the TV or his computer and zone out until sleep took him. Those were both perfectly reasonable ways to wind down after long, stressful days. But he didn’t need to just wind down, he needed to relax. If he wasn’t careful, if he didn’t take care of himself in these precious few hours to recover, tomorrow he might miss a step. People were counting on him to stay sharp - not just the families of the victims, but detectives and officers were looking to him for direction. Tony
was counting on him. He couldn’t let any of them down.

Steve bypassed his living room and made straight for the bathroom. Before he had any second thoughts, Steve turned on the taps and left the tub to fill with steaming hot water. He made a quick detour to the kitchen to warm up leftover pizza in the oven. All that was left was choosing a book. He was in the middle of a Stephen King classic, but after all this time with the Tony Stark, he had no interest in horror stories. He wanted romance, he wanted theatrical adventures to carry him away, if only for a few pages.

With his food warmed and his book selected, Steve undressed and slid into the tub. The sixth chapter of Treasure Trail was his favorite, the words so familiar he could have recited them in his sleep. There, soaking in the warm bath and losing himself in the beloved pages of his book, Steve began to relax enough to relieve himself of the stress he’d collected all day long.

He almost didn’t hear his phone ping with an incoming email.

If looks could kill, Steve’s phone wouldn’t have survived its untimely interruption. He couldn’t have one minute of peace? With a finger between the pages to keep his place, Steve poked at his phone to see what was so urgent that someone would email at eleven o’clock at night.

*Stark Adventures Member Update! A first look at Overdue Ritual*

Steve nearly dropped his book in the water. The next Stark Adventure wasn’t slated for another year, Tony was previewing it already? Forgoing all other things, Steve tossed his book on top of a stack of towels where it would be safe and snatched up his phone. Tony hadn’t even shared the premise of his upcoming novel yet, and this wasn’t only a blurb Tony had shared: he had posted twenty pages for his subscribing members to enjoy. The first twenty pages of the first chapter.

It was almost too much. What if Steve fell in love with these words and then had to wait a whole year for the rest of the story? But there was nothing for it, there was no resisting it. He signed into his account, settled against the side of the tub, and with breathless excitement dove into another fantastical world by Tony Stark.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Note: Updated sexy-times tag.

Six days later, they were all in the deep end. By the time they got through all of the fan letters, they had twenty-nine reasonable leads. Steve had assigned them a handful to six detectives while he and Bucky pursued five suspects themselves. It was enough to drive a man crazy. Everything was moving too slowly, too many leads were ending in dead-ends, and by the time all three of Antonovich’s alibis checked out, Steve was at the end of his rope.

After a long day of poring over lab results from the crime scenes and tracking down witness for their testimonies, Bucky and Steve had popped in long enough to update the home team before getting on to a meeting at the 62nd. Long enough to thaw the icicles in their clothes into chilling rain before heading into the bitter New York winter again.

Captain Carter stepped out of her office and caught them on their way to the stairs. “Rogers, Barnes. A word.”

Steve sighed and didn’t even bother taking off his sopping wet coat. He frowned at Bucky in a silent will we ever catch a break? Bucky unwound his scarf and rolled his eyes to articulate sure as hell not now. I’m starving and we’re about to get reamed in a way you don’t even like.

The clear vulgarity in Bucky’s look stopped Steve long enough to side-eye Bucky into relative silence before they walked into Carter’s office. The last thing they needed now was to offend their captain.

“Relax, Stevie. I’m sure she doesn’t remember the times you ghosted on her niece,” Bucky assured his partner and best friend, who suddenly floundered to remember how that relationship had ended (twice).

It was just enough for a distraction that Steve felt less anxious walking into the captain’s ambush meeting.

Carter was standing behind her desk waiting for them when they walked in. “Rogers, any updates? We could use some good news.”

“Nothing concrete,” Steve admitted as objectively as he could. “The only good news is that from the remaining crime scene evidence and threatening letters, we have a lot of avenues yet to find the people responsible.”

“It’s been a week, Rogers. That’s not good enough. The Commissioner is tired of this author-angle you’re driving. The Commissioner feels your scope is guided by your infatuation, and—”

“With all due respect, Captain, the posing of each victim was too elaborate to be coincidental—”

“Enough!” Carter snapped, shutting Steve up at once. “It has been a week and we’ve made no goddamn progress, Rogers. The Commissioner does not feel one author’s circumstances outweigh the threat to the city at large, and I for one don’t disagree with him. Take your meeting at the 62nd
tonight, then go home. Tomorrow you hand over the task force operations to the FBI. I’ll give you two more days with the letters, but that’s final. Am I understood?”

“Yes, sir,” Steve and Bucky intoned obediently before Carter dismissed them.

An indignant fire burned behind Bucky’s eyes and he looked ready to burn down hell for Steve. Bucky’s faith in him was all Steve had left in his corner now.

“Save it,” he told Buck before the arguments burst out of his friend. “Sally’s after the meeting?”

“Yeah, and you’re buying.”

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They met with the four detectives at the 62nd as planned. Detectives found CCTV footage from a Chase ATM machine that had captured a passing figure in a hoodie matching the description of the person seen with Giordani’s car near the shipyards. Although it was true that many people wore jeans and hoodies, it wasn’t as common in December. Steve grabbed a copy of the footage, thanked them for their cooperation so far, and warned them of the change in oversight.

The news was met with murmurs of discontent and shameless name-calling. Even though it was Steve’s first time leading an interdepartmental effort, his reputation preceded him and his experience on the force made it easy to delegate work effectively. He knew what detectives did, could do, and would do. He knew when to push and when to give people space. Federal agents tended to err on different ends of the spectrum: they either treated cops like untrained rookies or worked them like dogs for their own credit. All things considered, the detectives at the 62nd were about as pleased with the decision as Steve and Bucky.

None of them much felt like going home after that, so Steve and Bucky invited them along to Sally’s. Beer flowed freely, and by the time officers from the 20th arrived on the scene, mutinous pacts were sworn and rebellious hearts soared, loud and boisterous in their shared allegiance to the gold shield.

Steve never heard his phone ring, but the vibrations eventually caught his attention. He shoved his latest pint at Bucky and excused himself to answer it in the relative silence outside.

“Rogers.”

“Good evening, detective,” Tony said softly, his voice so gentle that Steve still had to cover his other ear to hear him clearly. “Is this a good time?”

“I said you could call me any time, Tony,” Steve reminded him, raising his voice to be heard over the din. “It’s a little loud here though, if you could speak up. What’s going on?”

With a quiet sound of understanding, Tony raised his voice to say, “I’ve been going over my stories with Pepper this past week, and I think—I can’t be sure if it’s even noticeable to others, but there may be something else connecting the specific scenes the murderer used for his crimes. I can come down to the station and explain, I can be there in forty minutes, maybe thirty—”

Steve blinked wildly at Tony’s unexpected words. The mellowing fog of alcohol started to clear as the gravity of the situation dawned on him.

“Wait, Tony. This sounds, I definitely want to hear what you found, but I’m not there at the moment,” Steve explained, but he rushed past the minor inconvenience. “Can I meet you somewhere? A coffee shop? Diner?”
“Well… I guess? If we must, but, uh,” Tony hedged uncomfortably. “It’s, uh. Pretty private, so I’d rather talk in …you know. In private. Could you come to my place? I even have all my books here, I could show you what I mean.”

A distant voice in Steve’s head cried out no. It sounded suspiciously like Bucky, and it reminded him that Tony had the slim average build of the figure in the hoodie, and a lead detective meeting suspects alone in private was a definite no-no. The letters Tony identified had only led to dead ends that, in retrospect, had wasted a lot of man hours. If Bucky was right and Tony was a suspect, integrating himself into the investigation at this level would be indescribably advantageous. Even without his intellect, a man like Tony Stark could already have enough insight to get away with his crimes. The last thing Steve should do was meet with him alone at a location where Tony had every advantage.

“Yeah, sure. Text me the address, Tony. I’ll be there right away,” Steve replied despite his (and Bucky’s) better judgment. Now, all he had to do was explain his momentary lapse of good judgment to his best friend.

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Despite freezing rain and sleet, Steve got dropped off at Tony’s address by a black and white in record time. He hesitated briefly at the door, considering yet again to ask the officer to hang around in case of emergency like Bucky had suggested. It would be the smart thing to do, but if he was right about Tony, the risk of offending him after all he was doing for their case was too great.

In the end, he waved off the officer and knocked on the door. He was armed, after all. He could take care of himself.

Tony opened the door barefooted and dressed more casually than Steve had ever seen him. It was hard not to stare.

“God it’s fucking cold—come in, detective. Want a drink?” he called over his shoulder as he led the way into his home. Steve shut the door behind him, but he followed at a more subdued pace.

His soft spot for Tony Stark was undeniable, but he’d never imagined his life to bring him here, standing in Tony’s townhouse with Tony in nothing more than loose, threadbare jeans, a t-shirt, and flannel shirt with his sleeves rolled up. Watching him walk away was a study in Tony’s natural grace and Steve couldn’t bring himself to look away. His was a hopeless case, a lost cause, and still he felt like the luckiest man in the world.

Until Tony noticed Steve hadn’t been following and turned to give him a questioning look.

“Detective?”

“Water, please,” Steve said in a rush, walking after his host finally and trying not to smack himself on the forehead.

By the time Steve caught up with Tony, they were standing in what he could only presume was Tony’s living room. It wasn’t the designer home he expected, but a comfortable space filled with an enormous couch and numerous mismatched armchairs. There was no TV as far as Steve could see, but bookcases covered every inch of wall space, stuffed with books. His home even smelled of books, that soothing musky scent of old books mixed with sandalwood. Steve would have been happy to spend a few hours perusing Tony’s library to find a book to share one of those armchairs with.

Whatever else existed in the room - floors, rugs, tables of any kind - was impossible to see. There
were books and pages strewn on every available surface, the books held open with various fruits and improvised paperweights like bottles of wine, potted succulents, and candlesticks of countless shapes and sizes.

“Is this research for the case?” Steve wondered, cautiously stepping between the books and the papers that took up the floor space to follow Tony.

Tony nodded in reply and tossed him a cold bottle of water. Steve caught the bottle easily and dropped into the couch, grateful to get his feet off the floor and away from what could have been a careful system of organization.

“I’m just gonna cut to the chase. I’ve been trying to think of how to say it, but nothing I’ve rehearsed sounds any better than the truth. So, basically, all the sexual material in my books either come from my imagination, or, it is directly from experience. And that could either mean I had sex, it was spectacular and worthy of commemorating, or it was an intentional run-through with a willing partner or partners for the purpose of writing into the book. You with me?” he asked at the end of a crazy rush of words that Steve only barely digested. Had he been jerking off to Tony’s actual sex life? Sure, it wasn’t so far fetched, and occasionally he might have even guessed it, but to have it confirmed? “You look a little pale.”

“Thirsty,” Steve explained breathlessly. He tore off the cap and took a long sip before gesturing for Tony to continue. “Go on.”

“The scenes the killer took from? All three cases fall into the specific ‘so spectacular it had to be commemorated’ category. I don’t know how he would have know. I’ve been reading them out loud, I’m trying to compare them to see—even Pepper’s helped, and we think there may be a change in tone that a very careful reader might detect. I’ve convinced myself, anyway, that they could tell the difference between imaginary and real, but what I can’t figure out is how anyone can separate ‘real and planned’ from ‘real but improvised’,” he admitted with a frown. “I’ve been trying all afternoon, but I’m at the point where words don’t look like words anymore. I thought maybe you’d have more luck? All the real and staged scenes are here on the table. Everything printed is ‘real and improvised’, and they’re all arranged around the books or series they belong to.”

Steve blinked back at him in bewilderment. “Right now?”

“I’ve been working on this for fifteen hours straight, and it’s all my writing. You think I’d expect you to solve it in one night after a day of work?” Tony drawled in reply, though if Steve wasn’t completely seeing all this through a self-insert fanfic lens, he heard a hint of playfulness in Tony’s tone. “I’ll give you my notes, you’ll have everything you need to recreate this …masterpiece shitstorm tomorrow.”

“Well-written shitstorm,” Steve corrected mildly, and Tony huffed in amusement. “Your timing is great. It’s been five days and no peep on the case, this can only help. I appreciate it, Tony.”

“It’s the least I could do, detective,” Tony said after a momentary pause. “I know you said I’m not responsible, but I’ll be damned if I’m just going to sit here and let some messed up asshole use my work to hurt people.”

It was remarkable how quickly Steve’s infatuation was threatening to burst from his chest, how desperately he needed someone to remind him that he hadn’t known Tony a week yet. He didn’t know the man, he only knew his writing. It didn’t make them friends, and it certainly didn’t mean they would grow to be more.

And somehow, against all rational counterpoints, Steve could feel himself swooning. He cleared his
throat and tried to clear his head. Twelve years on the force, and he was a damn good detective. He was better than his teenage fantasies.

“You said real but improvised?” he asked after a long stretch of reflective silence. “Could there be any legal issues there? Someone recognizing themselves and realizing what happened?”

“I have signed agreements from every single partner featured in my books, improvised or otherwise. I’m not here to blindside people for the sake of one page, detective.”

It was common decency, and yet Steve’s heart fluttered. What would a cool person say? Damnit, this was high school all over again.

“Tony, I’ve read passionate haikus about your testicles. Call me Steve.”

Tony gaped in surprise before he dissolved into a delighted peal of giggles, practically folding in on himself on the couch beside Steve. He might have tried to say something—he thought maybe Tony was trying to say his name, but there was no way to tell what were squeaks of amusement and what were recognized words in the English language.

“Drinks,” Tony finally managed, pushing off the couch to toe his way away from the paperstorm in his living room. “What’s your poison, Steve? Scotch? Tequila?”

Steve turned in his seat and gazed after Tony with a hopeful smile. “I’m afraid tequila hasn’t liked me since I turned thirty,” he called after him and watched as Tony poured himself two generous fingers of scotch.

“How do you do it, Tony?”

Tony added two drops of water to his scotch, then shot Steve a curious look. “What do you mean?”

“You’ve been working on this case for days. It’s been on your mind, that much is obvious,” Steve gestured at the organized chaos around him. “But you also published twenty pages last week. Twenty excellent pages; I’ve never been more excited about librarians in my life.”

“So you’re not just a fan, you subscribe to Stark Adventures, too?” Tony observed with a casual humor that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “I’m flattered.”

“You say that like you didn’t just create a whole new world last week,” Steve teased even as he tried to take stock of what happened while Tony made his way back to the couch. “You’ve done all this work on the case and created a town full of wizards who operate out of a library and use magic to do who knows what!”

“The story’s been with me a while,” Tony said quietly, tapping his head. In place of his earlier playful tip-toeing, he walked slowly to avoid disrupting his work. If Steve didn’t know any better, Tony looked tired.

“It doesn’t require a lot of thought once you get into it. Writing is what I know, I… when the world becomes too much, I create another one. I got home that night after the questioning, and I couldn’t sleep. I couldn’t—I don’t know how you do it,” he interrupted himself, his expression solemn and unrecognizable from only minutes earlier. “I don’t know how you can have a life outside of what you do, you—lives depend on you, families depend on you. All I had to do was answer a few questions and I couldn’t function. I went through the motions, but nothing felt right. So I stayed up and I wrote. The feedback helps,” he added with a wry, self-deprecating smile. “It helped, I mean. With all this.”
Steve let him have a few moments of silence after he’d spoken, giving Tony the space to think or continue if he needed to. “You care, Tony,” he eventually said, his voice quiet but firm in his confidence. “You’re right, sometimes you need to manage it, compartmentalize. But caring is not something to hide from. It’s astounding, all the work you’ve done to help us. This is information we would never have known without you, be proud of yourself. I know I am,” he promised. “I think you’ve handled yourself very well. And not to mention, your Overdue Ritual preview helped me when I couldn’t find any peace.”

Even though Tony hadn’t looked away from him once while Steve talked, that last admission left Tony wide-eyed with color rising in his cheeks. “Really?” he breathed in disbelief.

“Like waxedtreasuretrail81 said,” Steve drawled to Tony’s sudden burst of laughter, “I have no idea what’s going on or what will be happening, but it’s a journey that couldn’t have come at a better time.”

Tony laughed so hard he wheezed as he came up for air, and smug as can be, Steve smirked to himself and took the drink out of his hand before Tony spilled it all over the couch.

“You like that name, huh?” Steve asked rhetorically, snickering quietly to himself. Tony’s bright laughter filled the house with a contagious buoyancy that Steve could feel in his heart and in his soul. He couldn’t stop smiling, happy for no other reason than that Tony was happy.

“If I ever get a chance to explore social media and reference one of my books, would you let me use that username? As inspiration, of course,” he clarified with a straight expression - or what passed for a straight expression when one was still giggling and wiping tears away.

“Give me one of those waivers,” Steve said without hesitation. “Tony, I’ve loved your writing for as long as I can remember. If my stupid college humor gets me a nod in one of your books, I’ll sign anything you want.”

Tony’s steady gaze flickered down to Steve’s lips, so quick Steve almost didn’t catch it.

“Steve, stop me if this is irresponsible for the sake of the case,” Tony said in a softer tone of voice that had Steve’s eager heart pumping blood in the wrong direction. “But if you’re interested, there is a scene in Overdue Ritual where I could use your help.”

Steve’s valiant brain short circuited. In one moment he was desperately trying to think of how to cover his lap without giving away the obvious, and in the other, he couldn’t think of what word was the opposite of no.

“You could?” he whispered with trembling words that had sounded much more suave in his head. “What scene is that, Tony?”

“It is a fertility ritual, the practice that keeps the small town of Marham lush and temperate year round,” Tony explained, his voice deep and soothing and Steve couldn’t look away from his lips as Tony slid in closer to him on the couch. “It is performed once every season according to ancient Celtic traditions. The elected leader of Marham has to prove he can satisfy the town’s chief priest… before the entire town, the priest is tied to the altar,” Tony whispered against Steve’s wet, parted lips. “His body subjected to the people he served, vulnerable and exposed, a sacrificial gift to their gods…”

Steve whimpered into Tony’s offer of a kiss, starved—desperate for his touch. His heart had never thundered and stopped at the same time, and panting, he tried to respond.
“And, and you need me to…”

“I need my chief priest, Steve,” Tony answered in a firm, deep voice that washed over Steve in a feverish, full body shudder. “I need my sacrifice.”

Steve leaned after him, chasing those sinful lips he’d never before dared to dream he could touch. But Tony pulled back, not far, but enough that Steve couldn’t reach him. It took Steve a moment to recover and realize that his body was getting ahead of his tongue.

“Yes, Tony. Anything,” he swore on a single breath.

Tony’s answering triumphant smile would have left Steve weak in the knees if he hadn’t already been sitting. All at once, Tony crowded into Steve’s space on his hands and knees, occupying Steve’s entire world so effortlessly. With every fiber of his being, Steve felt all the pressures of the world fade away as he let his eyes slip shut and yielded to Tony’s covetous lips.

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Steve couldn’t think—he could hardly breathe. He could feel Tony moving around him, whispering words of affection and praise as he worked on releasing Steve from his bonds. It began with the scrape and slide of all candles pushed aside, and the soft sizzle Steve heard as their flames were pinched out. The whole process barely took a minute, Tony was never out of reach, and still Steve found such relief and comfort in Tony’s touch when he returned.

As Steve’s breathing evened out, Tony covered him with a soft weighted blanket. It was as if he’d been waiting at the ready to make sure Steve had every chance to catch his breath without allowing him to go cold. Despite wanting to feel Tony’s every last touch, the added warmth and comforting pressure of the blanket left Steve drifting away. Tony freed his legs one at a time, moving from ankle, to knee, to thigh with gentle hands and endless kisses. Gently, he helped stretch Steve’s legs out, massaging the aches and tension out of his legs with the same lavender oil from Steve’s anointment. The deep pressure of Tony’s strong, confident fingers kindled an undercurrent of lust through the satisfied haze Steve had lost himself to, and distantly he felt that all familiar heat coiling at the base of his spine, and his cock valiantly twitched in a feeble attempt for another go.

Steve thought he heard Tony murmur something above him, his words as intangible and fleeting as those in a forgotten dream. As he finished kneading Steve’s inner thigh, Tony slipped his warm, oiled fingers over Steve’s balls, cradling and squeezing them ever so gently in his hand. There was no sense of urgency or blazing passion to rouse Steve from his dreamlike state, but an intimate caress, a momentary pleasure that anticipated no other action. It soothed away Steve’s tenuous desire, and when Tony let go and let the warm blanket weigh down on him again, Steve closed his eyes with a deep sigh of content.

Tony released his arms and guided them under the blanket. He left Steve to rest for a minute or two, and when he came back, Steve’s senses filled with that familiar lavender scent of the anointing oil. Tony cradled Steve’s neck in both hands, and with the firm, steady pressure of his thumbs, he worked the tension out of Steve’s neck and shoulders until Steve was no better than putty in his hands.

Steve was barely conscious as Tony helped him slide off the table. How he made his way to the bathroom, Steve would never know. They left the weighted blanket on the bathroom floor as Tony walked Steve into the cavernous shower and washed his body clean. Water flowed like warm heavy rain from overhead, and Tony patiently guided Steve to a wide seat raised in one side of the shower. Steve dropped without complaint, and it wasn’t until he was off his feet that he realized how tired he was.
As Tony started washing Steve’s arms and his torso, Steve’s head fell back against the shower wall. His eyelids were too heavy, his thoughts too loud. All Steve wanted to do was close his eyes and drift away, find that bliss that had carried him away from it all on Tony’s dining table only minutes ago.

Tony hummed softly and Steve tried to open his eyes to give Tony his attention. “Should I be offended? I can hear you thinking, handsome.”

If Steve could’ve talked, he would have told Tony he didn’t want to be thinking, thank you very much. The way Tony was working the lather over his shoulders and his back, all Steve wanted to do was lean against Tony’s solid weight and give in to sleep. But his tongue was uncooperative and his lips couldn’t do it all on their own.

Tony chuckled at whatever sorry sight Steve must have made. The sound of his quiet, rumbling laugh warmed Steve somewhere deep inside, and tired as he was he couldn’t stop from smiling in return.

“Close your eyes,” he said. “Stop thinking.”

Steve tried. He closed his eyes and he tried. Tony washed his chest (slowly and repeatedly), then worked his way down Steve’s torso to his legs. His gentle touch calmed Steve’s racing thoughts somewhat, but peace was hard to find. The hand-off to the FBI kept creeping into his thoughts, and if he was honest, as bone tired as he was, a part of him wished he had enough energy to work on the new potential lead Tony had found.

The world around him suddenly stopped as Steve felt Tony kneeling at his feet like an offering. Unhurried and reverent in his touch, Tony lifted Steve’s soft cock in one hand and brushed his lips over the tip. Steve expected a playful kiss or maybe Tony would even try to stroke him off until he realized Steve wasn’t getting hard again, but Tony did neither. Instead, he parted his lips and took Steve’s soft cock into his mouth, swallowing him down until he nuzzled into Steve’s groin.

Steve choked on a gasp of Tony’s name. Wide-eyed, he watched Tony’s eyes close in pleasure, mesmerized by the sheer contentment in Tony’s expression. Then, Tony swallowed. There was no intention behind it, no attempt to coax another round out of Steve. It was enough intimacy to keep Steve’s mind from wandering and weighing on him, and Tony seemed comforted with his one task, glad and at peace with the weight of Steve’s soft cock on his tongue, filling his mouth.

Long minutes passed before Tony reluctantly pulled off and let Steve’s cock slip from his lips. The loss of his warm mouth left Steve shivering even in their hot shower, but a calm had returned to him. His limbs were heavy and uncooperative, as if this short time away from his daily stress was all he needed to remember his exhaustion. Patiently, Tony helped him up and led them out to the bedroom. They fell into bed, dried but tangled in each other through shared kisses and supportive arms.

Steve might have said something embarrassing - like thank you, or I’ve jerked off to your books so much I never knew I’d be fucked for one by you - but his brain had disconnected from all speech long ago. Tony guided him onto his side, and Steve obediently did as he was told. He felt Tony brush a kiss over his shoulder and another over the back of his neck before he felt Tony’s long, lean body sliding up behind his, curving around him in a protective embrace. Tony settled so they shared the same pillow, and he pressed a final kiss over the back of Steve’s head before nuzzling into his hair. Together they drifted off to blissful sleep.

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The next morning Steve got to the station with a spring in his step and a smile bright enough to make
It had been difficult to leave Tony that morning, nestled as he was in his cozy blankets. Snuggling closer and indulging in Tony’s languid kisses and sleep-warm body would have been heavenly. But they had a new angle on the case, and if there was one thing Steve needed to do - for Tony and for himself - it was to clear Tony’s name once and for all.

“Who are you and what’ve you done with Steve?”

Steve paused in the middle of stuffing his gloves into his coat pocket and turned to face his partner. Bucky stared at him, unblinking and unimpressed.

“Yesterday’s clothes Steve? Really?” he muttered in undertone. “Suspect or not, Stark is still connected to the case.”

“So let’s focus on that,” Steve suggested and walked over to Bucky’s desk with his notes from the night before. “Tony’s been—”

“Oh, it’s Tony now, is it?”

Steve gave his partner a dry look then carried on as if no interruption had happened. “Tony spent this last week trying to understand why a killer would choose those specific scenes out of all his books. The books were all written years apart, the scenes have nothing in common except that they are explicitly sexual, but there are so many other scenes a killer could have selected. He told me yesterday that there is one more thing that ties them together, except he wasn’t sure how someone other than him would know their connection. So,” Steve said in conclusion of his summary and turned over the folder with Tony’s notes so Bucky could see the excerpts Tony showed him the night before. “These three are excerpts of the scenes used to pose the victims. The rest are scenes that do not fall into the category Tony has identified. He’s thinking, if someone reads these scenes very carefully, it may be possible to separate them accurately.”

“...and what exactly is this supposed to tell me?”

“By his admission, Tony sometimes uses sex as practical research for his books. You’d have to read them closely to tell them apart, but basically, he said the scenes the killer used were all based in real experience. That can’t be a coincidence.”

Bucky frowned down at the papers put in front of him, clicking his pen impatiently as he read. His lips twisted in a wry grimace as he compared the different excerpts, and Steve inwardly sighed at the sight. Bucky didn’t read these books, he couldn’t be expected to find the finer details in Tony’s writing so quickly.

Instead of arguing, however, Bucky closed the folder and looked at Steve. “If that’s true,” he said quietly, distracted by his thoughts. “Wasn’t there a letter Stark found to do with this? A guy who accused him of rape because he expected to end up in the book?”

“Hang on, I did something with that,” Steve said and hurried back to his desk to dig through his binder dedicated to the case. He flipped through the pages until he got to the photocopy of the letter in question, and turned it over to read the report. “Alright: I put Barton on that one, and he found that the guy moved to Ohio in 2011 and died in a bus accident there two years ago.”

Bucky grunted in sympathy, then sighed to himself. “Dead end.”

“Let’s look at him again,” Steve said after a brief scan of Barton’s report. “He might still have family in the city. Besides, Barton’s got a scribble here about Stark being into the elderly, that doesn’t feel right...”
“...how old is the guy supposed to be?”

“Born in 1941?”

Bucky shrugged. “77 isn’t unthinkable. There’s always Viagra. Maybe he was researching a book about World War II?”

All around them, the bullpen fell quiet. Instinctively, Bucky and Steve turned to look at the figures occupying the hallway. They all matched, with their blue windbreaks and polished shoes. Their bored glances around the bullpen betrayed little, except for the guy at the very front. The guy with the sunglasses and the tailored suit.

The Feds had arrived. Steve and Bucky exchanged looks and sat down - Bucky in his chair while Steve leaned back against desk - to watch the spectacle.

“Wake up, everybody! The cavalry is here,” the man announced, plucking his sunglasses off with a decided flourish. “That’s right: the Federal Bureau of Investigation, or the FBI. You might have heard of us. I am Special Agent Hammer, Justin Hammer. I need Captain Carter and I need Detective Rogers. Which of you charming locals can—”

“Hey, Special Agent Hammer, Justin Hammer,” Bucky called out before Hammer had a chance to finish his sentence. “We’re right here.”

“Yes. Alright, good people,” Hammer recovered said after a loaded pause. “Back to work, chop chop!”

Bucky swiveled in his chair with no intention of standing to greet the very special Special Agent and his trailing entourage. Steve resisted the urge to roll his eyes but when Hammer asked who of them was Rogers and who was Carter, Steve pushed off the desk to stand at his full height, looming over Hammer all too easily.

“Agent. I’m Detective Steve Rogers, I ran the task force. Captain Carter is in a meeting with the Commissioner down at 1PP. She’ll be back by ten.”

Hammer looked him up and down with an unintelligible expression. There was no telling if he was checking Steve out or had other intentions, but eventually he heaved a dramatic sigh and looked Steve in the eyes. “When they said some a bookworm figured out the pattern, you weren’t what I pictured… Guess you got some brain for that brawn, am I right?”

Steve stared at him in silence. Bucky closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose to stave off the inevitable headache, but by the looks of Agent Hammer, Steve suspected headaches were only the first of their problems.

“Right… well, turn over whatever you’ve managed to find, and—”

Bucky slammed down a box full of binders on the desk. “That’s all of it.”

“Well, aren’t you efficient? Tax dollars at work here, clearly. Odinson, be a dear and take that, it looks heavy. Oh, didn’t see that coming, didya?” he smirked at Steve while gesturing at the enormous, muscular blond instructed to carry away the box with all their evidence. “I got one bigger and better. It’s been a pleasure, gentlemen.”

With a smug grin and an unfriendly salute, Hammer led his team to an unoccupied conference room. They shut the door behind them to cut off any interference from the police officers and set up their war room.
“Remember what the Captain said: we have two days,” Steve reminded his partner as he gathered up his coat and gloves. “Let’s find the man who sent that letter.”
Warning: Mention of past drug abuse and past sexual acts (not between Tony and Steve).

Please note: Description of sexual crime & violence tag also applies here.

“Listen. I’m not your captain, I’m not sweet on you like she is. I don’t sugarcoat the truth for your innocent little ears. It’s been two days and you’ve got nothing to show for it. That, boys, is what we at the FBI call a classic dead-end situation.”

Bucky glared up at the ceiling, presumably to stop from strangling Hammer. Steve stared back at Hammer straight on, wishing he could shut the schmuck up with the power of his mind. Inwardly, he wished Carter had been in the room to give the Special Agent a smackdown for such blatant disrespect.

“Witnesses who lived on the same floor as Michael Dunn say he had a male nurse who visited twice a week for years,” Steve repeated, speaking slower this time in an effort to hide his irritation. “Yet there is no evidence Dunn had home visits from a nurse or any other medical professional in all the years he lived in the city. His insurance says nothing about any prolonged medical problems, except that he visited a chiropractor semi-regularly in 2005, but that’s—”

“Snore snore snore,” Hammer drawled sarcastically. “So the guy had a penchant for male nurses, big deal. They roleplayed a little, took each other’s temperature, spiced up the week. It’s not a crime, detective. It’s a little weird, but it’s not suspicious.”

“It means another man frequently resided at the address where we believe the letter originated from,” Steve tried to explain, but Hammer rolled his eyes and turned away to whatever one of his agents had brought up to show him.

“You have all your agents and ten NYPD detectives across the city on your task force!” Bucky snapped in a sudden outburst of anger. “All we’re asking for is time to confirm this man’s identity and prove he had nothing to do with this.”

“He had nothing to do with this,” Hammer said in a bored tone, “there, happy? I did your job for you, you’re welcome. Speaking of jobs, I gave you something to do yesterday. Have you done it?”

“We don’t have enough back from the lab to start itemizing the new evidence,” Bucky said impatiently, in part because evidence already came back with clear descriptions. “What do you want us to do until then, sit at the desk and guard our emails?”

“We’ll get on it as soon as the evidence comes back,” Steve interrupted before Hammer reacted to Bucky’s mood. “Until then, come on. Let us get to the bottom of this. We just need to find his name and do a background check, that’s all.”

Hammer eyed the redhead agent standing beside him, but her expression betrayed no opinion. None of the eavesdropping agents were facing Bucky or Steve, except for the towering blond - Steve 2.0 - who from the back of the war room shrugged and asked nobody in particular, “What’s the harm?”
His comment was innocent enough, but Hammer pursed his lips in a clear attempt to stay cool.

“Alright gentlemen. You can do it your way for now,” Hammer conceded irritably. “But if your blunder slows down my investigation, I’m coming for your badges. Am I clear?”

From the far back, Steve 2.0 Odinson gave them a wink and a big thumbs up. Steve and Bucky muttered ‘got it’ when they meant ‘suck a bag of dicks’ and marched out of the conference room occupied by the FBI before Hammer changed his mind.

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Although Dunn’s former neighbors agreed on what his nurse looked like, they had no other information about the young man who visited their neighbor multiple times a week. Like most neighbors in big cities, Dunn stuck to idle chit chat about the weather or slow elevators. Nobody recalled seeing him with other people, either. No women in his life, no children, no friends. From the records on file, Steve and Bucky learned that Dunn had been married briefly in his youth, but they had no children, his nearest sibling lived in Pennsylvania, and his ex-wife had moved to Georgia soon after their divorce.

“Is it possible to be this lonely?” Bucky wondered between bites of his second hot dog. “Do you think it’s a permanent condition or it happens to you when you’re not paying attention?”

Steve hummed as he finished his last bite and washed it down with some Coke. “Won’t happen to you, Buck. You got me.”

“Sure I do, until Mr. Kinky Cow Eyes bats his lashes and you forget my number.”

Steve rolled his eyes, but rather than give in to Bucky’s childish bickering he considered what Bucky said more carefully. “You think he was always that lonely? He had enough social skills to get married once. Why wouldn’t someone like that be able to find a girlfriend or… anyone?”

“Maybe it was a high school sweetheart and they just thought that’s what they had to do? It wasn’t uncommon back then,” Bucky offered as a possible theory. “Or they got pregnant and her dad insisted.”

“But he has no children.”

Bucky frowned. Even if she’d gotten full custody in the divorce, Dunn would have been listed as the father if they were married. “Unless she didn’t want Dunn named as the father,” he said after a minute. “Wouldn’t hurt to reach out, right?”

“It’s thin, but worth ruling out. I’ll make the call,” Steve said and reached for his phone, but his phone was already ringing in his hands. Tony was calling.

“I’ll make the call,” Bucky sighed and stepped away to do exactly that. Steve might have argued or told him off, but it wasn’t as if Bucky was wrong. He could make the call as easily as Steve, and they weren’t exactly swimming in alternative leads.

He connected the call and answered as he always did. “Rogers.”

“Detective,” Tony greeted him with a deep, satisfied purr. “Is this a good time?”

“Yes and no,” Steve admitted, and he swore he heard the moment Tony’s playful mood calmed into careful attention at the other end of the line. “What’s going on?”
“Hey, this isn’t urgent,” Tony promised. “I wanted to invite you to dinner, but I’ll let you go. I can leave the details in a voicemail.”

On a whim, Steve interrupted Tony’s farewell to ask, “Before you left for Vancouver, were you seeing anyone here in New York?”

Tony was silent for a beat. “No. Nothing serious, why?”

“No male doctors or nurses?” Steve pressed. “This is for the case, Tony, nothing else.”

“I figured,” Tony said with a sigh, but then fell silent for a long time before he could continue. “I’d… I wasn’t in the best place then, honestly. I hurt my shoulder in a bad fall over a year ago, and I didn’t handle the painkillers all that well. That’s why I was in Vancouver.”

“So, did… in the time you were in the city, were you involved with any nurses or doctors?”

“No exactly something I’m proud of, Steve,” Tony whispered, “but yeah. Nothing serious, but enough to get a little… extra attention. Do you think it’s relevant to the case?”

“Possibly,” Steve started to say, not that he could think too straight after that confession. Never meet your heroes, they said.

“I don’t remember his name, but I know I’ve got it somewhere. I’ll find it.”

With that promise, Tony hung up and left Steve to stare at his phone in an uncomfortable silence. Tony had sought help. He’d recognized his problem, sought help, and recovered. Some might call his journey a heroic one, a victory over an addiction that otherwise consumed so many.

But it was difficult to reconcile what he should feel with how he felt. A man he’d admired all of his adult life had traded sexual favors for drugs?

“So, get this,” Bucky announced his return with a little more pep than usual. “Ex-wife, Carol? Turns out she’s got a son: Richard Kline. Moved to New York and worked as a nurse, got fired last month when he started becoming violent and unpredictable.”

“That was fast,” Steve said after a beat. “Where’d you get all that from?”

Bucky smirked and smugly asked, “Remember the redhead FBI agent?”

“Stone-faced ice queen who’s way out of your league? Yeah,” Steve replied dubiously. “What about her?”

“First, fuck you. Second, at least she’s never been a suspect in the case. Third,” Bucky finished in monotone, “since everything about this case has to go through Agent Hammertoe’s people, they put me through with her. I told her what we needed, and turns out we don’t need the Georgia police after all, we just needed the FBI databank.”

Steve pursed his lips in distaste. How much faster could they have gotten to this point in the investigation if Hammer had just cooperated with them from the start instead of discounting their theories outright? “That’s… convenient. So, where is Richard Kline now?”

“Natasha got his last address, but she also noticed that someone else registered at that address more recently,” Bucky said and held up his trusty notepad. “Feel like a trip to the Bronx?”

“Her name is Natasha?” Steve asked thoughtfully as he pushed off the half-wall he’d been perching
on to lead the way to the car. “Yeah, you don’t stand a chance.”

Bucky glowered after his partner and marched after him to catch up. “And just for that, I’m driving: give me the keys.”

With a smug chuckle and a playful jangle of the keys, Steve tossed him the keyring. They pulled into traffic and let the radio fill the silence. Steve knew he’d have to tell Bucky something about what he’d learned about Tony and the nurse, but how? There was no way to separate what Tony had done from the important details, and Bucky was already suspicious of Tony. Steve still didn’t know how to feel about what he’d learned. He didn’t need Bucky on his case right now.

None of Steve’s thoughts led anywhere fruitful before Tony came through as promised. In a short laconic message Tony identified the nurse he’d dealt with as Richard Kline.

Taken with what Bucky had learned through Natasha, the threads of evidence were finally starting to weave a clearer story. Steve had to tell Bucky; whatever happened in his personal life had to come second to the case. Lives literally depended on it.

“Listen, Buck. Something came up in my conversation with Tony. It’s about the case,” Steve said as casually as he could. “Long story short, last year he struggled with pain addiction after a shoulder injury and after surgery he had relations with a nurse at the hospital in exchange for pain killers. He looked up the guys name,” he finished before Bucky’s silence turned into something he didn’t want to deal with, and he held his phone up for Bucky to read the name himself.

“What the hell,” Bucky muttered, looking from the phone to Steve then back again. “What the—you—what the hell, Steve?”

“Think about it! The most recent book came out about a month ago,” Steve spoke firmly over Bucky’s obvious blindsided anger. “Maybe Kline thought he was going to have a part in the book because of what he did for Tony? When it doesn’t, he feels betrayed. He’s been taken advantage of and he loses it.”

Without a word, Bucky threw on the siren and punched the gas.

***

The next night Steve found himself on Tony’s doorstep, hoping that Tony was home.

It wasn’t long before the door swung open and Tony stared back at him in surprise. He was dressed as casually as before, barefoot and comfortable, and armed with a gleaming kitchen knife. “Steve? What’s - are you alright? Is this about Kline?”

Steve tried not to stare at the knife. How well did he really know Tony? “No, we’re still looking for him,” he said in the tone of voice he’d use to talk down frantic people at an active scene. He slid his hands out of his pockets in case he needed to reach his gun in a hurry. “We need to talk.”

“Hey, sure. Come in,” Tony said then, shaken out of his stupor by those four unhappy words. He stepped away from the door to let Steve come in, but he paused in the hallway. Steve could see the question in his eyes as clear as day, but this wasn’t the time for intimacy. There was too much between them.

When a kiss wasn’t forthcoming, Tony took a further step back. “Are you hungry? I’m about to have dinner, there’s enough for two,” he explained as he led the way to his kitchen. “Baked chicken, mac and cheese, some greens.”
Steve hesitated on the threshold into the kitchen. Now he saw that he’d caught Tony in the middle of carving up a golden brown, crispy baked chicken. A deep dish of mac and cheese sat cooling on the counter nearby beside a plate that was already loaded with steamed broccoli and carrots. The food filled the air with irresistible spices and the promise of butter, and not for the first time in their short acquaintance, Steve really wished they’d met under different circumstances.

In the silence that Steve allowed between them, Tony stopped what he was doing and looked up. He looked anything but surprised or betrayed. He looked like he had been expecting this visit for some time.

“Listen, Steve. I know what I said… it’s a lot to accept. If you want to keep this, whatever this is between us strictly to the case, I understand. I mean it,” he added more emphatically, in case Steve hadn’t believed him the first time.

Slowly, by some unnamed power, Steve walked into the kitchen and took a seat on a stool at the counter where Tony was working. He didn’t say anything, but Tony grabbed a second plate and filled it halfway with the veggies before placing it in front of Steve. He stuck a spoon into the mac and cheese and pushed it closer to Steve, too.

“Help yourself, it’s too much for me anyway,” Tony promised, and who was Steve to ever decline mac and cheese? Tony carved up the last of the chicken and put half on Steve’s plate before pulling up his own stool.

Tony didn’t ask him why Steve had shown up unannounced, or pushed him to talk. If he was honest, Steve wasn’t entirely sure himself, but he appreciated the space. He appreciated the chance to think it through.

“It’s not easy accepting that you’re a person like me,” Steve eventually said. “You were the first writer who treated marginalized stories like any other story. You taught me that this whole… mainstream, heteronormative, 2.5 kids and a mortgage was a hegemonic idea that wasn’t necessarily reflective of the human experience. You made me feel like I wasn’t destined to be the sidekick to some straight character, that I could be the star of my story just like anybody else. And I know it’s unfair to you,” Steve had to say, “I know it is. But… I just never expected you to be…”

The sentence trailed off without an end, because Steve wasn’t too sure what was most honest. Flawed?

“Human?” Tony offered without judgment.

Steve grimaced, because Tony wasn’t wrong. “It sounds so bad out loud,” Steve muttered. “But that’s… I can’t help it.”

“Just because it’s unfair doesn’t mean it’s not also unreasonable,” Tony pointed out. “Besides my books, the longest interaction you’ve had with me has been about three homicides. It’s not exactly the classic recipe for… well, for anything.”

Tony sounded so calm and collected that Steve found himself starting to resent him. How could he be so rational? Did this happen to him all the time? Maybe it did. Steve took a deep breath, and finally chanced a glance across the counter.

But Tony didn’t look as calm as he sounded. If anything, he looked tired and anxious, like he was waiting for the final blow to come any second.

“I realized,” Steve found himself saying before he’d really had a chance to hesitate. “Of all things
I’ve learned about you, Tony, nothing makes me want to get to know you any less. That hasn’t changed since the first day you walked into the precinct and offered to help us get through those letters. But I get that I’m asking a lot. It isn’t fair to ask you to be patient with my preconceived notions about who you are.”

“I did call to ask you out to dinner yesterday, didn’t I?” Tony replied with a playful smile. “This wasn’t exactly what I had in mind, so we can’t count this one, but—”

“I’m serious, Tony.”

“So am I,” Tony replied without the earlier glimpse of mischief. “I’m wealthy, I’m educated, and I’m a white man. I make a living writing books about characters who are not always wealthy, white men who graduated from MIT. You’re not the first person I’ve met who had opinions about me,” he said in a gentler tone of voice. “But you are one of the few who’s been willing to admit it. And if you’re willing to communicate, I’m willing to try.”

His acceptance came so easily Steve didn’t see it coming. He ducked his head before Tony caught him looking like spellbound schoolboy on his first date and focused on stabbing his lukewarm broccoli instead.

“I don’t know what you have against this dinner, Tony,” he said as casually as he could. “I think it’s great.”

“A dinner date can’t be leftovers until, what, the tenth date?” Tony decided without so much as asking for input. “I wanted to take you to the Factory Bar. They have these apple and bacon dumplings I thought you might like.”

The Factory Bar had great food, a great atmosphere, and Steve hadn’t been there in ages. “I can’t wait to try them, Tony,” Steve answered sincerely. “On our second date.”

“First date.”

“Second date.”

Tony narrowed his eyes, and Steve smiled back, happy as a clam. If Tony didn’t want to count their important conversation about a potential relationship just because their food was reheated homemade comfort food, he was going to have to fight Steve for it.

“You’re impossible,” Tony decided with a sniff, and with a final couple of bites, he pushed his plate away and slid off his stool. “Whatever. You win: second date.”

Steve’s smile only grew wider and brighter. He kept eating the great, date-night food on his plate and watched Tony half-heartedly put things away and clean up around them.

“What about Friday, Tony?”

“Aw, shucks. That’s tough for me. You see, I only have time for first dates on Friday,” Tony lamented with a big, mournful pout that fooled Steve for one whole second. That second was just enough time for Tony to slip out of the kitchen.

What mature, reasonable option did Steve have but to give chase?

***

From breathless kisses in Tony’s office to eager, roaming hands in the library, they finally made their
way to the living room in a laughing, tangled mass.

“Tell me about your day,” Steve whispered. They were stretched out on Tony’s deep set couch, Steve lying on his back while Tony enjoyed his cushioned position on top. “Are you doing more book signings?”

“I was writing today. Editing, actually,” Tony corrected himself with mischief bright in his eyes. “The scene you helped me with last week.”

Steve blinked up at him in shock. “You finished it already?”

“You’re quite the inspiring muse,” Tony teased in a soft whisper. “But even I can’t write that fast. Would you like to see how it begins?”

Those were words Steve had only ever heard in his wildest fantasies. As warm and cozy as they were right now, he could easily have shoved Tony right to the floor in his excitement to read the latest Stark Adventures smut.

“Tony, please don’t tease me,” Steve begged him breathlessly. It would have been a perfect opportunity for teasing or making Steve work for it, but Tony only laughed and rolled to his feet.

“Wait here.”

He was only gone for a minute or two, but Steve could have sworn it was much longer than that before he had a plain manila folder in his hands. Tony tucked himself in beside Steve on the couch, following along over Steve’s shoulder as they read Marham’s first fertility rites from *Overdue Ritual*.

As dusk turned to night, Ean, Marham’s chief priest entered the ceremonial lodge. He was the mortal conduit for Brigid, their patron goddess of fertility, raised from an early age to serve Brigid by surrendering himself in their most sacred rites. Through his body, Brigid received Marham’s sacrificial offering. Through him, she weighed their worth.

For centuries the people of Marham gather at her shrine to pray, to seek comfort, and pay homage to their protector. Invoking Brigid’s blessing in the festival of Imbolg poured life into their modest town. Her protection allow crops to flourish despite the craggly, northern climate and blessed Marham’s mothers with both healthy children and speedy recoveries. Homes were safe and livestock pleasantly plump so that no family had cause for grief for as long as Brigid was appeased.

As they did every year on the cold, dark winter night midway between the winter solstice and the vernal equinox, the township’s residents gathered to observe the ritual that determined their shared fate in the coming year. The original settlers built their town around the rock and hewed an altar from where the heart and blessings would forever reach its people. As a symbol of the union between the original Celtic settlers and the American Indians who founded Marham, two tall cedar posts flanked the altar and a willow hoop hung suspended from the ceiling directly over the stone altar. The cedar post was painted red and represented the body of First Man and the tribal ancestors of the American Indian tribe. With the willow hoop, these symbols provided a powerful warding against ill will on the cultures and people who lived in Marham.

Before them all, Ean and his twelve attendants made their way to the sacred stone where the newly elected Mayor of Marham, Torin Greaves, anxiously waited. Unlike the chief priest, this was the Mayor’s first ritual mating. As the elected leader of the town, the Mayor represented the people and their goodwill, and therefore had the most to prove to their patron goddess. His leadership affected
the livelihood and satisfaction of every family in their peaceful township, and in the sacred rite of Imbolg, Brigid judged Marham’s Mayor before all her followers. If the Mayor’s sacrifice failed to impress their patron goddess, a new Mayor would be elected whose virility could satisfy Brigid and ensure her continued blessing upon Marham’s people and climate.

Ean came to a stop before the Mayor and held out his arms for his attendants. He never looked away from the Mayor as two priestesses stepped forward to slowly, and with great care, peel away the gauzy red veil draped across the chief priest’s broad shoulders. Every turn of fabric revealed inches of smooth, unblemished skin, untouched by hardship or toil. The audience observed in reverent silence, but the Mayor, who never before had been so close to Brigid’s chosen sacrifice, watched with his heart caught in his throat as the chief priest was stripped by the attendants right before his eyes.

The fabric fell to the floor to reveal the divine adonis beneath. As the mortal expression of the patron goddess, the chief priest’s body effortlessly exuded strength and beauty. Ancient symbols depicting Marham’s prayer for family and health were drawn across the firm muscles of his chest, closest to his heart. The Mayor could only stare as Ean knelt before him and welcomed him to the rite of Imbolg in the ancient words of their people.

“Bannaghtyn as failt ort ny balley as cree beaynee Brigid. Noght ny lheeishyn eh ta lhiats. Cur tastey dou myr saillt hene, sheean mie orrym aynjee ennym, as hig ee bannee whileen as t’ayns shoh kionfenish as dty dhieyn marish yn ven graih as maih beayn.”

“Blessings and welcome to the home and heart of the sacred Brigid. Tonight what is hers is yours. Attend to me as you desire, bless me in her name, and she will bless as many of you as are present with her eternal love and forgiveness.”

“Ta mee breearrey shen,” replied Torin, swearing to honor Brigid’s chief priest as was asked of him. With his promise, the Mayor offered his hand to Ean. “Irree.”

Ean gave Torin his hand, and as bidden, he rose to his feet. Torin led him to the altar, lit now only by warm candlelight, and in words too quiet for the audience to hear, commanded Ean to bend at the waist and place both hands on the warm stone. The chief priest did as he was asked, submitting to Torin’s instructions without question.

With a slow, reverent touch, Torin skimmed his fingers across the breadth of Ean’s back, wondering at the power yielding to his touch as he fingertips followed the curve of his spine down to his generous, muscular ass. The body offered to him was not one that any man could touch - his skin was too sacred, and respecting his purity was crucial to observing Brigid’s virtue. Now, a year since Ean’s last ritual mating, Torin could feel the chief priest tremble at his softest touch and arching his back to lift his hips up into the Mayor’s hand, begging to be touched.

Nothing stopped the Mayor from taking what had been willingly offered to him. The chief priest’s body was his to use, and Brigid’s attendants his to command. Newfound power brewed into momentary delirium. A chance to taint a body so sacred, so exquisite, to claim him for his own and take what was offered to him without remorse. He could throw the chief priest to the altar and order his twelve attendants restrain him there, spread his legs and bare him to Torin’s depravity. But Torin would not satisfy Brigid in a matter of seconds or minutes. This ritual was an extended act of worship on her mortal form where Torin proved himself worthy of leadership. Proved himself worthy by surrendering his human vice and gluttonous lust in the face of divine temptation to serve the hundreds waiting in the audience to see the appetite of their patron goddess satisfied.

Ean was laid out over the altar on his back, assisted by his attendants who guided him into ritual position between countless wax candles. His arms were stretched over his head and tied down to the
altar with ceremonial hemp rope dyed with the same vibrant red only worn by Brigid’s chosen thirteen. But when one such priestess proceeded to raise and spread Ean’s legs, Torin stayed her hand from tying him down.

‘Reveal him by hand,’ he explained. Expose him by active force, lay him bare to the scrutiny of his audience.

The chief priest’s attendants did as they were told. Some held Ean by the ankles to extend his legs until his straining muscles of his thighs could stretch no farther. Others grasped his calves and his thighs as space allowed, immobilizing him until their pulling and stretching lifted Ean’s hips off the altar by their collective strength.

With his legs spread and his hips elevated, Torin made room for one more candle on the altar between Ean’s thighs. The gentle flame cast golden light on the most vulnerable and intimate anatomy, illuminating his exposed cock and trembling thighs to their audience. Slim shadows danced over his smooth skin, and finally Torin allowed himself to begin.

By the second page, Steve was palming his aching hard cock. After all these years, he should have known better than to read Tony’s erotica in jeans.

“Unzip, babe,” Tony whispered into his ear. “Pull out your fat cock for me.”

Spellbound and in over his head, Steve swallowed, gasped, and whined at the same time. He undid his jeans one-handed so he could continue to read as he took his cock in hand. Beside him, Tony moaned softly under his breath, and before Steve knew what happened, it was Tony’s hand wrapped around his hard cock, and Tony’s hand jerking him off with slow, leisurely strokes. Just enough to drive Steve out of his mind.

“Keep reading, Steve.”

***

That night, Steve had turned off his alarm. He’d put in enough hours at work already, and he was so tired by the time he and Tony crawled into bed to sleep that he wouldn’t be good to anyone if he didn’t get any sleep. And still his phone woke him much too early at 6:40 the next morning.

“Steve? You need to get down here.”

“Buck?” he grunted softly as he pushed himself upright in bed. Something was off, and Steve was alert at once. If only he remembered where he’d scattered his clothes the night before. “What’s going on?”

“Patrol officer found another body this morning. It’s recent, TOD less than two hours ago,” Bucky explained over the phone. “Tony’s been arrested, Steve. He was found on the scene, victim’s blood all over him.”

It was only then that Steve realized Tony’s townhouse was unusually silent. He’d assumed Tony was in the bathroom, or downstairs in the kitchen, but there was no sound coming from anywhere in the brownstone. He hadn’t even noticed Tony get out of bed.

“Did he have any defensive wounds?” Steve asked as he decided underwear were overrated and pulled on his jeans anyway.
“I couldn’t tell—all I heard him say before the FBI packed him up in a car was that he didn’t do it, he was just getting breakfast burritos or something.”

“Buck, listen to me. If it is him, fine, he’s already in custody, but in the off chance it isn’t, the guy can’t be far away. I’ll be right there, I’m just around the corner.”

***

The scene that greeted Steve was disturbingly familiar. He had read about it just the night before. The red rope, the mismatched candlesticks, the scattered bottles of wine. The victim was gagged and stretched over the hood of a car, his arms tied over his head and his legs spread wide in a nauseating facsimile of how Tony had masterfully opened Steve’s body up for his ritual sacrifice. Similar knots tied to secure the victim by the thighs, the calves, and the ankles, ensuring that he could not close his legs at any cost.

The victim had been emasculated by fire and left to die from his wounds. Left for someone to find in the morning bustle in a sleepy, family friendly part of town. Whether Tony was the one who left him there or the poor soul who found him was too much for Steve to think about.

“Well, something isn’t right. This doesn’t fit the pattern,” Steve said once he started to process what was happening, keeping his voice low so only Bucky would hear. “This scene hasn’t been published yet.”

“The guy’s been writing erotica for two decades, Steve. Unless you’ve memorized all of them, how can you be so sure?”

“Because he showed me the pages last night, he hasn’t even finished it,” Steve explained as calmly as he could. “I know this scene, Buck. He wrote that scene after we slept together, but the draft isn’t far enough along to describe tying up the legs. I only know about it because the victim is posed like me.”

A wild array of reactions flickered across Bucky’s expression—confusion, queasy discomfort, dawning shock, fear—until anger burned behind his eyes. “You think it’s a message?”

“Well, we can’t discount it,” Steve wryly agreed. “But since Tony hasn’t uploaded the pages and he’s editing these previews himself, whoever it is must have been watching us that night.”

Bucky nodded in understanding, and started looking around for an easy exit that wouldn’t tip off the FBI on the scene. “Do you have a key to his place?” he asked quietly.

“No, but when has that stopped you?”

It was easier than expected to leave the crime scene unnoticed, and as Steve had guessed, even easier for Bucky to break into Tony’s brownstone. They started in the living room where Steve showed Bucky the table that had been their alter, but they both quickly agreed that at that time of night, there was no clear view of Tony’s dining room without special equipment. The chances that someone would be lying in wait for hours or days with the right tools and with the right angle to see the dining table were too slim.

The more they thought about the circumstances and the equipment necessary, the more they agreed it was more likely that someone was spying on Tony remotely. While Tony’s dining room fortunately had the least amount of furniture and decorations, neither Steve nor Bucky found cameras hidden in any plants, books, or paintings.

Steve was moving on to the kitchen, where a good camera could be positioned to record the dining
“You got a screwdriver?” he asked, already poking at an outlet that was screwed in much higher than a regular outlet, presumably to accommodate light fixtures. “Why’s this here when there already is an outlet in the ceiling for the light?”

Steve blinked up at the ceiling where, sure enough, the lamp over Tony’s dining table was plugged into a convenient outlet only inches from the hook. He didn’t know where Tony kept his tools, but it didn’t matter anymore. He walked around the table, picked up a candle stick on the way, and punched out the outlet with a single blow.

There, glued to the shattered cover of the false outlet was a wireless camera no bigger than a thumbdrive.

Bucky cringed as something else occurred to him. “What do you think our chances are that he hasn’t noticed we found the goober?”

“Call Banner, tell him we’re coming to the lab right now,” Steve told his partner just as he was digging out his own phone. The block was crawling with cops, and he was thankfully put through to a black and white who was very eager to start her morning by plowing through every red light to get them back to the station in record time.

***

Banner got them an address out in Yonkers. When they matched the address to DMV records, they found the resident to be a Richard Dunn.

Steve reached out to the detectives who had worked with them from the 62nd and 20th, and nearly all of them answered the call. En masse they stormed building and the apartment itself. Dunn or Kline or whatever he called himself wasn’t in sight, but there was no question they had their man. Photos of Tony were meticulously pinned to the walls like tiles, making it impossible to guess at the color or wallpaper in any room of the apartment. A great variety of photos were taken outdoors all across the city, and contextual clues made it clear Kline had been following Tony for months.

The worst photos, however, were the ones of Tony from inside his own home.

Many of them were benign intrusions on Tony’s everyday life. Cooking in his kitchen, eating in his living room. Reading in his bedroom, writing in his office. But for every photo of Tony simply living his life in the privacy of his home, there were two or three photos of Tony in more compromising, intimate moments. Just looking at them made Steve sick to his stomach, and even Bucky, who had spent less than an hour in Tony’s home, looked queasy, too. It was so very obvious that those pictures had not been taken through any window. They were all taken from inside the house.

Detectives were still working to clear the apartment and make sure there were no hidden cubby holes when the radio crackled to life and one of their colleagues from the 62nd called it in.

“Rogers, copy? We got him: he was in the parking lot.”

“Wait for me,” Steve snarled into the radio. “He’s mine.”

***

With Kline in custody, Steve wasted no time prying Hammer’s fingers off of Tony. The preliminary CSU findings in Tony’s townhouse revealed how Kline had most likely been watching Tony all this time: through the crawlspace and wall cavity. The old sturdy brownstone had left Kline enough
leeway to move about freely, and they had already found dozens of candy wrappers, wadded tissues, and cigarette butts to show where he’d been hiding himself. The litter also turned out to be very helpful in pointing them to the spots where Kline had drilled peep holes through the wall to watch Tony unseen.

Tony had no interest in returning to his home after that. Simply being alone disturbed him, and he quietly sat at Steve’s desk the whole afternoon while Steve made his way through the mountain of paperwork that came with such a convoluted case.

“Tony, why don’t you stay with me tonight?”

Tony jolted out of his thoughts and looked up at Steve, wide-eyed. “What?”

“It’s not as nice as your place, and the bed isn’t as big,” Steve continued with a smile. “But it’s safe, and you won’t be alone. I know Kline is in custody, but I still… it would be good to know you’re not alone.”

“Are you sure?” Tony asked, the relief clear in his voice even though he was trying to whisper. “Won’t you… you know. Want some space?”

“No, nothing like that,” Steve replied with a smile. He took Tony’s hands in his and squeezed them gently. “The case is closed, Tony. My paperwork is done. There’s nothing more I can do right now, the rest is up to the FBI. We can do anything you want: we can stay in and order take out, we can go on our second date to the Factory Bar. The last time I felt stressed and in over my head, you took care of me,” he lowered his voice to say, “let me do the same for you, Tony.”

Tony huffed in wry amusement. “Another ritual would be a good distraction right about now.”

“Then let’s make one up. I trust you, Tony. I have from the start,” Steve reminded him with a meaningful look. “You already have your willing sacrifice, isn’t that half the battle?”

The hesitation in Tony’s look of hope and excitement eased away at last with unexpected laughter, and he brought Steve’s hands to his smiling lips for an affectionate kiss. “You, Steve Rogers, are more than that. You are more than I could have hoped for. Let’s do it, take me to your place already, because I can’t wait to see what it means to be cared for by you.”

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