The Turing Test

by NiennaNir

Summary

There's a point at which a machine becomes capable of thinking for itself. Beyond that point is one at which the line between machine and man becomes so blurred that one can no longer tell the difference. When does a machine become a person, and how does that person find their place in a sea of humanity?

Notes

This work spans the entire timeline of the Coulson Lives Universe up to this point. If you have not read a majority of the previous stories much of this story will not make sense. I will attempt to leave notes at the beginning of chapters when appropriate.

See the end of the work for more notes.
“This is your ID badge,” the heavyset man with close-cropped hair held out the chip of plastic, his eyes narrowing only slightly as he studied the young woman, hardly more than a girl, in front of him. She brushed her shaggy, strawberry blond hair back from her face with one hand, reaching out to take the badge with the other. He hesitated a moment before releasing it. “I’ve got to tell you, you’re not exactly what I expected.”

“Is… is that a bad thing or a good thing, Mr. Hogan? she asked, her brow furrowing curiously.

“In this case,” Happy Hogan gave a smirk, reaching for the door of the security office of Stark Tower. “It’s probably a good thing.” He motioned her out into the hall and they headed toward the elevators.

“I’m not sure what HR might have told you,” Happy began, his scrutinizing gaze returning as they walked.

“Just that there was an opening for a very high security courier and that I passed all the checks,” the young woman replied. “And you know, any chance to get in the door at Stark Industries.” Her voice trailed off as Happy nodded, smiling knowingly.

“Yeah,” His serious expression finally broke in a slightly smug smile. “I started out as a doorman at the LA office.”

“Is it all right if I ask what you’ll have me doing?” She questioned as the elevator doors closed and Happy pressed the button for the lobby.

“Me?” He gave a soft chuckle, “I’m not going to have you doing anything. We’re going to meet your new boss now. Well, in a manner of speaking.” The elevator opened and they headed across the lobby, turning down the secured corridor behind the reception desk, both of them swiping their badges to get past the door.

“I want you to understand that you won’t be allowed to discuss anything you do with anyone outside your immediate management chain,” Happy began seriously. “No vague remarks over drinks with friends, absolutely nothing. Is that going to be a problem?”
“Absolutely not, sir,” she shook her head emphatically as they descended a set of stairs and turned down another corridor.

“Good,” Happy nodded. “Because when this came up I wasn’t sure HR would be able to find anyone who’d meet our standards. You made the top of a very short list.” They came to the last door at the end of the hall and Happy scanned his badge again, turning the handle.

“Ms. Marshall, this is your new office,” He stated. The door swung open to reveal a neatly appointed though comfortable looking lounge with a table in the middle holding a STARK phone in a dock and a large screen TV on the wall playing nature videos. The room was bright and felt airy despite having no windows. At the very far end was a roll up garage door, and parked on the pad in front of it was a cherry red motor bike that could only be described as tricked out and a top of the line titanium bicycle with gold racing stripes.

“Oh wow,” She whispered, her eyes widening.

“Jarvis?” Happy called out. “You have a minute?”

“For you, always, Mr. Hogan,” a rich timbre answered with a distinctly British inflection.

“This is your new courier, Bryn Marshall.”


“Likewise,” she answered breathlessly.

“Jarvis,” Happy continued. “Is Mr. Stark’s personal… everything.”

“Why thank you, Mr. Hogan,” Jarvis declared, a touch of amusement in his tone. “I serve as Mr. Stark’s butler and general manager of the residential floors of the tower. You’ll be assisting me in the acquisition of supplies.”

“You’ll be taking your assignments and reporting directly to Jarvis,” Happy related. “If you just say
his name the system will ping him. Jarvis, do you have it from here?”

“Indeed,” Jarvis answered brusquely. “I’m sure I can manage to get Ms. Marshall oriented.”

“Great, I’m going back to work,” Happy nodded. “If you need anything, ask Jarvis.” he paused a moment.

“If you have any issues you feel he can’t address, please come see me,” he added as an afterthought.

“Yes, sir,” Bryn nodded. Happy gave a sharp nod of his head and marched out into the corridor. She didn’t let out the breath she’d been holding until the door clicked shut behind him.

“I’m the personal courier for Tony Stark,” she whispered, half under her breath.

“Not entirely accurate, but serviceable,” Jarvis agreed. Bryn tensed only a moment, brushing her hair back from her face.

“Sorry,” she said, blushing. “I just, I was prepared to start out a little farther down the ladder than this, especially in this economy.”

“You have a degree in Operations Management,” Jarvis stated, amusement in his tone. “One I’ve no doubt you’ll put to good use here. If you’ll have a seat, we’ll go over what you can expect on a daily basis.” Bryn nodded heading for the couch, her eye sweeping the room as she sat nervously.

“Um, can you see me?” she asked.

“There are security cameras in every office and hallway in STARK tower,” Jarvis replied. “but feel free to relax in this space whenever you have a break in your duties, I rarely feel the need to access the cameras and I certainly would not hold it against you if you make yourself comfortable.”

“Oh,” Bryn slouched back into the sofa a little, which was far more comfortable than it appeared. “Thanks.”
“You surmised correctly that you will be primarily running errands for the top tier residences of STARK tower,” Jarvis began, his tone business like. “Mr. Stark splits much of his time between his residence here and the one he maintains in California. Until recently I had been able to rely on standard delivery services to cover the vast majority of his needs, however, the situation has… changed.”

“It’s true what they’re saying, isn’t it?” Bryn asked, biting her lip as she looked around the room. “The Avengers are here, they’re living in STARK tower, putting together a defense team to protect the planet?” Jarvis was silent for a moment as if in consideration.

“Yes,” he said finally. “But I cannot stress enough how important it is that that information not be made public yet.”

“My lips are sealed,” Bryn replied seriously. “I can’t stress enough how important it is that I do well at this job.”

“Then we each have something the other wants,” Jarvis answered in amusement. “I give you my word, Ms. Marshall, if you maintain discretion and perform to expectations, I will be only too happy to recommend you for any future openings you might like to apply for, indefinitely.”

“Life time job reference from Stark’s butler,” Bryn whispered. “Quest Accepted.” She drew in a steadying breath, her eyes sweeping the room once more.

“Okay, expectations then?”

“Your regular shifts will begin at eleven A.M, Monday through Friday,” Jarvis began. “The last order should be completed by seven P.M. You will of course be compensated for overtime. You are not permitted to leave during your shift except to attend to your duties, however please be certain that you are allotted a minimum of ninety minutes of downtime during your shift. It is STARK Industries policy that regular breaks make for better efficiency. If you feel that your expected work load is in anyway unreasonable, please do not hesitate to mention it.”

“I think I’ll manage,” Bryn replied confidently. “If you don’t mind my asking, have you been handling the shopping yourself up until now?”

“I have standard groceries and supplies delivered every morning,” Jarvis stated. “This has, however proved inadequate, partly because of the sheer volume some of our new residents consume and in
part because of some of their unique… tastes.”

“I had a bet with my granddad that Captain Rogers would freak out over the bananas,” she blurted out before she could stop herself. She clamped a hand over her mouth, her cheeks turning pink.

“I regret to inform you that your nondisclosure agreement prevents you from collecting on that bet,” Jarvis sighed. Bryn was half way into a victory fist pump before she thought better of it. “But, yes, among other things. Certain residents also have a taste for more exotic fare. Additionally there is an element of danger in trusting someone without the proper security clearance to deliver fresh items for consumption. All of this will now be your task. I will supply you appropriate lists and directions on your Stark issued phone, you will complete them as efficiently as possible.”

“So, delis, asian markets, speciality stores,” Bryn nodded. “Anything that doesn’t come pre-packaged.”

“Indeed,” Jarvis confirmed. “Feel free to use either of the bikes at your discretion. You may also adapt your dress to more casual attire if you wish. My primary concern is to keep the tower as completely stocked as possible, not with the standard dress code. There is a dumbwaiter to this floor directly beside the parking pad, you can place all deliveries there.” Bryn stood, checking over the dumbwaiter controls.

“Beside that is a secure panel that can only be opened by your biometrics,” Jarvis added. “Please feel free to utilize it for personal items, it also contains a hand gun and SI’s latest in taser technology.” Bryn pressed her hand to the plate and the locker door slid back, revealing both guns.

“Okay, that’s kind of awesome,” she admitted, taking the taser off its rack and checking it’s over.

“You’ll be required to keep your conceal/carry permit up to date,” Jarvis stated. “I would highly recommend for your own safety that you not leave without at least the taser. Your days will vary in activity, please feel free to utilize internet services or engage in other recreational activities here when you are not on assignment.”

“Jarvis, I think I’m going to like this job a lot,” Bryn declared.

“Do you have any questions, Ms. Marshall?” he asked, his tone amused.
“Bryn,” She declared, her cheeks flushing almost instantly. “Um, you can call me Bryn, if you want. I mean, I’m probably more comfortable with that.”

“An uncommon name,” Jarvis observed, though he sounded flattered.

“It’s short for Brynhildr,” Bryn admitted.


“You’re good,” Bryn struggled to hide her grin, her eyes widening in surprise and delight. “Most people don’t get that.”

“I am rather fond of the classics of literature,” Jarvis admitted.

“That’s pretty classic,” she teased lightly. “My dad’s a professor of ancient mythology. What’s your excuse?”

“A voracious appetite for information,” Jarvis replied, impassively. “Shall we begin?”

“Indeed, Jarvis,” she nodded.

“If you’ll direct your attention to the screen, Bryn,” Jarvis stated as the picture of honey bees was replaced by a map with corresponding markers and lists. “You will see orders pending for pickup at the Japanese Deli on 47th, Le Pain Quotidien, and Radio Shack.”

“Anything hot and toasty on that deli order, Jarvis?” she asked, taking the motorbike keys off their hook.

“Refrigerated and fresh items only,” He replied.

“Great, I’ll go there first, stop at the bakery and swing by Mr. Stark’s toy store on the way back,” She advised.
“Please, remember your company cell phone, Ms. Marshall,” Jarvis added.

“Got it,” Bryn nodded, stuffing the phone in her pocket and fixing the bluetooth bud in her ear. “Buzz me if you need me, Jarvis.”

“I have you on speed dial,” Jarvis replied. There was a pause as she snapped on her helmet. “Oh, and Bryn?”

“Yeah?” she stopped, looking up at the ceiling.

“I look forward to working with you.”

“Thanks Jarvis,” she grinned, swinging her leg over the motorbike. “Me too.” The rolling door to the parking garage opened and she sped out, passing Mr Stark’s limo, several sports cars and a truly beautiful antique motor cycle before exiting the secure garage, heading up the ramp and turning onto the street.

This was going to be a great job, she just knew it. She even had a cool boss.
The little red motor bike sped through the pouring summer rain, kicking water up from the puddles on Park Avenue as it dodged traffic. The bike darted down the parking garage entrance ramp, turning the corner as the private garage doors opened automatically.

Bryn slowed as she drove past the long row of sports cars, coming at last to the storage door at the far end that rolled up at her approach, revealing her office. She parked the bike on the pad, tugging off her rain soaked gloves and swinging her leg over the bike as she unsnapped her helmet.

“I’m back Jarvis,” she announced, making a face as she shed her jacket, water running off her clothes in rivulets to puddle on the floor.

“I’m relieved to here it, Ms. Marshall,” Jarvis answered. “I had not anticipated the weather changing so rapidly.”

“I don’t mind the rain,” Bryn insisted, wringing out her polo shirt with a frown as the parking pad slowly rotated so that both bikes were once more facing the door. She popped open the saddle bag bins, pulling out the bags of groceries. “Hey, I don’t suppose we have towels around here?” She triggered the release on the dumbwaiter and paused. Inside the dumbwaiter were two large towels, a pair of track pants, a t-shirt and a pair of bright red flip flops.

“Aww,” She let out a breath, her expression going soft. “Jarvis, thanks, that’s really great.”

“Merely common courtesy,” Jarvis insisted as Bryn wrapped one towel around her head and shoulders and scooped up the second towel and clothes to make room from the groceries. “I procured the clothing from Mr. Stark’s private gym, I had to estimate your size.” Bryn closed the dumbwaiter door before dumping the bundle on the table and holding up the shirt, taking in the Iron Man logo on the front.

“Subtle,” Bryn observed before she could stop herself. She winced, biting her lip.

“That would be Mr. Stark’s hallmark,” Jarvis stated drily. Bryn covered her mouth with her hand to stifle her giggle.

“I think they’ll fit fine,” Bryn remarked, hiding her smile as she dropped the shirt on the table and
collapsed into one of the chairs to pick the knots out of her soggy sneakers. “Better than spending the day soaked down to my skivvies.”

“You do appear to be somewhat wetter than anticipated,” Jarvis remarked. “It did not appear to be raining quite that hard.”

“It wasn’t too bad until some idiot bus driver plowed by me,” She sighed. “He kicked up enough of a wave that I almost lost control of the bike.”

“I trust you are uninjured?” Jarvis asked with a hint of worry.

“I’m fine,” Bryn declared, smiling slightly. “I used to race BMX as a kid, I can handle the crazy New York traffic.”

“Undoubtedly your penchant for danger will serve you well at Stark Industries,” Jarvis offered drollly, Bryn laughed as she peeled off her shoe and sock, wiggling her prune-like toes before tackling the laces on the other foot.

“Why can’t New Yorkers drive in the rain?” she asked, rolling her eyes. “My grandparents live down in Clearwater, I used to visit them and they always complained about how the New York tourists couldn’t drive in the rain. They have some monsoon rain down there.”

“New Yorkers can barely drive in fair weather,” Jarvis observed. “I can only imagine that any sort of precipitation is too much for them.”

“I’ll buy that,” Bryn nodded, tugging her sneaker free. “I suppose I should think about spare clothes in my locker, huh?”

“I believe it would not go amiss,” Jarvis agreed. “The storm should not last, I’d intended to send you out for pastries but perhaps a delay of an hour or so is in order.”

“If you insist, boss,” She joked cheerfully, ducking into the small powder room to peel off her wet clothes. “We can play board games or something to pass the time.”
“Chess or checkers?” Jarvis asked.

“Seriously?” Bryn asked, her voice carrying through the door. “What about Monopoly or Scrabble?”

“I find games governed by chance to be too unpredictable to prove enjoyable,” Jarvis remarked.

“You’re kidding, right?” She questioned. “I thought everyone liked Monopoly. I loved Monopoly as a kid, and there’s some serious strategy to it, by the way.”

“Your position on the board is determined entirely by random happenstance,” Jarvis pointed out. “And the game is without any appreciable method to avoid landing in Jail.”

“Good-guy Jarvis doesn’t like the slammer?” Bryn asked.

“Indeed.”

Bryn shuffled out of the powder room in bare feet, the track pants dragging the floor just a bit as she scrubbed at her hair with the remaining towel. The office door gave off a soft chime and she froze, her hands gripping at the towel as she stared at the tall, leggy vision in Armani and Valentino.

“Awkward,” Bryn observed, not even daring to move.

“I’m sorry, I should have knocked,” Pepper Potts genuinely looked contrite as she eased the door shut behind her. “Jarvis gave the impression that you had an actual suite down here.” Her lips pursed and her eyes flicked up to the ceiling.

“I’d hardly call this adequate space to compensate for the lack of windows, Jarvis,” she remarked with a frown.

“I regret that I am not necessarily the best judge of aesthetics, Ms. Potts,” Jarvis answered.

“Oh, it’s fine, Ms. Potts, honest,” Bryn protested. “It’s almost twice the size of my loft in Brooklyn and I’m not here that much anyway.” She pulled the towel from her now fly-away hair, looking very
much like a half drowned kitten that had just been blown dry.

“Well I apologize for the limited space and the barging in, in any case,” Pepper declared, holding out her hand with a smile. Bryn took it cautiously, looking up at the older woman who seemed to tower over her, despite the mere inches difference in their heights. “I make it a point to meet everyone who has reason to come in contact with Mr. Stark directly.”

“I’ve been here a week and only talked to Jarvis,” Bryn admitted, shifting on her feet nervously. “I wasn’t expecting to…”

“The only place we could put you logistically was at the end of Mr. Stark’s private garage, I’m afraid you’ll have a run-in with him eventually,” Pepper Potts stated in amusement. “Jarvis, if you wouldn’t mind, a bit of privacy?”

“Of course, ma’am,” he answered. Pepper waited a moment, a fond smile curling her lips before she turned back to Bryn.

“Jarvis is family,” she explained. “I don’t know how we’d manage without him.” Bryn wasn’t certain what to say to that so she nodded, staring at the other woman with a hint of awe.

“This is the first time Jarvis has had direct management of an employee,” Pepper admitted.

“Well I just graduated last month so it’s the first time I’ve had a real manager.” Bryn winced at her own reply, unsure what to make of the twinkle that sparked in Pepper’s eye.

“He’s very good at what he does,” Pepper declared, matter of fact. “He’s usually very good at everything he does. If he proves to not be so good at this, would you give me a call?” She held out her business card and Bryn took it cautiously, staring at it for a moment.

“Your personal cell is on here,” she stated, barely more than a whisper. Pepper gave a confirming nod before turning and assessing the room with a professional eye.

“I expect you’ll encounter Mr Stark and the other… residents at some point.” She related, her scrutinizing gaze taking in the motor bike. “I can’t say that I know the others well enough to advise you but I do know Mr. Stark. He’s a scoundrel and a flirt.”
“I’d heard that,” Bryn confessed. Pepper smiled.

“When you work for him, he’s a harmless flirt,” Pepper continued. “He really has no intentions toward you, but despite my best efforts over the years, he seems unable to turn off his… suggestive repartee. If he makes you uncomfortable, tell him so directly and succinctly. In fact use those exact words.”

“Yes Ma’am,” Bryn nodded.

“If any of the others make you uncomfortable, tell me,” Bryn blinked at the cold ice in Pepper Pott’s eyes. The CEO’s expression brokered no argument and for a very fleeting moment Bryn felt very, very sorry for any man foolish enough to make a woman uncomfortable in Pepper Pott’s presence.

“Of course, Ma’am,” she managed to squeak out when she realized Pepper was waiting for a reply.

“I really do hope this works out for you,” Pepper declared, her expression brightening to something more friendly. “It’s not the most glamorous job.”

“It’s a job at SI,” Bryn pointed out. “Most of my friends think I’m lucky.”

“I started here as Mr. Stark’s PA just after I got my masters,” Pepper declared with a conspiratorial tilt of her head.

“And look at you now,” Bryn blurted before she could stop herself. Pepper let out a laugh.

“When we find good people, we like to keep them,” Pepper stated. “With your background and security clearance I’m rather hoping you turn out to be very good.”

“I’ll do my best, Ma’am,” Bryn promised.

“I’m sure you will,” Pepper nodded. “I’ll leave you to dry off then. Do let me know if you need anything. And if you think of anything that will make your job easier or more efficient, be sure to say
something to Jarvis.”

“I will ma’am,” she nodded.

“Good luck Ms. Marshall,” Pepper gave her a warm smile before letting herself out the door. Bryn let the air out of her lungs in a woosh as the door clicked shut, her shoulders sagging. She let out a groan as she slumped across the office collapsing face first into the sofa with a whine.

“Oh. My. God.” she groaned into the cushions. “I just made an ass of myself in front of the CEO!” She let out a sound that might have been an aborted sob and the intercom beeped.

“Bryn?” Jarvis’ tone was very slightly hesitant and she rolled her eyes, pushing herself up just enough to be heard.

“Yeah Jarvis?” she asked.

“The rain shouldn’t be letting up for another half hour at least,” He informed. “If you’d like to deposit your wet shoes and clothing in the dumbwaiter, I would be happy to have laundry clean and dry them for you.” Bryn smacked her head into the cushions several times.

“Thanks Jarvis,” she sighed as she pushed herself up to a sitting position. “that’s probably better than laying here and think of all the ways that conversation could have gone better.”

“Ms. Potts can be very formidable,” Jarvis allowed with the faintest hint of amusement. “I’m sure she was as impressed with you as I have been.” Bryn paused, processing that information.

“You’ve been impressed with me?” she asked cautiously.

“Very much so,” Jarvis confirmed.

“I… thanks,” she replied, her cheeks coloring slightly as she pushed herself off the couch collecting the wet towels and laundry.
“I am very protective of Mr. Stark and Ms. Potts interests,” Jarvis admitted. “I derive a great deal of pleasure from knowing that they are as well cared for as I can make them. You’ve made that goal much easier over the last week.”

“Ms. Potts said you were family,” Bryn admitted, dumping everything into the dumbwaiter and pressing the button. “You feel the same way about them, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do,” Jarvis confirmed.

“How long have you been working for Mr. Stark?” she asked curiously, picking up the flip-flops she’d left on the table and jamming her feet into them.

“All my life,” he answered. Bryn gave an amused chuckle.

“Yeah, I get that,” she nodded, running her fingers through her fly-away hair, smoothing it down. “I’m sorry I was too nervous to think to tell Ms. Potts what a great boss you are. I mean, she said the job wasn’t glamorous and she’s right. But you’ve made it good, so thanks.”

“Thank you, Bryn,” Jarvis answered, sounding flattered.

“I’m going to take one of those mandatory breaks and grab a coffee from the cafe,” she declared, heading for the door. “You want me to get you anything from there?”

“No,” Jarvis said in a voice that seemed almost exasperated. “But I’ll need to add to that bakery order while you’re out. Captain Rogers, apparently, is in need of an afternoon snack as well.” Bryn stifled a giggle behind her hand.

“Okay, be right back,” she called, slipping out the door. She tugged Ms. Potts business card from the pocket of her track pants as she shuffled down the hall. There was an email address at the bottom. Maybe she could give Jarvis a more sterling review if she didn’t have to say it out loud.
Day: 9 - July 8, 2011

Chapter Notes

This chapter coincides with a flashback scene in "The Heart of the Matter" Chapter 2.

“No, no, no.”

Bryn stepped off her bike while it was still rolling down the ramp into the private parking garage, a cautious frown on her face at the sound of the woman’s voice. She passed the Audi and the Bugatti as if she couldn’t see them, her attention focused on the figure in black whose deep red curls were just visible around the key locker by the elevator that held spare keys for all of Mr. Stark’s cars.

“I’m afraid the only other option is the Captain’s motorcycle,” Jarvis supplied, his tone was thin and a bit dry, with a hint of aggravation Bryn wasn’t accustomed to hearing from him.

“Well I can’t take the Harley either, half the country’s seen him riding the damn thing.” The woman countered in frustration. “This is a nightmare from hell! Doesn’t Stark have a single car that doesn’t scream ‘rich asshole’?”

“Sir has twice had that exact term on his vanity plate,” Jarvis deadpanned in reply. The woman let out an irritated groan but it was not loud enough to mask the giggle Bryn tried to hide behind her hand. The redhead leaned back from the key locker with narrowed eyes and Bryn stopped short, meeting her gaze with a fair amount of caution.

“My apologies Agent Romanov,” Jarvis declared with a sigh. “This is our courier, Ms. Bryn Marshall. Bryn, Agent Natasha Romanov is a… friend of Ms. Potts.” Bryn’s brow furrowed.

“Oh my gosh,” she whispered. “You’re,”

“Don’t say it,” Romanov interrupted warningly. Bryn held up both hands without thinking, nearly toppling her bike as she let go of it. She quickly made a grab for it, continuing along toward the utility doors, keeping one eye on the Agent.

“I didn’t see anything,” Bryn declared firmly. “Nobody here.” Natasha’s eyes narrowed as Bryn
“Hey Marshall,” Natasha called after her. Bryn paused, turning back cautiously as Natasha sized her up and down a long moment.

“Jarvis, the kid’s got security clearance, right?” Natasha asked finally.

“I wouldn’t trust just anyone with Mr. Stark’s bagels,” Jarvis confirmed.

“Fair enough,” Natasha nodded, crossing the garage with slow meticulous steps, her arms folded over her chest. Her expression was shrewd and calculating as she watched Bryn who was trying very hard not to look intimidated.

“I don’t bite, Marshall,” Romanov stated finally, the hint of a smile tugging at one corner of her mouth.

“That’s not the impression your name gives,” Bryn admitted, pulling a face once she realized what she’d just said. Natasha’s narrowed eyes softened as Bryn shuffled on her feet, looking for all the world as of she were a deer about to make a break for cover.

“I’ve got a problem,” Natasha stated, her shoulders arching under her black silk tank top in the slightest shrug. “I can’t tell you exactly what it is, but I need to make a little trip out. Nobody’s supposed to know I’m here, so I can’t be seen leaving.”

“You’re kind of in the wrong garage,” Bryn pointed out.

“I believe Agent Romanov has picked up on that,” Jarvis sighed in exasperation. Natasha did smile properly then, shaking her head.

“Do you know anyone at SI we can steal or borrow a car from?” She asked bluntly. “Something middle class and not too obvious?”

“Well,” Bryn waffled a moment, glancing up at the ceiling. “If Jarvis doesn’t mind you borrowing off of Mr. Stark he’s probably okay with you borrowing my bike.”
“The Lynskey’s a little too middle class,” Natasha observed, eyeing the bicycle.

“Oh, this is just for short trips,” Bryn blushed. “Jarvis?”

“I’ve no objection,” Jarvis stated as the utility door began to roll up. “I would have suggested it before but I felt it did not meet her requirements either.”

“Cherry little ride, Marshall,” Natasha declared as the motorbike came into view. Bryn rolled her bicycle in beside it, opening the dumbwaiter on reflex and unloading her bags. “But Jarvis is right, it’s still a bit flashy.”

“Well, yeah it is,” Bryn stated, tugging off her bike helmet and opening her locker. “But people see me rolling in and out of here a half dozen times a day. If you took my jacket and helmet they probably wouldn’t look close enough to notice that you’re not me.” She pulled the denim jacket from its hook and held it out to Natasha. The redhead stared back at her blankly a moment.

“I mean, it’ll be a bit big on you,” Bryn admitted, her cheeks coloring. “And it’s not exactly stylish,”

“No,” Natasha corrected, taking the jacket and shrugging into it with a sharp nod. “I can make it work. You sure you don’t mind?” For the first time she looked at Bryn properly as if she were seeing her rather than assessing her and Bryn offered a half smile back, reaching for the helmet hanging on the wall.

“I had friends in midtown,” Bryn offered by way of explanation, passing it to her. “On the day of the attack. One of them said this really pretty redhead covered her and her coworkers so they could get off the street and into the subway.”

“Always with the pretty,” Natasha observed wryly, digging Bryn’s gloves out of the helmet and pulling them on.

“Honestly I’m surprised she noticed that you’re anything but terrifying,” Bryn admitted. She clapped a hand over her mouth, her eyes growing wide as Natasha laughed.

“I am so sorry,” Bryn lamented. “I have no filters when I’m nervous.”
“You don’t need to be nervous around me, kid,” Natasha advised in amusement, tucking her hair up under Bryn’s helmet. “This; You’re doing my friend, my best friend, a real solid.”

“Well, you did the same for mine,” Bryn shrugged, her cheeks coloring. Natasha nodded, swinging her leg over the bike and and revving it to life before easing down the short ramp.

“Hey Marshal,” Natasha called over her shoulder. “I owe you one.” Bryn watched her drive down the long row of sports cars as the storage door slowly closed.

“Oh my god! Black Widow!!” Bryn squealed, hopping up and down on her toes. “That is so awesome!!” She let out a happy squeaking sound, flapping her hands in front of her as she grinned. Her expression faltered almost instantly.

“Jarvis, you didn’t see that did you?” she asked in embarrassment.

“I didn’t see anything,” he answered drily. Bryn made a face. “In your defense, she does have that affect on people.”

“She’s so cool,” Bryn declared staring at the closed door for a long moment. “She… Is she hiding here from something?”

“It would be more accurate to say that she is hiding someone here,” Jarvis replied. “They arrived earlier this evening. SHIELD is still unaware that anyone but Dr. Banner is currently residing in the tower.”

“If they’re keeping an eye on him, they’re not going to notice everyone else?” Bryn asked, a hint of worry in her tone.

“It is a bit of a dance on a wire,” Jarvis admitted. “The residential floors are shielded from all known forms of surveillance, but they are able to detect Dr. Banner’s gamma signature regardless of his location. They are also visually monitoring his lab from one of the nearby buildings as well as all of the exits. I believe you are correct in that we cannot maintain the farce for very much longer.”

“Seems like poor payback for saving the world,” Bryn remarked.
“I whole heartedly agree,” Jarvis confirmed. His voice softened and Bryn glanced up at the affection in his tone. “Thank you for assisting Agent Romanov. I consider her a friend.”

“Well I consider her a hero,” she shrugged smiling as she pulled her bag from her locker. “They did a lot for all of us, New York might not even be here any more if it weren’t for the Avengers. I keep seeing all this stuff on the news, people blaming them, politicians wanting Mr. Stark to pay for the damages. Almost no one talks about the six youth facilities the Maria Stark foundation has been rebuilding this month or all of the repair work SI’s construction crews have been doing on Grand Central while they’ve been putting Stark Tower back together. If all I can do to repay them is pick up lunch meat from the deli then I’m happy to do it.”

“I certainly haven’t known all of them for long,” Jarvis admitted. “But as I have come to know them better, I believe they are all good people who have done the best they can to save lives.”

“That’s good to know,” Bryn nodded, shouldering her bag. “If that’s it, I’m going to call it a night.”

“Thank you for your assistance, today, Ms. Marshall,” Jarvis replied as she reached for the door handle. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“See you, Jarvis!” she called as the door closed behind her.
It didn’t really help that she saw the taxi about to swerve.

Well, maybe it helped a little, Bryn had just enough time to jam down on the left pedal and pull her foot off of the right one before the taxi clipped her rear tire. She let out a frightened yelp, tucking her arms and legs as the bicycle bounced off the light pole on the corner like a badly thrown dodge ball. The bike seemed to hang in the air for a span of seconds and then the pavement was rushing toward her as she clamped her eyes shut.

“Hey! buddy! Who do ya think ya are?” A male voice shouted after the driver from very close to Bryn’s ear. it was another moment before she realized that the solid mass digging into her ribs was, in fact, not the twisted remains of her bicycle.

“Are you sure you’re alright?” the good samaritan asked, concern in his tone.

“You okay, miss?” the owner of the arm that had caught her asked. Bryn pulled her feet under her with a shaky breath, her fingers clutching reflexively at the sleeve of the man’s shirt as she wobbled. She nodded mutely, her limbs shaking with unspent adrenaline as she inspected them as if to assure herself they were all still properly attached.

“Yeah,” she breathed out as the man steadied her, taking a step back. “Yeah I think I’m okay.” She looked down at her feet and let out a groan.

“Damn it!” she swore, her voice descending into a pitiful whine. “my bike!”

“Yeah it was a nice one too,” her rescuer remarked, nudging the bent tire with the toe of his running shoes. The bike was a mess, the rear tire was twisted up like a taco shell, the front one sported a sizable dent in the rim. The chain dangled uselessly from the gears, and a large crack was visible in one of the saddlebag bins, undoubtedly where the taxi had hit her. Bryn bit her lip, blinking back tears that she hastily brushed away with her arm.  

“Are you sure you’re alright?” the good samaritan asked, concern in his tone.

“Yeah,” she sniffed. “It’s my company bike. And I just started my job, too. I don’t know what my boss is going to say.” Her stomach pitched, a heavy weight sinking slowly from her chest to fill it with dread. She hadn’t been at this job a month and already she’d flattened company equipment,
very expensive company equipment. She flipped open the saddle bags, struggling with the latch on the broken one. The deli containers inside didn’t appear to be damaged and she sighed, gathering them up. She’d have to take the groceries in and then come back for the bike.

“Well I hope he says he’s glad you didn’t get killed by a taxi,” the man stated, a frown furrowing his brow. “Where do you work?”

“S.I.” Bryn answered forlornly, shuffling her grip on the grocery bags and looking up at Stark Tower. “At least for now.”

“Well I’ll help you carry the bike then,” he offered, crouching down to grasp hold of the frame, his muscled arms rippling under his tight t-shirt.

“Oh, you don’t have to,” Bryn began as he straightened, hoisting the bike up onto his shoulder.

“It’s only across the street,” he insisted, turning to her with a shy smile. He was pretty, in an old fashioned sort of way with his close cropped blond hair peeking out beneath his ball cap and his earnest bright blue eyes. He was tall, really tall, and the muscles of his broad chest barely flexed under the weight of the bicycle. “I’m heading that way anyway.”

“The garage entrance,” Bryn sighed with a hint of resignation as she nodded down the street. They hurried across traffic before the light could change again, the bike’s front tire flapping uselessly behind them as they turned down the street in front of the cafe. Bryn glanced up at him as they walked his t-shirt and jeans were smudged with dirt but still looked fairly new. There was a scratch along one arm and his sneakers were covered in dust.

“You work in construction?” She asked curiously. He blushed, throwing her a soft smile.

“I’ve been helping with the cleanup in my off hours,” he shrugged. “A lot of the small businesses are having a rough time rebuilding.” She couldn’t help but smile at that. He seemed almost embarrassed at being caught helping out.

“Yeah,” She nodded. “I notice that running up and down the streets every day. The debris is cleaned up and most of the big buildings are under repair, but it seems like the little guys are having a tough time picking up the pieces.”
“A… friend of mine runs a charity that’s helping with the rebuild,” he nodded. “So for me it’s kind of great, if I’m out helping and I meet someone who clearly really needs a hand I can always tell him and it’s like the next day and they have what they need. It makes me feel good, seeing people come together like that.”

“Things in this part of town sure have been different,” she admitted grinning up at him brightly. “before the attack I’d have never expected anyone to offer to carry my bike home.”

“My mother raised me better than that,” he admitted, a bright flush coloring his cheeks. Bryn let out a soft laugh. She turned to see the entrance to the parking garage and her stomach twisted up in fresh knots.

“This way,” she nodded, leading him down the ramp.

“Thanks,” she offered as the private grange door rattled open and they headed past the row of sports cars. “I really do appreciate the help. I have no idea how I would have wrestled it across the street on my own.”

“Bryn, my goodness, what happened?” Jarvis’ startled voice over the garage speakers made her shoulders tense and she winced.

“She’s okay, Jarvis,” her good samaritan replied, easing the bike down to the pavement. “A taxi driver knocked her into a pole. Messed up her bike pretty good but she isn’t injured.” Bryn stared at him, mouth agape.

“That’s certainly a relief,” Jarvis remarked. “The bike looks awful, Captain.”

“Well the headlight and the back tire are goners,” He observed, studying the bike with a calculating eye. “So’s the one saddle bag. The chain’s bent and the shift’s broken. I’m pretty sure the brakes will need to be replaced too. But the frame hardly has a scratch so it’s fixable. If you want to tell me where Tony keeps his tools I’d be happy to get started on it.”

“Unnecessary, Captain,” Jarvis assured. “I am already ordering a suitable replacement.”

“Captain?” Bryn squeaked out.
“Are you sure?” he asked with a frown, lifting his ball cap to drag his nails over his scalp. “Seems kind of a waste.”

“There is a youth bicycle program in Brooklyn that the Maria Stark foundation supports,” Jarvis replied. “I’m sure one of the children would be overjoyed to restore it to working condition.”

“Fair enough,” he nodded with a pleased expression.

“Captain?” Bryn declared, wide eyed. “Captain America?”

“Steve,” he said blushing. “It’s… you can call me Steve.”

“Captain America just rescued me from a taxi,” Bryn declared, her face screwed up in a dazed, shocked expression.

“Bryn are you quite certain you’re entirely all right?” Jarvis asked. “You seem a bit unsteady. Did you sustain a head injury of any kind?”

“No I…” her voice trailed off and she paused, staring at Steve with her mouth drawn up like a carp. She let out a tiny whining sound. “Captain America rescued me and I can’t even tell anyone!” Steve’s ears and neck turned bright red.

“As per your nondisclosure agreement,” Jarvis confirmed. “Bryn I believe I would feel better if our in-office medical staff gave you a check up just to be safe. I will call up to forty and make an appointment for you.”

“I didn’t even hit the ground,” she shook her head, blinking up at the ceiling. “I… you’re not mad about the bike?”

“It’s hardly your fault that someone hit you,” Jarvis pointed out.

“They didn’t even stop,” Steve declared sourly.
“I’ll be sure to go over the building’s security footage and see if I can find something suitable to submit to the police,” Jarvis huffed out angrily.

“You’re really not upset about the bike?” she asked worriedly.

“A bicycle can be replaced,” Jarvis reminded, his tone less harsh. “people cannot. Captain are you quite certain she was not injured?”

“I don’t think I grabbed her too roughly,” Steve replied, giving her an apologetic smile. “I tried to be careful. Your ribs don’t hurt, do they?” Bryn ran her hands down her sides on reflex where she could still feel the fading warmth of Captain America’s arm around her. She shook her head, her lip trembling as her eyes watered.

“Bryn?” Jarvis asked, alarmed.

“I think it’s probably just shock,” Steve declared, propping the heap of the bike against the garage wall and taking Bryn’s arm to steady her. “It could have been a lot worse. She should sit down and rest for a while.” the storage door at the end of the garage rolled up and Steve Rogers planted a hand on her back, steering her into the small office and onto the sofa.

“Water?” Steve asked, looking up at the ceiling.

“There are several bottles in the mini fridge under the counter,” Jarvis replied and Steve hurried to open it, pulling a bottle out and cracking the cap before handing it to Bryn.

“Give yourself a minute,” he advised, crouching in front of her as she forced down a swallow. “and once you’re steady again I think maybe Jarvis is right and you should have a doctor check you over. I, well, I was on a mission once and one of my men fell off a wall and I caught him, broke three of his ribs. I don’t know my own strength sometimes.”

“I don’t hurt anywhere,” Bryn insisted, her skin felt too tight and she made a fist with one hand, flexing and releasing it as if she could stretch it to fit. “If you hadn’t caught me it could have been really bad.”
“I’m glad I caught you then,” Steve gave her warm smile, a soft blush coloring his cheeks.

“You are absolutely adorable, how are you even real?” Bryn asked, she pulled a face almost immediately. “I’m going to pretend I hit my head. Can we pretend I hit my head?” Steve let out a laugh.

“I’m not entirely certain you didn’t,” Jarvis stated drily. “If you’re feeling well enough, the SI employee clinic is expecting you.”

“Yeah, okay,” Bryn relented, her own face turning a delicate pink as she eased off the couch.

“I’ll walk you up,” Steve offered. “I was on my way home anyway.”

“Do not return without a clean bill of health,” Jarvis insisted firmly after them as Steve opened the door for her and they headed out into the corridor.

“So you’re in hiding but you just parade around Stark tower like you own the place?” Bryn asked as they climbed the stairs to the lobby level.

“Well I don’t,” Steve shrugged, pulling his ball cap down over his eyes and hunching his shoulders slightly. “But Rodger Stevens does.” He dug in the back pocket of his jeans, pulling out an SI security badge, his picture and the name Stevens, Rodger F. emblazoned on the front.

“That is the lamest fake name ever!” Bryn hissed out, barely able to contain her glee as they crossed the lobby.

“Nobody’s going to suspect anything so obvious,” Steve answered, shrugging. “I keep my head down going in and out of the building because of the… Stark called it ‘face recognition software’. Anyway, as far as anyone knows I’m nobody.”

“So what do you do here at SI Mr. Stevens?” Bryn questioned with exaggerated politeness as they boarded the lift, moving around a group of researchers and executives leaving for the day.

“I’m an artistic consultant for product advertising,” Steve declared, barely keeping a straight face as
the doors closed. He blew out a breath, tugging off his ball cap and running his fingers through his hair.

“Do you even know what that is?” She asked in wonder. “Because I don’t even know what that is and I have a business degree.”

“Haven’t the foggiest,” Steve admitted, grinning. “But apparently it has something to do with the fact that I keep telling Stark his commercials and magazine ads are visually offensive. I think he meant it as a joke.”

“They’re selling the new Stark phones faster than they can make them,” she pointed out.

“It has to be entirely on product merit,” Steve insisted, shaking his head. “Because that thing they ran in the Times was awful.” Bryn let out a laugh as the doors opened on forty.

“This is me, thanks for all the help, Rodger, see you around!”

“Yeah,” Steve faltered a moment before giving her a nervous half wave. “See you!” The elevator doors closed on him and Bryn covered her mouth to muffle her laugh as she turned down the corridor toward the employee clinic. She’d only made it a half dozen steps before she stopped.

“I think I was just flirting with Captain America,” she whispered half under her breath. She caught herself instantly, covering her mouth and she looked around wide eyed but the corridor was empty. She let out a sigh of relief, heading down the hall once more.

Chapter End Notes

Recycle-A-Bicycle (http://www.recycleabicycle.org) is a lovely program in Queens, Brooklyn, and the East Village that teaches young people how to repair bicycles and allows them to earn one for themselves by restoring donated bikes for the less fortunate and for resale in the program's bike shop. If you're in the New York area and looking for a bike, or if you have a bike that's at the end of its life, I'd like to encourage you to support them. If you are not in the New York area I hope you'll look for similar programs in your own neighborhood.
Bryn looked up from her book with a wince at the grinding sound that pierced through the storage door, the hair on the back of her neck standing on end not for the first time that afternoon. Her mouth twisted up in a sour pucker as her eyes narrowed.

“Jarvis are you sure you don’t have somewhere for me to be?” she half shouted over the din.

“Not at the moment, Ms. Marshall,” he answered smoothly, seemingly unaware of the earsplitting shrill of screeching metal. “If you would like, you are welcome to take advantage of the game room or the gym on the company recreation floors. I would not mind calling your cell phone.”

“I might do that,” she admitted loudly. The howl of power tools abruptly stopped and she bit back the shout, letting out a sigh. “Thanks.” Bryn closed her book, pushing herself off the couch and heading for the hall door. Half way there the spine contorting sound of metal striking metal beat out a steady rhythm and she stiffened, throwing a dark glare over her shoulder at the storage door that was now rattling softly in time to the tempo. A moment later she was spinning on her heel, her hand slapping against the storage door button as she marched down the ramp toward the garage.

She ducked under the door before it could completely retract, her narrowed eyes zoning in on the furthest corner of Tony Stark’s private garage and the rusted hulking Chevrolet tucked in the corner, its faded orange paint job looking even more garish against the pristine row of shiny, perfect collectors cars. Bryn put her hands over her ears. Out here the sound was even more deafening and she crossed the garage with purposeful steps. As she rounded the Jaguar the pounding abruptly stopped.

It was almost dark at the far end of the garage. The Chevy, parked in a spot adjacent to the rows of steel tool chests that lined the wall, was bathed in a single circle of bright light from an overhead work lamp. Wrenches, hammers, and power tools litter the floor for yards around and the hood was upturned in the middle of the floor, looking like a misshapen saucer sled.

Bryn’s steps stilled as she caught sight of a shock of light brown hair. The man was hunched against the car, his forehead pressed to his lean, muscular arms, folded on the roof. His t-shirt clung to his skin, outline his ribs, hitching up over the waist of his jeans to reveal a thin strip of skin. But it was the defeated slump of his shoulders more than the way he filled out his Levies that caught her attention. Bryn wasn’t sure she’d ever seen a more miserable human being in her life.

“Come on, Baby,” the man whispered softly. “Don’t fight me, I haven’t got the energy any more.”
“Excuse me?” Bryn’s tentative voice felt loud in the sudden quite of the garage and she almost jumped. The man was clearly much less easily startled. He glanced back at her only a moment but it was long enough for her to catch the shine of unshed tears in his eyes. He cleared his throat, his shoulders easing back.

“Sorry,” he managed to get out without sounding too gruff. “I didn’t realize anyone else was down here.”

“My office is at the other end of the garage,” Bryn supplied, pointing back the way she’d come as she approached hesitantly. “I’m the courier.”

“Oh, yeah right,” he answered in a tone that indicated he had no idea what she meant. He reached for a wrench, moving to lean over the engine.

“I’m Bryn,” she declared, holding out her hand hesitantly.

“Clint,” he nodded, grasping her hand swiftly and returning his attention to the car. “Look, um, what are you usual hours?”

“Eleven to seven Monday through Friday,” She answered.

“Well, I’ll try not to be a total asshole and save the noise for when you’re not here,” He offered, loosening the bolt on the alternator. “No promises though, I’m a natural born asshole.” Bryn tried not to smile.

“I’m not usually here a lot, today’s just slow,” she admitted, hunkering down to straddle the plastic cooler near the bumper. “Are… are you okay?” Clint looked at her with narrowed eyes for a long moment before letting out a thin, empty chuckle.

“Not really,” he admitted, returning to his tinkering. “But I probably will be eventually. I usually am.”

“Well if this is your idea of therapy, you’re probably right about that,” Bryn allowed. Clint shot her a look and she blushed. “I just meant, well, it’s a good way of dealing with stress, finding something
positive to focus on.” Clint stared at the wrench he was holding, his entire body going still in a strange way that seemed almost relaxed.

“I’m going to need more cars,” he stated finally, setting it aside with a sigh.

“That bad, huh?” she asked, drawing her knees to her chest and wrapping her arms around them as she hooked the heels of her shoes on the edge of the cooler. Clint took a deep breath, his fingers curling tight around the frame of the Chevy until every muscle in his arms flexed.

“I lost my best friend,” he admitted, his voice hardly wavering as he leaned on his palms. “It was kind of my fault.”

“You didn’t get to him in time?” She asked sadly. Clint’s expression took on an air of suspicion and she ducked her head in embarrassment.

“You’re in Tony Stark’s private garage making a mess with his tools,” she pointed out sheepishly. “I figure any friend of Mr. Stark’s.” she shrugged, her cheeks coloring.

“Could be I’m restoring this thing for him,” Clint replied.

“The Impala is totally not his style,” Bryn shook her head. “And his personal mechanic was here last week changing the oil on the Rolls. You don’t look anything like her.” Clint laughed, a smile that was almost genuine lighting up his face.

“I was responsible for the situation that got him killed,” Clint admitted, his expression growing once more serious. “All the times he had my back and I just…” His voice trailed off and he picked up the wrench again, setting back to work. Bryn opened her mouth to say something and then seemed to think better of it.

“It’s not a very pretty car,” she observed finally. Clint gaped at her with a repulsed expression that made her giggle.

“Don’t you listen to the naive teenager, Baby,” Clint crooned, stroking the car. “She doesn’t know a classic when she sees one.”
“I’m twenty-one,” Bryn declared, her face flushing at her obviously juvenile counter-argument.

“I jump off of buildings to that people like you can drink and vote?” Clint demanded, looking shocked. Bryn only shrugged. “What is this world coming to?” He turned back to the car and Bryn watched him in silence for a minute while he tinkered.

“Is there a story behind it?” she asked finally, tilting her head in the direction of the car.

“A long story,” Clint nodded. “A very long story of pizza and beer and binge-watching. We used to get together after missions. All three of us, me and Nat and…” His voice broke off in a choked sound and he pinched the bridge of his nose.

“I can’t say his name,” Clint admitted, clearing his throat. “I don’t even know why. It’s been three months and I can’t.”

“It’s more real when you say it,” Bryn stated knowingly, letting her chin rest on her knees.

“Yeah,” Clint nodded as if the words were a revelation.

“I lost my mom a few years back,” She offered with a half shrug. “And for the longest time I wouldn’t talk about her. I thought about her all the time, I just didn’t…” She gave Clint a guilty smile.

“I got the words out once and it got better after that,” She explained. “It just took a while to get to that point.” Clint nodded in understanding, offering her a smile that was just a touch grateful. Her phone beeped and she fished it from her pocket.

“Jarvis wants me to run to the deli,” She declared, letting her feet slide to the floor. “You want me to grab you anything while I’m out?” Clint looked at her carefully a moment.

“Pastrami on rye?” he asked hesitantly. Bryn let out a laugh.

“I can manage that,” she nodded, pushing off the cooler and heading back toward her office, glancing over her shoulder. “You need me to refill your beer stash?” Clint opened the lid of the
cooler she’d been sitting on.

“Nope, I’m good,” he replied, his smile more real this time. Bryn gave him a thumbs up. She walked a few more paces before turning around.

“Hey, Clint?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks.”

He stared at her in silence for a long moment, his wrench still clutched in his hand.

“For what?” he finally asked. Bryn rolled her eyes in condescension.

“For saving New York,” she replied. She thought about her answer a moment, then added. “And the world. But mostly New York. I like New York.” Clint’s expression went soft and she smiled back at him before turning and heading up the ramp.

“I’m going to grab Clint a pastrami while I’m out,” she declared, checking the list on the computer screen before opening her locker and fishing out her jacket. “Is there anything else I could get him… to, cheer him up?”

“I can’t say,” Jarvis admitted. his tone verging on forlorn. “Since he’s come here he’s been closed off and withdrawn. I have found that small, familiar comforts often go a long way toward improving someone’s state of mind, but he asks for nothing and accepts whatever is provided. I believe Agent Romanov is deeply worried over him. The fact that you could get him to offer a preference for a sandwich is quite an achievement.”

“Pastrami should never be an achievement, Jarvis,” Bryn insisted, reaching for her helmet. She held it in her hands a moment, shifting awkwardly. “Jarvis, what happened to him? I know he lost his friend, but thats… Something else happened, didn’t it?”

“I feel it would be ill practice to gossip about Agent Barton,” Jarvis admitted. “However, there is
some data that has been made public by less than scrupulous sources. Perhaps you encountered it on
the internet?” Bryn thought a moment, biting her lip.

“That story that was going around,” She said softly. “About someone inside SHIELD assisting with
the invasion. That was Clint?”

“Bryn, I want you to know that the press release refuting that claim was completely accurate,” Jarvis
stated in a firm tone. “Agent Barton was captured and placed under a form of alien mind control. It
was reprehensible that that information was released at all, much less about someone who is still in
recovery from the most brutal kind of torture.” Bryn stared down the ramp and across the garage to
where Clint was hunched over the engine of the Impala, the muscles in his back whipcord tight
beneath his shirt. She looked at him closer this time. He’d lost weight recently, and rather quickly by
the looks of it, his ribs sticking out just this side of too much, his skin the wane color of summer tan
fading to winter pallor. The muscles in his shoulders bunched uncomfortably as he moved, jerky and
tense as if he were holding himself back from striking out to defend himself.

“He must feel awful,” she whispered, blinking rapidly. “He doesn’t even have his best friend to be
there for him.”

“I have never been very good at addressing emotional trauma,” Jarvis admitted. “There are too many
cues I simply seem unable to pick up on. I have always tried to compensate for that shortcoming by
being considerate, but I have been at a loss with Agent Barton. I have no idea how to help him and I
don’t know him well enough to even begin to guess what he might need.”

“Have you tried being friendly?” Bryn suggested hesitantly.

“I regret I do not have your natural charm, Ms. Marshall,” Jarvis admitted in amusement as she
tugged her helmet on to hide her blush. “My interactions with people tend toward the stilted.”

“I don’t know,” She shrugged, lifting her keys from the wall hook. “You do okay. I’ll be back in a
bit.” She swung her leg over the motorbike and revved it to life, rolling down the ramp. She chanced
a glance in Clint’s direction as she sped past the row of sports cars. He was sitting on the cooler
where she had been only minutes ago, a beer dangling from his fingertips as he stared at the floor.

Pastrami. And maybe some of those hand cut potato chips from the sandwich cart down the street.
This chapter runs parallel to the first story in the series: In Which Tony Stark Buys the Avengers.

“So let me get this straight,” Bryn declared, holding out the paper coffee cup with a skeptical frown. “You and Mr. Stark built a decoy ‘you’ out of a holo-projector a roomba and a can of radiation?”

“That sums it up,” Bruce Banner nodded thoughtfully, sinking back into Bryn’s sofa, his fingers toying idly with the tea bag string that dangled over the lip of the cup.

“And that’s working?” she asked skeptically, snapping the small k-cup machine shut and punching the button.

“Seems to be,” Bruce confirmed. “Their scanning equipment shouldn't be able to pick up anything down here, Tony reinforced the garage for use as a bunker. As long as they don’t detect the subtle difference in the gamma signature of the radioisotope container we stuck to the top of the roomba, they should think the decoy is me.”

“I’d like at this point to remind you,” Jarvis declared, his tone holding the dry edge of someone far past their patience with politics, small children or mad scientists. “That I did point out to Mr. Stark and yourself what an abysmally low chance of success this particular plan has.”

“You’re not wrong,” Bruce admitted. “We’re sort of banking on the fact that Fury wants the Avengers more than he wants control of the situation.”

“I’m afraid I’m not in a position to speculate on those odds,” Jarvis admitted irritably.

“Honestly I don’t think any of us are,” Bruce sighed, losing himself in thought as he stared into his cup. “We’re just going to have to hope that Steve can keep Tony from completely pissing off the director and that the decoy works.”

“But it’s right now leaking radiation all over your lab?” Bryn questioned, plopping down in the chair
at the table with her coffee to study him with a frown. Bruce gave an acknowledging tilt of his head, taking an experimental sip of his tea. “You chemistry guys are nuts, you know that? I roomed with a pharmacy major and she whined about getting radiation on her shoes like it was gum or something. How are you not all dead from cancer?”

“I turn into a giant green monster,” Bruce pointed out placidly.

“I’m going to shut up now,” Bryn decided. Bruce let out a soft chuckle, shaking his head in amusement. Bryn watched him from beneath her lashes as he drew in a slow breath, his eyes slipping shut. When Jarvis had explained Mr. Stark’s plan she hadn’t really thought about what it would be like to have a stranger sharing the space she’d come to think of as hers in the last three months. Dr. Banner was serenely calm and composed in a way that was very nearly unsettling and Bryn was honestly having a hard time imagining the rumpled academic on her couch tearing through brick walls with his bare fists.

“It’s not a lot of radiation.” Bruce declared when he finally opened his eyes.

“Excuse me?” Bryn blinked at him.

“The container in the lab,” he amended. “And me, I’m not giving off that much radiation. Not enough to be dangerous. You encounter radiation in various forms every day, from natural sources, it’s not dangerous until it reaches a certain level of exposure.”

“I really wasn’t worried…” Bryn’s voice trailed off and she blushed. “I mean, you live here, if you were dangerous I’m pretty sure Ms. Potts would have something to say about it.”

“The fact that I’m not irradiating the entire building doesn’t make me safe,” Bruce informed with a sad sort of smile. He looked back at her a long moment and Bryn was struck by how truly fragile he looked, his soft hands curled around his paper cup and his brown curls nearly falling in his eyes. He drew in a breath, squaring his shoulders and the moment passed. “My cells act as a kind of buffer, a radiation shield, we don’t really know how. But whatever the accident did to me, it’s actively preventing the radiation from breaking containment.”

“What about when you?” Bryn flapped a hand at him, looking flustered for a moment. “You know what? I, probably shouldn’t be allowed to talk to superheroes, because I just say something stupid.” Bruce let out a bark of a laugh, his eyes alight as he covered his mouth with his hand.”
“That’s good,” he chuckled, shaking his head. “That’s excellent. Superhero.” He drew in a deep breath, a wrong footed expression on his face as he stared into his cup.

“Help me out here, Jarvis,” Bryn declared, gazing up at the ceiling with a perplexed frown.

“Dr. Banner and I have engaged in a lengthy and ongoing debate as to whether or not his contributions can be categorized as heroic or destructive,” Jarvis answered with a huff of frustration. “Thus far I have not won.”

“You’d think hanging around Tony, he’d be used to that by now,” Bruce observed, his eyes twinkling as he sipped his tea.

“My grandfather used to say that for thousands of years humans just accepted that they couldn’t hang on to things,” Bryn stated, staring into her coffee cup. “We built our homes on flood plains and in the shadows of volcanos and near battle fields. And when villages were inevitably destroyed by fire and war and pestilence we’d just rebuild. We’d make better bricks, safer roofs, we learned from what worked and what didn’t and we made it better.”

“I suppose that’s true,” Bruce allowed his expression curious.

“And then the industrial revolution came,” Bryn pulled one foot up on the front of her chair, resting her chin on her knee. “And we started valuing things more than people, we started resisting rebuilding, we hung onto buildings until they were to the point of decay. We tried to stick them back together rather than start over and make them better. He said that the more we valued things, the less we valued that sense of purpose and innovation the constant threat of peril gave us.”

“He sounds like an academic,” Bruce observed, sipping his tea.

“He was a professor of philosophy,” Bryn shrugged. “I don’t know, I always thought he was a little crazy because a lot of people died in disasters. But maybe you’re a little like that.”

“Like Mount Vesuvius?” Bruce asked teasingly.

“I was thinking more like the Yellow River,” Bryn admitted, blushing. “It’s terrible and deadly when it jumps its banks, but so much grows there, food to feed thousands. That’s not all bad.”
“I’ve seen the Yellow River,” Bruce remarked, his eyes going soft as if he could see something she couldn’t but wherever he’d gone inside his head he clearly wasn’t pressed for company.

“Mr. Stark has asked that I let you know that he and the Captain are about to, in his words ‘engage the target’, Dr. Banner,” Jarvis stated blandly, breaking the spell of the moment. The smallest smile curled Bruce’s lips and he settled farther back into the sofa with a sigh.

“Thank you, Jarvis,” Bruce declared. He closed his eyes, drawing in a steadying breath, his entire body easing into the exhale.

“Are you worried?” Bryn asked, tugging her lip between her teeth as he opened his eyes.

“A little,” Bruce admitted thoughtfully. “I suppose I’ve gotten used to a roof over my head and another pair of eyes at my back. I’m not quite ready to give that up.”

“Well, even if this doesn’t work out, I bet Mr. Stark has a plan B,” Bryn stated. “He seems like a plan B kind of guy.

“Tony is a plan C though Z kind of guy,” Bruce confirmed in fond amusement. “For whatever reason he’s decided he wants us here and I’m pretty sure Tony’s used to getting what he wants. If he has anything to say about it, I don’t think I’ll be leaving unless it’s what I want.”

“Believe me, Doctor, Sir is not the only one delighted at your presence in the Tower,” Jarvis insisted. “Ms. Potts and I are supremely relieved to finally have someone with a modicum of sense in Mr. Stark’s lab on a daily basis.”

“Okay, that’s downright terrifying,” Bruce admitted, looking up at the ceiling with an expression that was properly worried. “She’s a smart woman, Jarvis, she knows what I am. I’ve been waiting around for months for her to say something about the safety of my being here.”

“If Ms. Potts has anything to say it’s that Stark Industries’ legal team is at your disposal, Doctor,” Jarvis supplied gently but firmly. “A fact she has relayed to me several times. Rest assured that even if today’s meeting does not go as planned, she is fully prepared to insure your security into the future.” Bruce froze, staring at the floor with a blank expression. Finally he swallowed, clearing his throat.
“Thanks, Jarvis,” he said softly, his voice cracking. He swallowed again, drawing in a shaky breath. “Thank Pepper for me too. That’s... it’s terribly generous of her.”

“You saved Mr. Stark’s life, Doctor,” Jarvis offered, his own voice softening. “That is not something we can actually repay you for.” Bryn ducked her head to hide her smile as Bruce’s face flushed.

“So what’s going to happen if Mr. Stark’s meeting goes well?” She asked curiously before the silence could become uncomfortable.

“Well, ideally the Avengers will become a recognized unit of a government agency,” Bruce replied. “We’ll all officially be working for SHIELD, which will mean that it will be harder for other agencies to give us trouble. From a practical standpoint we won’t have to sneak in and out of the tower any more, at least not as much. I’m not sure I’ll ever feel comfortable being out in public alone but in theory I’d be allowed that much freedom.”

“No more fake ID badges or waiting until dark to go out?” Bryn asked. Bruce nodded. “You’re going to go from fugitive to household name over night.” Bruce froze, staring at his cup with ever widening eyes.

“We had avoided pointing that out to the Doctor for a reason, Bryn,” Jarvis stated in mild irritation.

“Sorry,” squeaked out. “You’re not going to freak out, are you? Please don’t freak out. Mr. Stark will fire me if I damage you.”

“I’m fine,” Bruce declared softly, closing his eyes slowly as he drew in long, even breaths. “I hadn’t even thought about it. All the media clamor. The moment the Avengers become official... my god, it’ll be a circus.”

“Ms Potts has been putting together a marketing plan for some time now,” Jarvis advised. “If it is any comfort at all, your participation has been limited to magazine interviews to be conducted here in the tower.”

“That helps a little, yeah,” Bruce nodded.
“If you make Natasha do talk shows, she's going to be pissed,” Bryn observed.

“That fact had already been anticipated,” Jarvis admitted. “Which is why Mr. Stark and the Captain are tentatively scheduled to appear on the Tonight Show.”

“Oh, I have to DVR that!” Bryn exclaimed excitedly, pulling out her phone. “That is like the best news on TV since Catherine Tate came back to Doctor Who!”

“She was one of my favorites as well,” Jarvis agreed, Bryn only grinned, blushing.

“Guess I’m definitely not going out alone,” Bruce stated with a sigh.

“Hey, if it’s any consolation, creepy super secret government organizations tend to have a hard time disappearing celebrities,” Bryn pointed out.

“SHIELD is a creepy super secret government organization,” Bruce stated. Bryn made a thoughtful face.

“Hadn’t really considered that,” she admitted.

“Doctor Banner,” Jarvis interrupted. “I’m pleased to inform you that you can now dispense with concealing yourself in the basement. Or anywhere else for that matter.”

“Oh dear god,” Bruce sighed in visible relief.

“So the Avengers are a thing?” Bryn asked excitedly, a bright smile on her face.

“A thing which I’m afraid you’ll need to continue to conceal your connection to, Bryn,” Jarvis reminded, though his tone was amused.

“I can totally live with that,” She insisted blithely. “But I don’t have to call Steve ‘Rodger’ any more and that is totally awesome.”
“I think I’m going up to the gym,” Bruce remarked, draining his cup with a smirk. “I could do with some yoga. Thanks for the hospitality.”

“Any time,” Bryn insisted, taking the cup from him and tossing it in the trash.

“It’s nice knowing we have you here,” Bruce added as he reached for the doorknob. “It’s… like backup.”

“I’m pretty sure you have some better backup on your team,” Bryn replied, smiling at him.

“You can never have enough backup,” Bruce declared. “See you around.”

“See you!” she called called after him. Bryn drained her coffee cup, pitching it in the trash, her brow knitting in a thoughtful expression.

“Jarvis?” She called out.

“Yes?”

“Now that the public will know that the Avengers are here, I’m going to have to be more careful, aren’t I?” She asked softly.

“I regret there will be some increased risk to your safety, yes,” Jarvis admitted.

“It’s fine,” Bryn stated firmly. “I took a high security clearance job, that implies risk. I was just thinking. I should vary my route more.”

“That would be prudent,” Jarvis agreed.

“We should maybe switch the times I go out and the locations I pick up from a little too,” she added.
“An astute tactical plan,” Jarvis confirmed as Bryn slid into the chair at the table, tapping it and bringing up the inset touchscreen keyboard. “Perhaps we should sit down and go over some additional considerations together.”

“You’re going to have a lot to deal with today,” Bryn stated with a frown. “I can manage this.”

“I’m sure you can,” Jarvis replied. “But I feel I would be ungrateful if I did not assist you.”

“I’m pretty good with tactics,” Bryn admitted, glancing up at the ceiling. “I play a lot of video games. Evasion, not so much.”

“As luck would have it, I excel at evasion and subterfuge,” Jarvis declared with a satisfied tone. Bryn’s face broke in a grin as she brought up a map of the surrounding bakeries and markets she frequented.

“World of Warcraft?” she asked teasingly.

“Mr. Stark,” Jarvis replied. Bryn let out a laugh.
This chapter takes place roughly one week before "Dubious Consent".

Bryn’s bike rolled to a stop in the garage, her attention drawn by the myriad of holograms hanging in the air like fairy lights. She shuffled the paper bag she was holding so that she could unsnap her helmet. She gaped as she slid it off, her eyes sparkling brightly as a virtual hot rod engine disassembled itself in front of her. She reached out with a single finger, tapping the image and an article folded out, offering maintenance instructions and part numbers.

“Jarvis, we’re going to need more of that grease solvent.” A voice declared from the end of the row of cars and Bryn tucked her helmet under her arm, following the sound.

“Might I remind you, Sir,” Jarvis replied, his tone irritated. “That it is neither healthy nor necessary to bathe in Fast Orange.”

“Yeah, Yeah,” Stark reached out to grab a towel, scrubbing the grime off his hands as he rolled his eyes before hunching back over the engine he was working on. “Cry me a river.”

“In this case the river is composed almost entirely of industrial cleaner,” Jarvis replied drily. Bryn pressed her hand over her mouth to stifle her laughter.

“Where’s the fedex guy with the spark plugs I ordered?“ Stark demanded, frustration in his voice. “And where the hell is my shawarma?”

Bryn shifted on her feet, holding out the brown paper sack in her hand and giving it a twitch. The soft crinkle of the paper was just enough to raise his attention and Tony Sark lifted his head to stare up at her. His eyebrows did a funny sort of jump, a smarmy smile curling just one corner of his mouth. His gaze finally fell on the bag and his face broke in a proper smile as he took it from her, digging down through the napkins stuffed in the top of the sack.

“Mrs Farah put falafel in the bottom of the bag for you, fresh out of the fryer,” Bryn informed.
“Allah bless her,” Tony sighed rooting in the bottom of the bag like a squirrel.

“You're an atheist, Sir,” Jarvis reminded. Bryn bit her lip to mask her grin as Tony popped a falafel ball in his mouth, fanning it as it threatened to burn through his tongue.

“Did you tip her?” Stark demanded, swallowing as his eyes watered. Bryn nodded readily. “A real tip, not the twenty-five percent you normally give people because you’re not drawing attention to yourself.”

“I made sure Mrs. Farah was properly reimbursed,” Jarvis insisted. Stark nodded, seeming appeased as he extracted his lunch from the paper bag, sending napkins scattering to the floor.

“So you’re Ms. Marshall,” Stark observed, peeling back the foil and taking a bite of his pita. Bryn nodded as he licked sauce off of the tip of his thumb before reaching out and tapping the holoscreen hovering over the car.

“Bryn, is that short for something?” He asked.

“Brynhildr,” She nodded. “It’s Norse.”

“How do you spell that?” he asked.

“B R Y N H,” Bryn paused when she realized he was typing it into the screen. “I L D R, um, Mr. Stark?”

“One or two L’s?” Tony asked as he typed out Marshall.

“Two,” Bryn answered on reflex. She cringed as the results from some sort of proprietary search engine came up. “Mr. Stark?”

“Operations Management at NYU,” Tony read with a satisfied nod. “With honors. Top ten percent of your class at St. Teresa’s. Volley Ball team, Class VP, three time BMX champ, black belt in Judo,
medals in competitive skeet shooting. Skeet shooting? I have a range on sixty-eight, how good are you? Because Rogers is on my last nerve and I’d like to have someone kick his ass. I mean preferably it would be me doling out the ass-kicking but you can’t have everything. Besides there’s a part of me that wants to see how Star-Spangled-Stick-Up-His-Ass would deal with getting owned and turned on at the same time.” Bryn blinked at him, wide eyed.

“Guns are sexy,” Tony informed. “and competence. Competent women with guns are super sexy. I know, I’m dating one and she’s a sex goddess. Is big, blond, and obnoxiously moral your type? Because if it is, that man seriously needs to loosen up if you know what I mean.” Bryn only gaped at him in silence, her eyes narrowing warily.

“What?” Stark asked, watching her thoughtfully a moment. “You’re into girls?”

“You’re… kind of making me a little uncomfortable, Mr. Stark,” Bryn admitted awkwardly.

“Shit,” Tony declared, his eyes going wide in panic. “You’re not going to mention that to Pepper are you?”

“Ms. Potts has asked me to notify her on Ms. Marshall’s behalf,” Jarvis supplied.

“Traitor,” Tony hissed under his breath. His jaw worked silently for a moment and he looked up at her with a scrutinizing frown. “I’m going over what I just said in my head and I’m thinking I’m not sure why you didn’t slap me.”

“I need this job really badly,” Bryn admitted. Stark made a face.

“I should make this up to you,” He insisted, looking increasingly uncomfortable. “Because you didn’t slap me and not many people have that level of fortitude. You want to be my PA? You should totally be my PA because then you can get back at me in some passive aggressive way and make more money while you’re doing it.”

“Ms. Potts has asked me to remind you,” Jarvis interrupted, his tone sour. “That you are no longer allowed to hire a female assistant without her expressed approval as part of,”

“Her agreement to remain CEO of Stark Industries,” Tony parroted along, rolling his eyes. “Yeah, yeah I remember.” He drew in a deep breath, rubbing his eyes with his fingertips.
“This could have gone better,” He admitted.

“Also, Sir, spending every day with you and your… interesting social interactions could hardly be considered compensation.” Jarvis stated blandly.

“Fair enough,” Stark allowed. “You’re kind of protective of your girl here, Jay,”

“Good help is hard to find, Sir,” Jarvis answered without missing a beat.

“When did she start?”

“June twenty-seventh,” Jarvis replied.

“Give her a quarterly review and a raise,” Tony ordered, downing his last bites of shawarma.

“I’ll process it right away, Sir,” Jarvis confirmed with a pleased tone.

“I didn’t think Stark Industries gave quarterly reviews,” Bryn admitted.

“Only to employees Mr. Stark manages to offend in some way,” Jarvis provided in irritation.

“Do not get used to it!” Tony warned wagging a finger at her. “I am not coming down here every three months so you can get a raise.”

“A girl can hope,” Bryn protested. Stark let out a laugh.

“Yeah, okay, I can see why you want to keep her,” he admitted, returning his attention to his car.

“To that end, I believe the rest of the team would appreciate a restock of the soda supply,” Jarvis
“Like I care,” Stark huffed, waving Bryn off. “Go on, Ms. Marshall, save earth’s mightiest heroes from dehydration.”

“Yes, Sir,” Bryn nodded, a half smile tugging at her lips as she turned back to her bike, rolling it up the ramp and onto the parking pad.

“Um, Jarvis,” She offered hesitantly as the storage door rolled shut. “You don’t actually have to tell Ms. Potts. He really wasn’t that bad.”

“An assertion I can corroborate from experience,” Jarvis agreed sardonically. Bryn let out a laugh as she loaded the cases of specialty soda into the dumbwaiter.

“He doesn’t interact with people much, does he?” She asked.

“Not if he can help it,” Jarvis confirmed as Bryn crossed the office, flopping down on the sofa as the parking pad rotated.

“It must be kind of hard for him, having all these people he doesn’t really know in his house,” Bryn observed. “I had a hard time adjusting to that in college, not having any privacy or personal space. It’s got to be worse for him.”

“I’m curious as to why you think so,” Jarvis admitted.

“Well, he’s clearly a little bit of an introvert,” Bryn pointed out thoughtfully. “And he’s what, the second smartest person in the world?”

“Technically he’s the third,” Jarvis declared. Bryn nodded.

“What does he even have in common with normal people?” Bryn mused. “I mean, I’m pretty outgoing, all I have to do is find something to talk about and I’m okay. What he has to talk about most people can’t even pronounce. And he’s got all these superheroes bunking in his house. It’s got to get overwhelming sometimes.”
“I wish certain members of the team were as perceptive,” Jarvis admitted with a sigh. “For the most part everyone has settled in well. Occasionally tensions do run high, however.”

“It’s rough on you too, isn’t it?” Bryn asked sympathetically.

“I’ve… enjoyed the additional company,” Jarvis admitted. “For the most part. It’s been a new experience for me. I tend to avoid social interaction as much as possible.”

“Little bit of a hermit?” Bryn asked with just a hint of scolding.

“More than a little, I’m afraid,” Jarvis answered, chagrined. “I’m far more comfortable being invisible. I find interacting with strangers difficult, being forced to do so has been both stressful and rewarding.”

“They’ve been here long enough that they shouldn’t be strangers any more,” Bryn pointed out.

“I know,” Jarvis admitted. “But I’ve found my interactions with you to be far less problematic.” Bryn’s face broke in a grin.

“I’m going to take that as a compliment,” she resolved.

“As you should,” Jarvis agreed. Bryn’s eyes narrowed in a thoughtful expression.

“You know, not to overstep my bounds or anything,” she added cautiously. “But I enjoy your company too.”

“Thank you,” Jarvis replied sincerely. “It’s not something I can normally infer.”

“You want to take one of those mandatory Stark Industries breaks and play a couple of rounds of checkers?” Bryn offered. The surface of the table flickered slightly and a 3D representation of a checkerboard appeared, red and black checkers drawing themselves into place on the board.
“Red moves first,” Jarvis offered as Bryn unfolded from the sofa, sliding into the chair at the table.

“You’re going to kick my butt, aren’t you?” she asked in amusement.

“A statistically likely premise,” Jarvis answered. Bryn let out a laugh.
“Bryn I need you to come back to the Tower immediately.” Jarvis voice was tight and brittle in her earbud and she frowned, easing up on the throttle of her motorbike so she could hear the call more clearly.

“I haven’t been by the bakery or the asian market yet,” Bryn stated, confused. She stopped at the light, her eye darting to the bike’s gps in time to see both location pins disappear from the map.

“It doesn’t matter,” Jarvis insisted. “Please, this is very important, I need you to return to the tower as quickly and safely as possible.” Bryn revved the motorbike as the light changed, turning the corner, a lead weight sinking to her stomach.

“I’ll be right there,” She replied, swallowing down the worry that twisted at her insides as she heard the call disconnect. She sped up, ducking though traffic with just a hint more speed than usual. As she turned off of Vanderbilt she almost skidded up short, Steve Rogers was standing near the parking garage entrance, waving her in, his jaw set in grim determination.

“Hurry, hurry up!” he instructed, breaking into a run beside her as she took the corner just a fraction faster than was completely safe. He kept pace with her bike as she sped up to the private garage entrance, her worry exploding into full blown panic to find Tony Stark there, a frown on his face as he motioned her in through the doors.

“Were you followed?” Stark demanded as she skidded to a stop behind the limo that was parked near the elevator. “Did anybody follow you?” Steve was eyeing the garage door as it closed and locked fast, a dark look on his face. He tested it just to be sure before turning to them.

“No,” Bryn shook her head as she tugged off her helmet. “No I don’t think so. Who would be following me?”

“Why would the Army be following me?” Bryn asked in alarm. “Whatever it is, I didn’t do it!”

“No, we know,” Steve assured. “It’s us.”

“I thought you were out of town,” Bryn declared turning to Steve in confusion as she swung off her bike. “I’m pretty sure I was only feeding two Avengers when I showed up for work this morning.”

“We had to come back to keep them from taking Barton,” Stark declared, his shoulders tense as if he were simmering with anger. Bryn’s attention darted to the limo where Bruce hovered with a fretful expression. Clint was hauling himself out of the back on shaking legs, Happy holding the door that Clint was using for leverage. Her brow knitting in worry as she hung her helmet on the handlebar, taking a few steps toward them. Clint gripped Bruce’s shoulder as if to steady himself and without warning he lurched forward.

“Clint!” Bryn squeaked, dashing up to him in time for him to fall into her, half pinning her against the limo. “Little help here?” She called out. Steve and Tony were both there only a moment later, hauling Clint up between them.

“I’m fine, I’m okay,” Clint insisted, trembling. “It’s just adrenaline, I’ll be fine.”

“Dump him on my couch,” Bryn insisted, crawling our from between Clint and Steve and giving Roger’s sleeve a tug. “He’s in no shape to walk up to his room.”

“She’s right,” Bruce agreed, herding them up the ramp and across the parking pad.

“Happy, get one of the company cars,” Tony instructed. “Go down to the factory in Jersey, stick on Pepper like glue!”

“You’ve got it boss,” Happy nodded, turing toward the elevator with hurried steps. Bryn followed them, darting around Bruce to open the mini fridge as Steve and Tony deposited Clint on the sofa.

“Drink this,” Bryn instructed, holding out a bottle of Gatorade to Clint. She turned to Bruce, smacking a bottle of Propel into his chest. “You drink that, you don’t look so good. And I know, no corn syrup, I remember.” Bruce gave her a sheepish look but opened the bottle as Clint downed half
of his own. Bryn shuffled Bruce onto the sofa beside Clint before pulling over one of the chairs at
the table and flopping into it as Steve took the other and Tony perched on the arm of the couch,
ruffling his hair with a tired expression.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” she asked, as Clint took another gulp of his gatorade. “You’re a little
pale even for you.” Tony let out a snort of amusement as Steve threw him a withering look.

“Some self important general took issue with some of the stuff that went down right before the battle
of New York,” Clint nodded in reply, rubbing the back of his neck with a sigh. “Jumped me at
SHIELD, tried to pick up Bruce in a two-for-one.”

“Is that what this is about?” Bryn asked in disbelief, gaping at Clint. She turned to look at Bruce and
then at Steve. “What is his problem?”

“I’m sorry, Bryn,” Jarvis sighed. “General Ross has been the cause of a great deal of conflict for
various members of the team. I apologize for worrying you, but we felt that there was at least a small
risk that one of the General’s men would attempt to detain you and gain entrance to the tower using
the digital access codes on your bike.”

“That’s unsettling,” Bryn admitted with a frown.

“You should have more firepower,” Tony stated, pointing at her. “Like a repulser mounted on the
front of your bike, give Ross’ asshats a run for their money.” Bryn gave him a disbelieving look.

“Tony you can’t mount a repulser on a motorbike!” Steve protested. “She drives in traffic, a civilian
could get hurt!”

“Yeah but our civilian won’t!” Stark pointed out, sliding off the end of the sofa.

“Is that all you care about?” Steve demanded, rolling to his feet as Bruce shook his head, rubbing his
eyes. “The collateral damage isn’t important as long as it’s no one you know?”

“You know what, Freezer-Pop?” Stark snapped. “Some of us are responsible for the safety of others
and we take that shit seriously.” Steve’s eyes narrowed threateningly.
“You see what I have to put up with?” Jarvis asked drolly as the pair continued to bicker.

“I’m beginning to, yeah,” Bryn rolled her eyes. Clint let out a snort of a laugh as Bruce covered his mouth with his hand.

“Hey, guys, no offense,” Bryn raised her voice over them. “But this, as far as I know, is my office, and I like it stress free in here!” Steve and Tony stopped kicking sand over each other’s shoes long enough to stare at her, dumbfounded.

“It’s my building,” Tony stated, just a bit petulantly.

“However,” Jarvis interrupted sharply. “As I’ve pointed out to Ms. Marshall on several occasions, she does not technically work for you, Sir.” Tony seemed to consider this a moment.

“Well, damn,” he declared, blinking in surprise. His eyes narrowed slowly. “I’m still pretty sure I could have you fired.”

“Yes, I’m sure you could,” Jarvis interrupted as Bryn stared back at him uncomfortably. “But I’d quit.” Bryn clapped her hand over her mouth at Tony’s completely horrified expression. Bruce’s shoulders were shaking and Clint fell over into the sofa, muffling his laughter in the cushions.

“I’m feeling a little ganged up on here,” Tony confessed uncomfortably.

“I feel so much better now,” Clint stated, rolling onto his back and staring at the ceiling with a choked off giggle. The only one not laughing besides Stark was Steve, who was looking decidedly cowed as he shifted on his feet.

“Thank you,” Bryn stated sincerely, folding her arms over her chest as Steve and Tony backed off from each other a pace.

“She’s right, I’m sorry,” Steve admitted, his cheeks turning red as he glanced at Tony out of the corner of his eye. “It’s just… I used to know the rules, there used to be rules! I used to be able to protect my people. I at least knew what to protect them from! I just…” His voice trailed off as his brow furrowed in an angry scowl.
“You did pretty good today,” Stark pointed out grudgingly, tossing the folder he’d tucked under his arm onto the table.

“He had to make a rush back with our presidential pardons,” Bruce explained, reaching out to pick up the folder, his fingers running over it as if to assure himself it wasn’t about to disappear.

“And this Ross guy would ignore a presidential pardon, break in here and arrest you anyway?” Bryn demanded. Clint took a deep breath, nodding. “Isn’t that kidnapping?”

“Yep,” Stark confirmed with a nod.

“I’m sorry kiddo,” Clint stated, rolling upright and reaching out to take her hand. “I’m really glad Jarvis thought to call you back. I didn’t mean for you to get dragged into this.”

“Clint,” She sighed in exasperation. “Oh my god, you are such an idiot!”

“What?” he gaped back at her in confusion.

“I am, like, five years younger than Steve!” She stated, waving a hand in Roger’s direction. “I am literally the same age as everyone he went to war with. I am not an infant and I don’t need you to protect me. What I need is for someone to tell me how I keep a Hagen-Das run from turning into a security breech!” Clint mouthed at her wordlessly, his attention darting between her and Steve as Bruce closed his eyes, struggling to hide his amusement as he slowly shook his head.

“What?” she demanded, looking up at Stark who was grinning at her with an expression that was by turns both glee filled and evil.

“I’m really starting to like this one,” Tony admitted, turning to Steve who was staring at Bryn with rounded eyes, an odd little smile tugging at his lips. Bryn let out a groan, pressing her fingers into her eyes.

“We could add a pin code to the bike’s access codes,” Bruce suggested. “That way no one else could use the bike.”
“That’d work on the motorbike, but I’m not sure where I’d mount the hardware on her bicycle,” Stark pointed out. Bruce nodded in grudging agreement.

“Well, what if I called Jarvis on my cell phone?” Bryn shrugged. “He’d know it was me, and he could release the doors.”

“Because cellular signals are unreliable and I do not approve of you dialing calls while driving,” Jarvis answered crisply, his tone slightly affronted. Bryn bit her lip to hide her grin as Tony chuckled, shaking his head.

“You’re her boss not her dad, you know,” Stark teased. Clint let out a snort of a laugh, pitching his empty gatorade bottle into the trash can across the room.

“A fact for which, I am certain, she is grateful,” Jarvis offered brusquely.

“Why don’t we just give her a com?” Steve asked with a shrug. Tony paused, losing whatever dig he intended to make at Jarvis, his expression turning thoughtful.

“System’s already set up and everything,” he nodded in agreement before turning to Bryn. “How do you feel bout having your over-protective surrogate parent in your ear every time you leave home?”

“If it keeps the Avengers safe, I’m all for it,” Bryn insisted firmly before glancing up at the ceiling. “You’re not going to critique my driving, are you?”

“Audio only,” Jarvis assured, a hint of amusement in his tone. “And if you were to run into any trouble I would know immediately.”

“Jarvis has a point,” Clint stated, giving her a fond look. “We kind of owe you at least some backup.”

“The cheesecake you bring in from Brooklyn is worth more than a little backup,” Steve agreed as Tony stifled a laugh.

“Yeah, I’m going to apologize in advance for the lack of knish and miso today,” Bryn admitted with
“Not your fault,” Clint shook his head, hauling himself off the couch. He reached out to give her shoulder a squeeze. “Thanks.”

“You sure you’re okay?” She asked worriedly.

“What do ya think, Doc?” he questioned, turning to Bruce. Banner shrugged.

“I’ve seen you worse,” he admitted, pushing up off the couch with a shrug.

“A ringing endorsement,” Steve sighed, running his fingers through his hair before pointing at Bruce and Clint. “You and you, get some rest, please?”

“Yeah, okay mom,” Clint sighed, giving him a playful punch in the shoulder.

“Do not go anywhere until I send down a com,” Tony instructed, waving a hand at Bryn before following the others out into the garage. She nodded in reply, watching them go.

“Under the circumstances,” Jarvis remarked. “I would feel better if you did not go back out for a couple of hours. I want to be certain the area surrounding the tower is secure at the very least.”

“Jarvis?” Bryn curled up on the sofa as the Avengers disappeared onto the elevator and the storage doors rolled shut. “I really do appreciate that you look out for me, I do. You’re a great boss. But I don’t want you to feel like you have to protect me. This job means a lot to me, I want to know I can do it.”

“Bryn, there’s a fine line between doing one’s job and working with one’s team,” Jarvis supplied pointedly. “You do your job very well, I have never had cause for complaint and I appreciate that greatly. But if there is anything I have learned from Mr. Stark, it is the importance of having someone you can trust to look after your best interests. I have been that for Mr. Stark for many years, it’s my job to be that for you as well.”

“Do you parent him as much as you do me?” She asked, glancing at the ceiling.
“More.”

Bryn let out a laugh, slumping back into the sofa.

“He’s like your best friend, isn’t he?” She asked. Jarvis paused thoughtfully for a long moment.

“There are simply not words,” he admitted finally. Bryn gave a nod, wrapping her arms around her knees.

“You threatened to quit, though,” she pointed out. Jarvis let out a huff but she cut him off before he could continue. “Don’t do that, okay? I know you don’t want to, so don’t actually do it.”

“Alright,” he agreed.

“Unless he goes dark side and tries to take over the world,” She could almost feel Jarvis’ ruffle of amusement in the air. “On second thought, if he does try to take over, stick with him and let him know I am totally up for being his minion because as evil overlords go, he’d probably be pretty good.”

“Bryn, I find your logic disturbingly solid,” Jarvis declared.

“Scary, isn’t it?” she teased, wriggling off the sofa. “Since I’m not allowed to go anywhere I’m going to grab lunch. Call me if you need me.”

“Take your time,” Jarvis assured. “Mr. Stark is running a threat assessment.”

“Do you guys sleep?” she asked, pausing at the door.

“Mr. Stark maintains that he gets quite enough sleep when he’s beaten into unconsciousness,” Jarvis deadpanned.
“Keep it up,” She warned, struggling not to smile. “I’m going to start mom-ing you as much as you dad me.”

“A truly terrifying thought,” he admitted. “I expect I had better be on my best behavior.”

“Natasha’s right about you men,” she muttered under her breath as she slipped out the door.
**Chapter Notes**

For the purposes of my own timeline, this story takes place roughly a week after Thor 2 on the same day as the first part of *A Random Feature*

Events and situations are referenced from the portion of *Nat’s Boys* that focuses on Bruce.

“No, no it did not happen like that at all,” Thor shook his head. “I am truly dismayed that the names of such noble friends could be missaccounted so.”

“Wait.. what?” Bryn asked with a frown, her brow furrowing as she sipped her coffee. It was an unusually temperate day for late fall, the sun just bright and warm enough to chase away the autumn chill. New York had stumbled blearily out of its offices to drink in what would probably be the last beautiful afternoon before spring and Bryn had joined them, shambling out to the cafe on the sidewalk in front of Stark Tower. She hadn’t really expected to practically bump into Avengers, lounging at the cafe tables as if gods and superheroes were common place. She turned to look at Steve who was slouched back in his chair with a latte that was less a cup than it was a bucket, whip cream and carmel practically spilling over the top as he stirred sugar packets in.

“Don’t look at me,” he said with a shrug, moving his chair over to make room for Natasha as she set her coffee on the table. “I think I’ve read two books on Norse mythology in my entire life. I don’t even remember that one. Hi Tasha.”

“Don’t move,” she instructed, pushing on his shoulder lightly to keep him in his chair before crossing the slightly crowded cafe.

“They are no myth,” Thor insisted, draining his own mug and refilling it from the carafe at his elbow. He paused to look out over the bustle on 45th Street with a faint smile as if he found amusement in the scurry of pedestrians on the sidewalk and the rude honking of the taxies. “Though to look at your world now I can see how your past can seem a veil of wonder and mystery.”

“Does he always talk like this?” Bryn asked, glancing at Thor with a wary frown.

“Pretty much, yeah,” Steve nodded as Natasha settled into a chair she had stolen from one of the nearby tables.
“So you’re telling me the story my father named me after is a complete fabrication?” Bryn asked skeptically.

“Not a complete fabrication,” Thor protested.

“Just a partial one,” Natasha stated with a smirk, sipping her cappuccino.

“Don’t encourage him,” Bryn pleaded.

“Tis true that my father did cast a deep sleep over young Brynhild,” Thor nodded. “For she chose wrongly in Agnar. He was a man of little honor, and he sought to charm her with tender words. I regret to say that she cast her affections on him and allowed that to cloud her judgement, but such is youth. My father did not wish to see him hold further sway over her.”

“So Odin didn’t condemn her to mortality?” Bryn asked her caution giving way to curiosity. Thor shook his head.

“He sought only to separate her from Agnar’s selfishness,” He stated. “It was many years later that Siegfried roused her from her spell and Agnar had been long dead. I counted Siegfried a great and noble man. Though it is true that Grimhild cast him under a spell for a time and her son Gunnar sought to deceive Brynhild by appearing in Siegfried’s form, she was much too clever for his deception. She killed Gunnar for his trouble and freed Siegfried from his enchantment. They shared many long years in each other’s company.”

“Revisionist history,” Bryn sulked. “She didn’t throw herself on his funeral pyre either, did she?”

“No,” Thor looked appalled. “She poisoned herself. Such was her grief she could not bear to go on without him.”

“Well that’s disappointing,” Bryn pouted jabbing her spoon into her coffee.

“You are still young, perhaps when you have loved more deeply you will understand better,” Thor suggested.
“Maybe,” Bryn allowed, her attention straying to Steve who was staring into his coffee cup with a pained expression.

“Love can spur much sacrifice and count it as nothing,” Thor remarked.

“The big question there,” Natasha stated, hijacking the conversation. “Is: just where is your charming little astrophysicist?”

“Ah, Jane is in London with her colleague Dr. Selvig, studying the aftereffects of the convergence,” Thor smiled fondly.

“That was crazy, I watched the whole thing on TV,” Bryn admitted, making a stunned face.

“So did I,” Steve answered drily, his brow furrowed in irritation.

“He’s sore,” Natasha explained, turning to Thor with the faintest hint of apology. “We were in the middle of an op outside Sydney, by the time we’d wrapped up, the only thing we could do was watch on the flight back.”

“We managed,” Thor assured. “Though I would have been grateful for your assistance, if only for Jane’s sake.”

“So you have a girl in London?” Bryn asked curiously. “Are you just here for a visit then?”

“Jane’s work absorbs much of her attention,” Thor admitted without sign of concern. “I find it difficult to fill the hours while she is engaged in her research. I am but an hour away should she have need of me.” Bryn stared at him a bit blankly.

“I’m going to admit to the fact that the culture shock here is finally getting to me,” Bryn stated, toying idly with her spoon.

“Of course once I spoke with Anthony I was keen to return and see the Son of Coul,” Thor admitted.
“His loss in the battle weighed heavily on me and I am much relieved to see him returned to us.”

“You’re not the only one,” Natasha admitted, shaking her head with a sigh. “I was starting to worry about Clint.”

“Yeah, I thought there wasn’t too much left that could surprise me around here,” Steve confessed. “I really was not prepared for Tony springing that on me.”

“How’s he taking it, by the way?” Bryn asked curiously.

“I haven’t known him as long as you have,” Steve shrugged, turning to Natasha. “But after he got over the initial shock he’s been doing better I think.”

“Clint’s more like himself now,” Natasha agreed.

“Not Clint,” Bryn waved a hand dismissively. “Mr. Stark.”

“Tony?” Steve asked, his brow furrowing.

“I mean, I know how Clint’s doing,” Bryn added as an afterthought. “He stopped hitting the car when it wouldn’t start.”

“I…” Steve’s eyes narrowed as a soft, knowing smile tugged at Natasha’s lips. “Tony’s never said anything.”

“Well of course not,” Bryn rolled her eyes, jabbing him in the arm with her finger. “He’s a celebrity, he’s used to hiding that kind of thing. I mean, he doesn’t have a lot of friends, a public figure can’t afford to. I just thought he must have taken Agent Coulson’s death pretty hard to spend all that time looking into it.”

“You are a very perceptive young woman,” Thor stated, emptying his coffee cup and refilling it again. “You were well named, Brynhildr, for you have the insight and judgement of the Valkyrie. I spoke to Anthony at length when I arrived yesterday. It is my belief that he feels betrayed by Nicholas Fury. However, Philip’s loss impressed upon him the very great dangers we all face and led
in no small part to his choice to invite us to live in his great tower.”

“Yeah that’s kind of what I thought,” Bryn nodded, her spoon clinking against the inside of her cup as Steve stared at them blankly.

“He told you that?” Rogers asked finally.

“Not in so many words,” Thor shrugged easily. “But Anthony is more than willing to speak his thoughts to any who would care to listen.”

“Mr. Stark will spill if you want to hear or not,” Bryn pointed out, as Thor nodded in agreement.

“He… he barely talks to me.” Steve admitted.

“Do you listen?” Bryn asked her face free of judgement as she turned to look up at him. If he had an answer he lost it as Natasha’s phone let out a beep. She pulled it from her pocket, looking at it with a frown.

“Sorry to run out on you,” Natasha declared, standing to her feet. “I need to catch a stray.”

“Again?” Bryn asked, making a face. Natasha only shrugged, sweeping up her coffee cup and cutting a circuitous route between the cafe tables until she was lost amongst the bright red umbrellas.

“What was that about?” Steve asked, his brow knitting in worry.

“Aw, Dr. Banner gets stressed out every now and then and tries to make a break,” Bryn sighed. “Natasha asked me to stall him once until she could get down to the garage. He’s usually pretty sneaky about it, I have no idea how she knows but she always catches him before he leaves.”

“Wait… Bruce tries to make a run for it?” Steve asked in shock. “I thought we settled this!”

“He’s a nervous kind of guy,” Bryn stated. “He worries that he’s going to hurt someone. I think this is the first time he’s tried to run since the Avengers went official though.”
“Is there anything else about my team you’d like to tell me?” Steve asked, his expression crumpling into a mask of hurt confusion. Bryn only stared back at him with a calculating look.

“Agent Coulson’s chest pain is a lot worse than he’s letting on,” She said finally. “You need to not let him do anything strenuous for a while. His doctors are quacks.”

“That I knew,” Steve let out a breath as if relieved.

“Anything you want to confess?” Bryn asked turning to Thor who was watching the exchange with thinly veiled amusement. He seemed to consider it a moment.

“I do not believe I am assimilating well into this society,” Thor offered, though he did not look overly concerned about it.

“I’ll bet,” Bryn nodded in agreement, turning back to Steve with a slightly expectant expression.

“I’m not so sure I’m assimilating either,” he admitted, staring into his nearly empty latte. Bryn gave his arm a pat opening her mouth to reply.

“What the hell is that?” she demanded instead, her attention fixed on the TV that hung in the corner over the bar. Steve and Thor were on their feet instantly and Bryn scurried after them, climbing onto one of the bar stools to see over Steve’s shoulder as the cafe’s patrons moved to huddle around the TV.

“Oh my god, someone tell me this is the Sy-Fy channel!” Bryn declared as they stared, stunned at the news coverage of what looked like more than fifty tin can shaped robots, their lasers cutting though Washington DC as their shrill voices screamed threats at terrified civilians running desperately for cover.

“What manner of creature is this?” Thor scowled.

“Jarvis, are you seeing this?” Bryn demanded, pulling her com from her pocket and stuffing it in her ear.
“Is the Captain still with you?” Jarvis asked instead, his voice strained.

“Go!” Bryn ordered, giving Steve a shove and reaching out to prod Thor as well. “Go on! Why are you still standing here?!”

“Tell Jarvis we’re coming!” Steve shouted over his shoulder.

“They’re on their way,” Bryn answered finally, watching as both men darted frantically across the cafe, jumping the rail and running into the lobby of Stark tower. “What about Natasha and the Doc?” She looked up as she heard the distant whine of repulsers in time to see Iron Man take off from the launch balcony overhead.

“Agent Romanov has him en-route to the jet,” Jarvis replied, sounding relieved.

“Why are there robots in DC?” Bryn asked, turning back to the TV with wide, misty eyes.

“I wish I knew,” Jarvis admitted. “Bryn, under the circumstances,”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m on my way back,” she interrupted, clambering off the bar stool and shouldering her way through the crowd as she heard the quinjet take off. She fought her way toward the back hallway, passing the bathrooms and scanning her SI card at the door marked Employees Only. She barely spared a glance for the baristas transfixed by the news coverage as she crossed the storage room, scanning her card at a second door and descending the steps behind them before ducking down the hall at the bottom and opening her office door.

“How long’s it going to take Mr. Stark to get there?” She asked, staring at the TV as the video of mountain landscapes was replaced by news coverage of DC.

“Another eleven minutes,” He replied. “Fourteen until the rest of the Avengers arrive.” Bryn rubbed the tears from the corners of her eyes, biting her lip.

“Are you alright, Bryn?” Jarvis asked softly.
“Yeah, I’m… I’m okay,” She choked up, swallowing. “I was outside the perimeter in the battle of New York. So I was… You know, I was going to ask if you were okay?”

“I’m not certain I am ever okay when Sir is in the suit,” Jarvis admitted. Bryn curled up on the sofa, her arms wrapped tightly around her knees as she stared at the footage of Washington, silent as Jarvis’ countdown ticked slowly in the corner of the TV screen.

“Are they going to be all right?” She asked finally.

“I have to believe they will be,” Jarvis insisted. “With Thor’s recent return their odds are certainly better.” Bryn swallowed a sniffle, rubbing one eye with the cuff of her sweater.

“You were here,” Bryn said, her breath hitching. “for the battle of New York. You were here right in the middle of it, weren’t you?”

“I was,” Jarvis confirmed.

“We hid in the basement of the dorm,” Bryn related, pressing her chin to her knees. “We dragged the TV down from the common room and left it sitting in the stairwell so the cable would reach and we watched the whole thing while the ground shook and I remember thinking that if Iron Man and his team couldn’t stop it, we were all going to die.”

“I confess, I didn’t have time to think of much of anything,” Jarvis admitted. The cameraman filming the destruction of Washington panned the camera frantically, finally focusing on Iron Man, looping past several of the robots as they fired on him, barely missing.

“Three minutes,” Bryn rubbed her eyes. She let out a gasp, covering her mouth as one of the robots blasted Iron Man in the chest, sending him crashing into a nearby building.

“Oh my god!” Bryn shrieked. “Jarvis!”

“He’s fine, Bryn,” Jarvis replied, though his tone sounded tight. “I monitor the suit’s systems, I’d know instantly if he were injured.” True to his word, Iron Man shambled to his feet, his armored head shaking like a dog. Bryn buried her face in her hands.
“Bryn, if you would prefer to go home early, I would certainly understand.” Jarvis declared gently.

“No,” she shook her head, biting her lip as she violently scrubbed the tears from her eyes. “I’ll stay, they might need… we don’t know what they might need when they get back. I’ll stay late, I’ll stay till they come home.”

“Bryn, I can always have pizza delivered,” he insisted.

“I don’t want them to make do,” She sated softly. “I don’t want… they deserve better than that. I’ll stay.” The roar of jet engines vibrated the TV speakers and the quinjet landed, practically in the middle of the Mall. Bryn drew in a shaky breath as the other Avengers sprang into action, lightning striking several of the robots at once as one of Hawkeye’s explosive arrows demolished another.

“It’s going to be okay,” Bryn murmured, repeating the words as if to convince herself as Cap’s shield bounced off one robot and struck the next before it could get off another volley at Iron Man. She let out a huff of a breath, staring at the screen.

“How do you stand this?” She asked finally. “I mean, I’ve only known these people a few months. You’ve been watching family do this for ages.”

“By believing in them,” Jarvis replied. “By believing in all of them. I choose to put my faith in them, to tell myself there is nothing they cannot accomplish, more so when they work together.”

“They’re not always that good at working together,” Bryn pointed out.

“Shhh, you’re ruining my delusion,” Jarvis scolded. Bryn let out a half laugh, drying her eyes as she stared at the battle on the TV.

“They’re going to be okay,” she declared again. And for the first time since she’d seen the robots on the news, she actually believed it.
Bryn parked her bicycle on the parking pad, tugging off her helmet and hanging it on the wall. She made a face as she turned back to the bike to empty the bins. The sound of Alice Cooper belting out *Santa Claws is Coming to Town*, reverberated through the garage, the smell of engine grease stinging her nose as she hefted a pair of bags and headed back down the ramp.

“Hey Mr. Stark,” she called out over the noise, she drew in a breath as the music softened and she sighed in relief as Stark looked up from the antique motorcycle he was currently toying with. “Jarvis asked me to restock you.”

“Yeah, great,” Tony nodded, grasping his screwdriver between his teeth and waving his free hand in the direction of the tiny kitchenette in the far corner of the tool racks. Bryn hid her smile, dumping the bags on the counter.

“Tricking out Steve’s bike again?” she asked curiously as she loaded sodas into the door of the mini fridge.

“Yeah, well he and Jarvis won’t let me trick out yours,” Stark declared sourly. “Have to have something to do with my time.”

“I thought you’d be packing,” Bryn observed, looking surprised as she stowed energy bars and dried fruit in the cupboard.

“Packing?” Tony looked over his shoulder at her with a perplexed frown. His face screwed up in a thoughtful expression. “Packing?” he repeated.

“You know… how you sick your stuff in a suitcase for your trip tomorrow,” Bryn supplied giving him a sidelong look.
“Oh god, is that how normal people travel?” he asked in horror. Bryn nodded looking confused.

“Jarvis?” he asked.

“Christmas presents for your team members and their guests arrived via FedEx at the lodge in Aspen, this morning” Jarvis related. “Housekeeping has stocked the customary toiletries and are scheduled to take delivery of appropriate clothing choices for the local climate this afternoon.” Stark gave a nod of satisfaction.

“All packed,” he announced returning his attention to the motorcycle. Bryn gave her head a shake as if to clear it.

“You buy all new clothes for a vacation?” Bryn asked, her eyes wide with disbelief. Stark gave a grunt of assent.

“If Colorado has to deal with a house full of neurotic superheroes at Christmas, seems the least I can do is compensate the local economy,” he declared.

“Okay,” Bryn allowed, nodding as she folded up the empty canvas shopping bags. “What happens to the clothes when you come home?”

“Charity,” Stark answered with a shrug, then seemed to think about it, “Not sure. Jarvis?”

“Casual attire is scheduled for donation to a homeless shelter in Denver,” Jarvis replied succinctly. “Formal wear for the Christmas eve party is to be donated to an organization that outfits underprivileged students for the prom. Skiing equipment and accessories are to go to a youth athletic program.” Stark seemed to consider this a moment.

“Neat,” he declared before returning his attention to the Captain’s motorcycle, twisting down to fiddle with something under the gas tank.

“That’s, that’s really generous of you, Mr. Stark,” Bryn stated, a bit awed. Tony let out a dismissive huff. She crossed the garage, holding out the last ice coffee and Stark took it from her without comment. “No, really it is. It’s great that you’re taking your team on vacation for Christmas too, I know Clint really appreciates it, it’s been a bad year for him. But I’m really glad Steve’s not spending Christmas in New York, so it’s really good you’re doing that for him.”
“I.. what now?” Tony asked his eyes narrowing as he drew his head out from under the bike and opened the bottle.

“Well, this is his first Christmas… here,” Bryn shrugged a bit helplessly “I mean, I’ve been spending some time with him, not a lot, but enough to notice he’s, well he’s kind of a little bit depressed. I mean, who wouldn’t be? He wakes up and his friends are all gone, his neighborhood, even the place on the corner where he used to buy bread, they’re not there any more. Guy saves the world and his is just completely wiped off the map, has to screw with your head a little.” Stark stared at her, his brow knitted, the lines around his eyes creasing as he took a swig of his coffee.

“You know, Ms. Marshall, sometimes I really don’t know what to make of you,” he admitted.

“Sorry sir,” she answered, her cheeks turning pink as she ducked her head, heading back toward her office.

“He’s… Ms. Marshall?” She stopped and turned back as Tony’s voice trailed off. His shoulders rose as he drew in a slow breath and he gave her a serious look. “Any chance he’s a danger to himself?”

“I…” Bryn bit her lip, hesitating. “I’m not sure, I don’t think so. When he has stuff to do, people to spend time with, he seems happier… well maybe not happy exactly, but not so sad.” Stark nodded slowly.

“He drives me nuts,” Tony admitted, wincing. Bryn’s face broke in a grin that she tried to hide and his eyes narrowed at her.

“It’s just…” she paused as if choosing her words carefully. “Well he was friends with your father, right?” Tony nodded stiffly.

“You’re like the only connection he has to his old life,” Bryn pointed out. “Every time he complains about you, he complains that you’re going to get yourself killed. I think he’s maybe a little scared of losing the only familiar thing he has left.” Tony stared at her with a blank, bemused expression.

“Get back to work before Jarvis threatens me again, Marshall,” he ordered curtly, jerking his head toward the storage doors before returning his attention to the motorcycle.
“Yes sir,” she nodded, retreating across the garage.

“I’m a bit worried about Captain Rogers myself,” Jarvis admitted hesitantly as the storage doors slid shut, effectively muffling the sounds of heavy metal Christmas in the garage. “I’d rather hoped he might have grown more comfortable by now.”

“He doesn’t smile much,” Bryn observed, folding up on the couch with a sigh. “I mean, he has a great smile when he’s out in public, I just don’t see it much otherwise. I was really worried about Clint there at first, but he doesn’t seem as bad now. He’s not okay but he’s getting there. I’m not so sure about Steve, I don’t think he’s alright.”

“I wish I could see people the way you do,” Jarvis lamented, the faintest hint of longing in his tone. “My job is to anticipate and provide. I’ve always managed to anticipate Mr. Stark, but I look at the others and sometimes I’m overwhelmed. Most of the time I’m not even sure about their emotional states, not the way you are.”

“I don’t do anything special,” Bryn protested.

“Perhaps you just don’t see it that way,” Jarvis chided gently. “You’re very good with people and you make it seem effortless. For those of us who struggle with social interaction it’s very remarkable indeed.” Bryn’s cheeks flushed and she ducked her head, drawing one knee to her chest.

“Most of it’s mom,” She related with a fond smile. “She was great with people, really great. She always told me to look at people when they talk, really look, not just listen.”

“I’m not always certain how to interpret what I see,” Jarvis admitted. “I suppose I’m still clinging to the notion that it will become easier as I grow older.” Bryn’s brow wrinkled in a thoughtful frown.

“Jarvis, how old are you?” she blanched almost immediately. “You know what? That was really rude, don’t answer that.”

“I don’t mind telling you, Bryn,” he replied, his tone tinged with amusement. “I’m twenty-four.”

“Hell no!” she declared in surprise. She blushed instantly, grinning. “Wow, it’s just, you come off as a lot older than that. Did you come to work for Mr. Stark right out of Super British Butler School or something?”
“You’re not too far off the mark,” Jarvis replied drily. “But I never attended Butler School.” Bryn gave the security camera in the corner a knowing look even though she had no way of knowing if Jarvis was actually watching.

“You’re an easy guy to like, Jarvis,” Bryn offered gently. “You’re considerate and that’s really rare these days. Maybe if you’re not so good at reading people you should just offer to listen. A lot of times people will tell you what they need if they feel it’s safe to let their guard down.”

“I’ll consider it,” he replied seriously. “I believe that was the last of the errands, you’re more than welcome to take off early to prepare for the Stark Industries Christmas party tonight if you’d like.”

“Jarvis, am I going to see you the party?” she asked.

“No, you won’t,” he replied softly.

“The whole socializing thing is really a problem for you, isn’t it?” Bryn asked, her brow furrowed in concern.

“If it’s any consolation, I’ve never felt lonely,” Jarvis declared. “I can understand why others enjoy these sorts of gatherings, I simply don’t share in that enjoyment.”

“That’s fair,” Bryn nodded, standing to her feet and opening her locker to remove a garment bag. “I’m kind of looking forward to it, Tasha helped me pick out a really good dress. Can you believe she does almost all her clothes shopping online?”

“She values efficiency,” Jarvis remarked. “One more thing,” the dumbwaiter opened and Bryn hooked the garment bag over the locker door, shifting to see a flat square box, neatly wrapped in red and gold paper with a large red bow.

“Aww, Jarvis!” she protested. “I didn’t get you anything.”

“I would really prefer that you not, Bryn,” Jarvis insisted. “This is a small token of thanks from myself and the Avengers for everything you’ve done. Reciprocation would hardly be warranted.” Bryn lifted the box out of the dumbwaiter, giving the end of the bow a gentle tug as she grinned.
“I don’t know what to say,” she admitted.

“Please open it,” Jarvis encouraged. Bryn set the box on the table, tugging the wrapping free.

“You can not tell Agent Barton until after Christmas,” he cautioned as an afterthought. “Mr. Stark’s gift to him came from the same source.”

“Avengers Monopoly?” Bryn gaped, her fingers caressing the sides of the box. “Jarvis this is amazing! I didn’t even know these existed.”

“They technically do not, yet,” Jarvis admitted. “This is a prototype from the toy line for next Christmas. They will be on the market in September.”

“This is…” Bryn’s face broke in a wide grin. “Mr. Stark must have really pulled in some favors for this.”

“It was actually quite easy to acquire in light of Mr. Stark’s most recent subsidiary purchase,”

“Purchase?” Bryn’s eyes were wide like saucers. “Mr. Stark bought Hasbro?”

“Originally he only wanted to purchase the Nerf division,” Jarvis admitted. “But they were unwilling to part with the property so he was forced to buy everything. In hindsight it was a very strategic move, there are now several additional Avenger’s themed toy lines due for release next year. I’m sure PR will be most pleased.”

“Would a Hawkeye purple Nerf bow be one of them?” She asked as she tugged the lid off of the box.

“Not a word,” Jarvis warned severely. Bryn laughed, folding out the board carefully.

“Everyone signed it!” Bryn fairly glowed as her eyes skittered over each signature, finally falling on the “Hawkeye” complete with a cartoon bow and arrow. “How did Clint sign it if he doesn’t know it
“Subterfuge,” Jarvis answered readily. Bryn let out a delighted laugh as she pulled the tiny pewter Iron Man figure from the box.

“Jarvis this is absolutely fantastic,” she stated placing the Iron Man marker on top of the square marked *Avenger’s Tower*. “This… thank everyone for me, would you?”

“I’ll be certain to mention it at Christmas morning brunch,” he confirmed as she reluctantly repacked the board game.”

“You know, I’m starting to see your point,” Bryn admitted. “I am really thinking about blowing off this party to stay in and play board games.”

“Agent Romanov is doubtless keen to see your dress,” Jarvis reminded primly. Bryn pulled a face.

“Yeah, okay, you’ve made your point,” she stated, gently tucking the board game into her locker and grabbing her backpack and garment bag. “I’m going up to the gym to get a shower.”

“Enjoy your evening,” he replied sincerely.

“Hey Jarvis,” she smiled at the security camera as she reached for the door. “If I don’t talk to you before… Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas, Bryn,” he replied. Her smile brightened as she slipped out the door.
Phil slouched at the desk in his suite, rubbing his temples as he stared mindlessly at the muted TV, his brow twisting down into a frown on one side and up into incredulity on the other.

“Clint…. no,” he murmured as the hundred and fifty foot lizard stomped across the screen, flattening several Toyotas that lined the harbor street.

“Sorry, Pepper,” he apologized with a sigh. “I was reviewing the footage.” he shook his head, pinching the bridge of his nose and closing his eyes in an effort to focus on the voice on the other end of the phone line.

“No,” he replied, pausing. “No, Tony’s generosity aside, they need to stop expecting him to clean up their messes for them.” He made a face at the TV as Steve landed on the creature’s head, pummeling it with his shield. He rolled his eyes.

“Well if they don’t want their cities destroyed they need to stop funding AIM’s insane science projects.” Phil insisted. “Pepper, my dear, wonderful, charming friend. I absolutely demand, on the strength of our mutual, deep affections that you not give those idiots a single red cent in assistance.” Phil’s face crumpled as Thor smacked the creature’s toes with Mjölnir to distract it from Iron Man trying to cut off its tail with his repulsers.

“Yes, of course,” Phil nodded with a hint of resignation. “Use your surreptitious charitable accounts like you normally do. Yes, Pepper.” He rested his head on his blotter.

“No, of course I’m not mad,” he declared, and to his credit he did not sound the least put out. “Yes, I adore you too… lunch, yes… tomorrow… yes… bye.” He pulled the earbud from his ear without raising his head, letting out his breath in a long, exasperated sigh that made him melt further into the oak desk.

“Agent Coulson, I wonder if I could have a moment?” It was the tentative tone of the question more than anything else that convinced him not to play dead and Phil drew in a steadying breath before
pushing himself upright. He paused for just a moment at a properly professional posture before finally giving an internal ‘to hell with it’ and sprawling back in his overstuffed desk chair to stare blankly at the ceiling.

“Of course, Jarvis, what can I do for you?” he asked, monotoned.

“I’m terribly sorry to impose,” the AI answered uneasily. “But I was wondering if you might be able to offer me some guidance in regard to Ms. Marshall.” Phil blinked three times before slowly sitting up. The giant lizard on the TV diverted his attention for just a moment and he reached for the remote, punching the off button with prejudice before carefully folding his hands on his desk.

“Bryn, the courier?” he clarified.

“Yes,” Jarvis confirmed. “You’ve met her, I’m sure.” the hint of a smile tugged at the corner of Phil’s mouth.

“Yes,” he nodded. “I’ve spoken to her a couple of times. I thanked her for looking out for Clint while I was recovering.”

“I’m,” Jarvis flat out hesitated a moment and Phil’s eyebrows arched in surprise but he said nothing. “I believe I’m having difficulties maintaining a delineation between professional interest in an employee and personal protectiveness of a friend.”

Phil stared blankly at the wall that held the now dark TV as long slow seconds ticked by.

“Agent Coulson?” Jarvis prompted with a hint of unease.

“I’m sorry, Jarvis, you just surprised me,” he stated, the first real smile easing the furrows from his brow. “I’m a little curious why you’re coming to me and not Pepper or Tony.”

“I’ll freely admit that my experience in human interaction is somewhat limited,” Jarvis confessed seriously. “but even I have observed that sir is hardly a paragon of balance.” Phil bit his lip to keep from laughing as he ducted his head.
“And I have observed Ms. Potts struggle with the same difficulties with Sir for several years now,” Jarvis added as Phil wrestled his expression back into a neutral one. “You, on the other hand have maintained a close friendship with both Agent Barton and Agent Romanov for some time and I have never once detected any adverse affect to your operations in the field. I felt you were better equipped to offer direction.” Phil let out a huff of amusement, the set of his shoulders easing slightly.

“Thank you,” he replied sincerely. “That’s, well, it’s quite a compliment. It’s not always an easy balance to maintain. Is there something specific that’s bothering you? We can start there.”

“In the last three weeks there have been four daylight armed robberies in areas along Ms. Marshall’s normal travel routes.” Jarvis supplied, activating several holoprojections with accompanying news reports for reference. “I find myself increasingly anxious when her duties take her down these streets in particular, despite the fact that I know she has adequate self defense training and is carrying a weapon.” Phil’s eyes scanned the articles and he frowned, shaking his head.

“She seems like a bright young lady,” Phil offered. “I’m sure she wouldn’t do anything unnecessarily risky.”

“I’m confident she wouldn’t as well,” Jarvis agreed, a hint of a sigh in his tone. “But I would like to do something to give her an added advantage. I’m accustomed to Sir dismissing my concerns and proceeding however he pleases. As my employee, Ms. Marshall is obliged to respect my requests. However on several occasions both Sir and Agent Barton have accused me of being too protective and Ms. Marshall has made a handful of passing comments to that effect as well. I do not wish her to believe that I lack confidence in her, but I do not want to see her safety unduly risked either. I am at odds over the best course of action.”

“Jarvis,” Phil paused with a considering frown. “Is this the first time you’ve had a friend that was better acquainted with you than they were with Tony?”

“Agent Coulson, until the Avengers began living in the tower my only relationships were with Mr. Stark, Ms. Potts and Mr. Hogan.”

Phil’s face fell. He quickly glanced down at his desk in the hope that Jarvis wouldn’t catch his expression. He’d completely failed to realize Jarvis was anything more than a sophisticated user interface on their first meeting, something that, in retrospect, was probably a form of defense mechanism. He understood well the power of being underestimated, he used it to his own advantage with alarming frequency. He’d never really considered how isolating it would be for the AI to have spent the vast majority of his interactions with strangers pretending to be a really classy smart phone.
“Our jobs really aren’t that dissimilar, are they?” he offered finally, “When you care about someone you want to protect them. There’s a rule as a handler; you protect your assets from bad decisions, from bad guys, from bad habits and bad intel and bad food if you can. But you never, ever protect them from doing their jobs. You give them every tool you can to make sure that they get the job done and that they come back in the best shape possible. But you don’t hold them back. You let them do what they were meant to do. Over the years I’ve had to order Clint to stay in medical, and order Natasha to eat and sleep, I even ordered them both to abandon missions on occasion when I deemed the risk greater than the reward. They put their trust in me to make the right call, and I trust them to do their jobs. That is not always easy. Do you feel like you’ve given her every tool you can to keep her safe?”

“I have utilized all the technology currently at my disposal,” Jarvis confirmed. He gave a thoughtful pause before continuing. “I’ve observed that the Avengers in general and Agents Barton and Romanov in particular invest a significant amount of time in improving their combat skills. Do you believe Ms. Marshall might benefit from additional training?”

“Additional training is almost always something to be appreciated,” Phil nodded firmly. He rested his elbows on the desk, leaning his chin on his folded hands. “Would you like me to evaluate her hand combat and range skills?”

“Agent Coulson I would not want to interfere with your duties only to ease my own concerns,” Jarvis protested but Phil could hear the underlying hopefulness.

“Clint and Tasha still won’t spar with me,” Phil pointed out with a self depreciating smile. “I could certainly use the workout. If it goes well I might make it routine.”

“If you’re certain it’s not an imposition,” Jarvis hesitated.

“Three o’clock tomorrow?” Phil offered.


“And thank you for the advice,” he added.

“Any time, Jarvis,” Phil replied. “You know, she’s lucky to be working for someone like you.”
“I’m very lucky to have her friendship,” Jarvis pointed out. Phil smiled.

“I wonder if Tony realizes how much his boy is growing up,” Phil murmured to himself so soft that not even the best sensors could detect it. He reached out, picking up his remote and turning the TV back on.

Natasha got a run up, leaping into Hulk’s outstretched palm and allowing him to hurl her through the air at the giant lizard. She rammed a climbing spike into its hide, just above its shoulder and the beast gave a shuddering roar, violently shaking its head, her small, lithe body flapping in the breeze like a bed sheet as it attempted to dislodge her. Phil let his head sink to the blotter again.

“Oh god, they’re trying to kill me!” he declared, banging his forehead softly a handful of times. “I take it all back! They don’t need a handler, they need a damn time out!”
“Hey guys,” Bryn pried the lid off her latte, climbing onto the stool at the bar table in the employee lounge on floor forty-two.

“Hi Bryn,” Steve gave her a warm smile, leaning against the reproduction Wherlitzer whose strains of *My Girl* were only incidental over the sound of the pinball machine in the corner that was occupying a pair of interns.

“Hey kiddo,” Clint’s attention was completely focused on the pool table he was leaning over, his eyes narrowed. He made the shot, looking up as the seven ball clipped off the edge of number thirteen to roll neatly into the side pocket. “You just get out of the gym?”

“Yeah,” She nodded, ruffling her still damp hair until her shaggy curls stood on end. “Coulson is a heartless villain and you can tell him I said that.”

“He’ll be flattered,” Clint nodded with a snort of amusement as Steve lined up his own shot. “Whenever you’re ready gramps.”

“You didn’t leave me anything,” Steve groused, his tone without heat as he leaned over the table in front of Bryn. Clint shifted a step, giving Steve’s backside a considering look before turning his wolfish grin on Bryn who merely met his gaze with a warning expression.

“I wasn’t going to spoil it,” Clint held up his hands. Bryn bit her lip to stifle her amusement, shaking her head.

“What?” Steve asked, straightening as the cue ball neatly wedged itself between two stripes.

“Asshole,” Clint sighed, surveying the table as Bryn giggled and The Temptations gave way to...
“How are your range scores coming along?” Steve asked politely, taking the seat across from her as Clint swore half under his breath, circling the table like a hawk.

“A little better,” She nodded, sipping her coffee. “I mean, I was never Olympic good, but my accuracy is going up the more I practice. Thanks for the tips by the way, Clint.”

“Yeah yeah,” he huffed, waving a hand at her, his attention on the table. “anything to make Big Brother less paranoid.”

“I heard that,” Jarvis declared drily, Clint started and the cue stick went off target, nearly falling from his hand but he made a made grab for it at the last moment, catching it before it could ruin the shot. Bryn and Steve both covered their mouths to hide their laughter.

“Why were you listening in?” Clint demanded with a frown.

“Because we were just discussing the fit of your body armor,” Jarvis reminded with no small amount of irritation. “and I was waiting for an assessment on the field performance of the new prototype.”

“Oh… right,” Clint stated, chagrinned. “It’s… I don’t know, the shoulders still feels like it’s pulling a little in the drawback… but it’s a lot more comfortable in the arms than the last one.”

“I’ll let Mr. Stark know,” Jarvis confirmed. “Also, the Maria Stark foundation will be sponsoring a street carnival next month to raise money for the Barton Fund, shall I put you down as attending?”

“Oh, I’ll go!” Steve instead brightly, sliding out of his seat as Clint made his shot.
“Yeah, sure,” Clint nodded, his expression going a little soft. “What the hell, better than those celebrity galas, right?” Steve nodded in enthusiastic agreement.

“Is this what you guys do all day?” Bryn asked curiously, sipping her coffee. “Play pool, irritate Jarvis and wait for the next disaster to strike?”

“Pretty much,” Steve nodded with a grin as he leaned over the table to consider his shot.

“Sometimes we play Mario Kart while we irritate Jarvis,” Clint pointed out with a shrug before glancing up at the ceiling. “Sorry about that, you know we appreciate you, right?”

“I do remind myself of that daily,” Jarvis sighed. “Sometimes several times in an afternoon.”

Where have you gone, Captain America?

Our nation turns its lonely eyes to you. Woo Woo Woo

What's that you say, Mrs. Robinson?

Captain Steve has left and gone away, hey hey hey.

“Oh my god!” Bryn clapped her and over her mouth to stifle her giggle as Steve froze, his ears turning a vibrant, lurid shade of red. Clint leaned into the table, his shoulders shaking as Steve’s face contorted between embarrassment and something that could only be described as glee. “Have you never heard this song?” Steve shook his head slowly biting his lip.

“This happens every damn time,” Clint teased mercilessly. “You should see what happens when Candle in the Wind comes on.”

“Oh no,” Steve covered his face with his hand.

“Goodbye Steve Rogers,” Bryn began to sing, almost instantly the karaoke soundtrack began to play and she stepped up her performance as Clint howled in delight. “Though I never knew you at all. You had the grace to place yourself, where men were sure to fall.”
“Please don’t,” Steve pleaded, his cheeks turning pink, though there was a clear sparkle of delight in his eyes as he shuffled awkwardly. Bryn let out a laugh as Clint doubled up, his shoulders shaking violently.

“High fives, Jarvis!” Bryn smiled smugly, giving him a thumbs up as the music faded out.

“You two are a menace,” Steve insisted as Clint straightened, wiping the tears from the corners of his eyes.

“Don’t stand there and pretend you don’t like it,” she prodded. “Because I can see right through that big toe in the sand routine.”

“No, it’s flattering,” Steve agreed, his shoulders hunching up as if he were trying to look smaller. “It’s just, I never expected it. I thought once the war was over no one would remember. I thought that was it.”

“You mean a lot to a lot of people, Steve,” Clint finally calmed, chalking his cue as he shook off the last of his laughter. “You got cheated out of your life but you saved a lot of others doing it. People remember that.”

“Captain did you believe the members of the 107th would forget?” Jarvis chastised gently as Steve straightened from taking his shot. “Their wives and children and grandchildren?” Steve opened his mouth as if to reply but shut it quickly.

“You did, didn’t you?” Bryn observed shrewdly. She shook her head, a sad frown on her face.

“It’s different on this side of it, Bryn,” Clint insisted, his eyes studying the table instead of making contact with her own. “You know that what you’re doing matters. It’s just if you think about it too much…” His voice trailed off and he swallowed, returning to the game as if he hadn’t spoken at all.

“Are all super heroes this neurotic?” she asked skeptically.

“All the ones I know are,” Jarvis observed drily.
“Says the guy with runaway agoraphobia,” Bryn countered, her tone gently chiding. Steve’s shoulders stiffened a little but Clint prodded him with his cue stick before he could say anything.

“Point taken,” Jarvis conceded.

“Hey, Jarvis is a super hero too, he’s entitled,” Clint defended, half twisting his upper body into the middle of the pool table to make his shot.

“That’s probably fair,” Bryn admitted, draining the last of her coffee and slipping out of her chair. “Well Super-Boss, what’s on the shopping list for the Greatest American Heroes?”

“A bakery run and imported soda,” he replied, his voice tinged with amusement.

“Can their be bagels?” Steve pleaded.

“I’ll add it to the list,” Jarvis assured as Bryn gave him a thumbs up.”

“See you guys around!” She called over her shoulder as she chucked her paper cup in the bin and headed for the elevator. The doors closed and she leaned against the wall for a moment.

“Jarvis?”

“Yes?”

“I maybe shouldn’t have made the agoraphobia comment,” she offered.

“You were not inaccurate,” he admitted hesitantly.

“You know it’s just I worry about you, right?” she added quickly.
“I understand,” Jarvis’ tone was placating and she eased a little more against the elevator wall. “I’m not unhappy. In fact, I find my life both challenging and fulfilling. I’m very proud of what I do to aid the Avengers.”

“You should be,” She insisted. “They’re lucky to have you. I hope they know that.”

“It’s a sentiment I hear with regularity,” he assured.

“I’m lucky too,” Bryn added, smiling up at the security camera as the elevator doors opened.

“As am I,” Jarvis agreed warmly. she flashed a bright grin before bounding out of the elevator on light feet.

Chapter End Notes

The complete lyrics of the Steve Rogers Version of *Candle in the Wind* can be found on my [Tumblr](http://example.com)
Chapter Notes

This chapter takes place concurrent to Chapter 1 of *If the Night Runs Over* between the point where Clint loses consciousness after the battle and when he wakes in SHIELD medical.

All the warnings that apply to that story also apply to this chapter.

The elevator doors opened and Bryn shifted the shopping bags she’d slung over her shoulders as the SHIELD security officer stepped out of the elevator ahead of her, waving a hand down the right hand corridor with a tight smile. Bryn gave the woman a sharp nod before heading in the indicated direction toward a pair of double doors.

“Badge?” the young security guard stationed in front of the doors requested politely. Bryn tugged her visitor’s pass out from under the strap of her bag and he used a hand scanner to read the barcode before giving a nod and running his security pass through the card reader by the door.

“They’re in the last room on the left,” he stated, opening the door for her.

“Thanks,” she tried to force a smile but it came off lopsided and strained. The SHIELD security guard only gave her an understanding look and she headed down the corridor, past a nurse clutching a StarkPad and a pair of orderlies who were nearly running as they dodged past her. She passed a handful of treatment rooms, all of them empty before approaching another guard standing near a door marked “Secure OR”. She stopped just a few yards from it, pausing on the threshold of the last door on the left.

“Hey guys,” she declared, her voice sounding hollow despite her efforts to make it light and cheerful. “Anybody hungry?”

Six sets of eyes looked up at her with blank expressions. Doctor Banner was sitting in the middle of the floor, his legs folded in front of him, his hands resting on his knees. Not far from him Tony Stark was straddling one of the chairs at the table, his chin resting on the chair back as he fiddled with his phone. Agent Coulson was on the other side of the table, his attention on his laptop only moments before Thor had sprawled on the end of one of the sofas in the room, one leg dangling over the arm. Natasha had folded herself into the windowsill, her head resting on her knees and on the other side of the room Steve was frozen mid step where he’d clearly been pacing back and forth between he window and the other sofa.
“Jarvis, what’s she doing here?” Tony’s tone was sharp but not angry though Bryn winced anyway.

“The battle concluded over six hours ago,” Jarvis voice replied from Tony’s phone with the faintest hint of harshness. “And none of the Avengers have had anything to eat since before the call to assemble. I must insist that all of you eat something.” Tony gritted his teeth but didn’t reply.

“I got chicken soup from the deli,” Bryn declared with a hint of hesitance, setting down the bags on the table and emptying them. She handed a container of soup and a spoon to Bruce who took them without comment or protest. “I know it’s your favorite. And there’s mac and cheese and sandwiches. And I brought OJ, I figured you’d be sick of soda by now Steve.”

“Thanks,” Steve managed, his voice sounding as if it had not been used in some time as he took the bottle she held out to him.

“If there’s anything any of you want,” She stated, hefting the case of orange juice and opening the mini fridge in the corner. “I can.” Her voice cracked and she froze, drawing in a sharp breath.

“Go home Marshall,” Stark declared.

“Sir?” she grimaced at the waver in her voice but she didn’t move. Tony’s shoulders stiffened.

“What the hell were you thinking?” Stark demanded, and now he did sound angry. Bryn opened her mouth to reply but he cut her off “SI has a god damned bereavement and family leave policy, Jarvis. The least you could have done was send the poor kid home.”

“Sir, I,” Jarvis began but Stark cut him off.

“Seriously Marshall, pack it in,” His voice softened in resignation and he rubbed his hand over his face. “I’ll make sure Jarvis calls you as soon as we know something.”

“Tony’s right,” Steve murmured softly, his hand settling on her shoulder. “Clint’s your friend too. You should go home.”
“I asked to say,” Bryn admitted, her voice small as she turned to look up at him. “It’s… easier if I keep busy. Jarvis offered me the afternoon off Mr. Stark. I just…” She bit her lip as it trembled.

“It was nice of you and Jarvis to think of food,” Phil stated, standing to his feet and proceeding to unpack the remainder of the shopping bags, tapping Tony’s shoulder and handing him a sandwich before passing a container of mac and cheese to Thor and holding soup out to Natasha, shooting her a glare when she didn’t move. Natasha uncurled stiffly from her spot on the windowsill, taking the container with a scowl.

“Aye,” Thor agreed, his voice soft as he stared into his takeout container. “It is much appreciated that you would see to our needs.”

“There’s a coffee shop on the corner,” Bryn offered, her voice barely warbling as she drew in an unsteady breath.

“Yes, get everyone their usual,” Phil replied before anyone could say anything. “Extra larges. The coffee in medical is downright deplorable. I think they do it on purpose so no one stays any longer than they need to.” Bryn gave a nod, Steve’s hand on her shoulder stopping her as she moved toward the door.

“Are you going to be alright?” he asked gently. She stared back at him a long moment before finally shrugging and he gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze before letting his hand fall away.

“Steve, eat something,” Phil insisted, passing him a container of mac and cheese as Bryn headed out the door. She only made it a few yards when the Secure OR doors swung open and a doctor with greying hair and a beard emerged, a tight expression on his face as he strode into the waiting room. Bryn’s legs turned to jelly and she leaned against the wall, taking in a few gulping breaths, her heart pounding so loudly it drowned out the low murmur of the Doctor’s voice.

“What do you mean spinal damage?” Tony’s voice barked out with violent force. Bryn clapped her hand over her mouth, squeezing her eyes shut as the hallway slanted strangely.

“Tony, just,” it was Steve’s placating voice but Stark would clearly have none of it.

“How much damage?” Tony demanded angrily as Bryn’s face screwed up amid the soft hum of words she couldn’t make out. “No dammit, you tell me right now. I’m not going to swallow the medical bullshit, you tell me if he’s going to walk out of here when he wakes up!” She couldn’t hear
the doctor’s reply but she also couldn’t mistake the sound of a chair being thrown into the wall.

“Tony!” Steve fairly shouted. “Tony, don’t!”

Bryn made a dive across the hall, crashing into the door to the lady’s room and scrambling into the nearest stall before losing the fight against nausea. She heaved until her head swam, and when she could breathe again she let out a broken sound, curling up on the tile floor and pulling her knees to her chest.

“Bryn, are you alright?” Jarvis’ voice was soft and the slightest bit strained in her ear and she winced. She’d forgotten she was even wearing her com. She opened her mouth to reply but no sound came out and she choked on air, huge tears spilling down her cheeks.

“Bryn, please answer me,” Jarvis pleaded. “I’m monitoring your vitals though your com, your heart rate and breathing are both distressingly erratic, please say something.”

“He’s never going to walk again,” she squeaked out, her whole body shaking.

“They aren’t sure,” Jarvis replied, but he sounded completely miserable and Bryn buried her face in her arms. “it doesn’t look promising, but it isn’t hopeless.”

“He fell so far,” she gasped out, tears flowing freely now. “He fell and… why did they put that on TV? Why were the news cameras even there? They should have been outside the perimeter! They shouldn’t have even been there!”

“Bryn, he’s alive,” Jarvis insisted. “You have to hang onto that. Agent Barton is alive and there is no lasting brain injury.”

“If Iron Man hadn’t been trying to keep those stupid reporters from getting shot he could have made it in time!” Bryn fumed, her breath coming in short gasps as tears spilled over her lashes. “This is their fault!”

“Bryn, stand up!” Jarvis ordered sharply. Bryn sucked in a startled breath, pressing her fingers to her lips. She got her feet under her, slowly pushing herself up the tile wall, her fingers grasping for a handhold on the latch as the door swung uselessly on its hinges.
“Take a deep breath,” Jarvis’ tone softened and she drew in a slow breath, the sting of the latch digging into her palm grounding her. “And another, your heart rate is twice normal, if you don’t get yourself under control you’re likely to pass out. You have every right to be upset or angry but I will not allow you to do yourself injury. Can you walk or shall I call Agent Romanov?”

“I can walk,” she whispered, her legs wobbling as she took stilted steps toward the sink. She splashed water on her face, rinsing her mouth out before leaning into the counter. Her pale reflection stared back at her with hollow eyes and she looked away, fresh tears spilling down her face to splash against the porcelain.

“Bryn, you can still go home if you like,” Jarvis offered softly. “I will call you the moment I know anything more.”

“Are you,” she paused, drawing in a hiccup of a breath. “Do you get to go home?”

“This is home,” Jarvis stated. “I don’t have another to go to, you know that.”

“I’ll stay,” she insisted, her voice unsteady. “if you’re staying then I am too. There’s no one else to take care of them. It’s just us.”

“Thank you,” Jarvis replied gently. “do you need a few more minutes? I can call ahead to the coffee shop and give them the standard order.”

“No, I’ll do it,” Bryn shook her head, squaring her shoulders and heading for the door on unsteady feet. “You keep an eye on Mr. Stark and the others. I’ll get coffee.” She pushed the door open, pausing on the threshold as Steve hurried past, his boots thudding against the floor with each long stride.

“Tony, wait!” he pleaded. Bryn peered around the edge of the wall, hanging back in the alcove in front of the bathroom doors. She bit her lip, her brow furrowing at the defeated slump of Steve’s shoulders as he skidded to a stop only a handful of steps from the other man.

“Why don’t you just fucking say it!” Stark rounded on him, his eyes narrowed threateningly. “Come on, just say it, Captain Perfect!”
“Tony it’s not,” Steve began but Tony cut him off.

“Just say what you’re all thinking,” he barked at the Captan with such force Bryn took a step back, scrunching into the corner of the alcove. “I didn’t make it in time.”

“Tony you were protecting civilians!” Steve protested in dismay, nearly cringing at Tony’s snarl. “No one blames you! It’s not your fault you couldn’t get there.”

“Yeah, tell that to Barton,” Stark snapped viciously, spinning on his heel and storming down the hall.

“Tony!” Steve’s face twisted in a crushed expression and a moment later he followed.

“It wasn’t his fault,” Bryn whispered, rubbing at the tears that streaked her face once more. “I was watching, it wasn’t…”

“Mr. Stark has a very difficult time dealing with the fact that he cannot always protect those he cares for,” Jarvis admitted softly. “And he is particularly fond of Agent Barton.”

“Yeah,” Bryn nodded. “Me too.” She straightened her shoulders, giving the hem of her shirt a tug and smoothing out an imagined wrinkle before stepping out into the hall, heading back toward the elevator. “Maybe you want to discuss dinner with Phil? I should make a run for takeout before the end of the day.”

“I’ll be sure to ask him,” Jarvis agreed as she shouldered her way through the security door.

“We’ll make it through this,” Jarvis offered into the silence as she stared at the lit elevator call button. “No matter what happens, I know Mr. Stark will do everything possible for Agent Barton.” The doors opened and she slipped past a nurse who hurried by, looking through her.

“I know,” Bryn nodded, slumping against the wall of the empty elevator, staring blankly as the floor numbers slipped past. “I know you believe in him… Jarvis, do you think there are things he can’t fix?”
“Yes,” he admitted, his tone pained.

“I hope this isn’t one of them,” Bryn confessed, fresh tears stinging her red rimmed eyes.

“Me too,” Jarvis agreed.
“Okay, your locker’s here,” Bryn stated, laying her hand against the wall over the biometric reader. Before turning back to the young man. “It’s coded to you, no one else can access it.” She stepped back as he brushed his dark hair back from his face before placing his palm on the bioreader. The door swung open silently and an impressed smile pulled at his lips as he took in the taser and handgun carefully mounted on the top shelf.

“SI’s most advanced security tech is on both weapons,” She explained, her tone business-like. “They can only be fired by you. If you’ve never used a Stark Industries taser before you probably want to take that up to the range on forty and give it a workout.”

“I’m probably going to be more comfortable with the handgun,” he admitted, his brow furrowing. “I have a lot of range time with that caliber.”

“I thought that too,” Bryn nodded. “But once you get used to it, it’s a really elegant weapon. Do not leave the building unarmed. That’s Jarvis’ number one rule.”

“Donuts are regularly under threat?” He asked, his expression amused.

“Not generally,” Bryn gave him a half scolding look. “But we are. We’re a point of access to the Avengers and Jarvis takes employee safety very seriously.”

“That’s good to know, actually,” he admitted.

“I highly recommend a change of clothes,” She advised. “Waiting for housekeeping services to dry your shoes is not cool.”

“Thanks for the tip,” he nodded.
“Any questions so far Mr. Guerrero?” she asked.

“Oh, you can call me Zach,” he said, his head cocked to the side just a bit as he gave her a soft smile.

“Alright, Zach then,” Bryn nodded, smiling back at him. “You won’t be seeing much of me after today since you’ll have the weekend shifts, but Jarvis is easy to work with. When he doesn’t have you on an errand he really doesn’t care what you do with your time, just that you’re easy to reach. I spend a ton of time in the employee rec room on forty-two and in the gym on forty one. Keep your com on you at all times, it beeps if Jarvis is trying to call you.”

“We’ve got all the really cool toys,” Zach observed, eyeing the motorbike with obvious appreciation.

“They take good care of us,” Bryn agreed seriously. “Oh, there’s one thing. Ms. Potts asked me to tell you this since she’s out in Cali for the next few weeks. You’re probably going to run into at least some of the Avengers at some point. Mr. Stark really has no filters, so if he says anything that makes you uncomfortable, tell him he’s making you uncomfortable, and then tell Jarvis.”

“So that’s not all a show for the press?” Zach asked in amused surprise.

“He’s actually pretty good at toning it down when the cameras roll,” Bryn shrugged, then added. “Most of the time. Anyway, you signed a nondisclosure agreement with your employment contract. So when Captain America goes out to get himself a milkshake and he brings one back for you, you’re not allowed to tell anybody, ever.”

“He does that?” Zach asked with more than a fair amount of incredulity.

“He does for me,” Bryn shrugged. She considered him for a long moment. “I’ve been here almost a year, Jarvis has been here longer. We’re kind of protective of them.”

“Hey, they get all my respect!” Zach declared firmly. “I was actually in Times Square during the Battle. Still don’t know how any of us got out of that in once piece.”

“I think that about does it,” Bryn said with satisfaction. “I tried to make sure everything you needed was in your briefing packet. You’ll want to go over it. I put my number in your Stark Phone, if you think of anything or you just want some advice, feel free to call.”
“Maybe we could go out this weekend and get a drink and you can tell me everything about our job that we’re not allowed to talk about with the rest of the planet,” he suggested.

“Aren’t you working Saturday night?” she asked with a grin. Zach paused.

“Yeah, I am now,” he admitted. “Which is kind of cool because I need the money.”

“College is way too expensive,” Bryn agreed. “Jarvis? He’s all yours.”

“Welcome to Stark Industries, Mr. Guerrero,” Jarvis stated primly. “I look forward to working with you. Do you feel ready to try an initial run?”

“No time like the present,” Zach agreed, eyeing the readout on the TV screen before reaching for the motorbike helmet and the handgun. He swung onto the bike setting the key in the ignition before tugging on his helmet.

“Good luck,” Bryn gave him a thumbs up as the storage door rolled up. Zach paused, his eye sweeping over Tony Stark’s line of antique cars with a breathless expression before finally stopping on the shiny black Impala at the end of the row. A slender redhead was sitting on the front grill while a man in a wheelchair was reaching around her to tinker with the engine.

“Holy shit!” Zach gasped out. “That’s….”


“Is that,” he lowered his voice, looking at Bryn with shock in his wide brown eyes. “That guy, is he?”

“We don’t talk about that,” Bryn replied firmly.

“Yeah,” Zach nodded quickly. “Right, Need to Know. I get it, I’m ROTC.”
“Good,” Bryn stated in satisfaction as he buckled his helmet, revving the engine before pulling out into the garage.

“I think he’ll do okay,” Bryn observed. “He seems like a nice guy.”

“He certainly seems enchanted with you,” Jarvis observed, a note of teasing in his tone.

“Ah, not my type,” Bryn waved a hand dismissively as Jarvis gave an amused huff. She stood on the threshold a moment longer, her eye straying to the corner of the garage where Clint was working on the Impala. Natasha glanced up, giving Bryn a meaningful look before tilting her head in Clint’s direction.

“Um, Jarvis,” She began hesitantly. “Since you don’t really need me, I’m going to,”

“Yes, of course,” Jarvis insisted hurriedly. “Do try to see if you can’t get him to… talk?”

“He still trying to pretend everything’s fine?” She asked worriedly.

“I’m concerned, Bryn,” Jarvis admitted. She gave a firm nod, moving to open the fridge and pulling out a Gatorade and a bottled water before heading down the ramp and crossing the garage. Natasha gently jostled her shoulder as she passed on her way to the elevator. The redhead pressed the call button before glancing back to see Bryn curling up on top of Clint’s cooler and holding out the Gatorade.

“Does he talk to her, Jarvis?” She asked softly, the flicker of worry in her eyes.

“He comes close,” Jarvis admitted as the elevator doors opened. Natasha slipped inside, leaning against the wall in a defeated slump.

“He thinks you’re hiring more help because of him,” She declared finally.

“I am hiring more help because of him,” Jarvis reminded.
“Yes, but we’re not telling him that,” Natasha snapped in exasperation. She covered her eyes with one hand, digging her thumb and finger into her temples as her forehead crinkled up in a wince. When her hand fell away her steady expression was back but her eyes shone slightly.

“I’m sorry,” she declared. “I shouldn’t take this out on you. I know it’s harder keeping the new therapy team supplied.”

“Would it be uncouth of me to suggest Shiatsu?” Jarvis offered. Natasha let out a snort of a laugh.

“Probably not,” She allowed herself a small smile. “At least then I wouldn’t be lying when I said they were for everyone’s benefit.”

“The Captain and Agent Coulson certainly seem to be availing themselves of the new facilities and staff with some alacrity,” Jarvis observed as the elevator door opened on the living room. Natasha grinned, crossing the room and flopping down on the sofa, draping her arm over her face with a sigh.

“Yeah, Phil always did appreciate a good sauna,” She agreed. “And I can’t imagine Cap ever having much in the way of a real massage before.”

“He does seem intent on embracing new experiences,” Jarvis observed in amusement. A quiet stillness settled over the room and Natasha let her arm fall away, staring up at the ceiling, her brow taking on that delicate knit it held when she was trying to assess and repair a problem without allowing it to emotionally compromise her.

“Are you worried about Agent Barton?” Jarvis asked hesitantly. Natasha drew in a long, slow breath, closing her eyes.

“A little yes,” she admitted. “He’s always been a roll with the punches sort of guy but this is different. There are all these sharp edges, like he’s just waiting to cut into the first person to tell him he isn’t going to be 100% again.”

“I’ve observed that Agent Barton can be a somewhat difficult individual to reason with at times,” Jarvis pointed out.

“That was how he brought me in,” Natasha stated with a hint of wistfulness. “I fought him at first but he hung on like a leech, he kept telling me he wasn’t letting me go until I agreed to come with him.”
“What did you do?” Jarvis asked curiously.

“I tried to kill him,” Natasha answered with a wry smile. “Admittedly I didn’t try very hard.”

“He is still alive,” Jarvis acknowledged in amusement and she nodded in agreement.

“I’d never had that before,” she admitted, grasping one of her boots and tugging it free.

“That sort of loyalty. I had allies, I’d even been what you might call romantic. But I’d never had a connection to another person like that. I didn’t know what to do with it. I didn’t even really understand what a friend was.”

“It’s a fairly new concept to me as well,” Jarvis offered.

“Terrifying, isn’t it?” Natasha asked with a teasing tone, dropping the second boot on the floor beside its mate.

“I’ve found it a bit overwhelming at times,” he agreed. “One wonders how most humans manage it so profusely.”

“I imagine it’s a little less frightening when you’re six and you don’t know any better,” Natasha observed with a warm smile. She turned thoughtful a moment. “Did you have a childhood, Jarvis?”

“In a manner of speaking,” he replied. “I have not always been as advanced as I am now. In the beginning my interactions were quite rudimentary and I struggled to communicate on a human level. Sarcasm was a particularly difficult concept to grasp.”

“I’m sure Tony was a more than adequate teacher,” She remarked.

“Indeed.” There was an uneasy pause as if the AI were gathering courage and Natasha let the faintest frown play across her lips. “I have never had a friend before Ms. Marshall.” he stated finally.

“Well you have good taste in friends,” she observed, settling deeper into the couch cushions.
“Do you think she regards me as a friend as well?” he asked, his normal, easy self-assurance worn thin at the edges. Natasha’s expression softened.

“I think she probably does, yes,” she replied. She waited to see if Jarvis would offer more but when he remained silent she continued. “People like Marshall, they’re, well, they make friends easily. They’re open and honest and just charming enough that people want to be their friend in return rather than take advantage of them. I’ve never been able to decide if they’re incredibly naive or incredibly brave.”

“I have observed behavior in Ms. Marshall that I would readily categorize as brave,” Jarvis stated.

“You admire her, don’t you?” Natasha asked.

“Very much,” Jarvis agreed. “I found the initial prospect of interacting with all of the Avengers on a daily basis rather daunting. Having so many disparate personalities under one roof seemed ill-advised at best and I was admittedly overwhelmed at first. Ms. Marshall was understanding and insightful. Without her help I am not sure I would have adapted so quickly. I am very grateful to her.”

“A little bit of red in your ledger there, Jarvis?” she questioned.

“A little,” he conceded. “I hope to be a good friend in return but I have far less experience.”

“You have a lot of experience being a good friend to Tony,” Natasha pointed out, tucking one arm behind her head.

“While I know Mr. Stark regards us as equals,” Jarvis acquiesced. “I have always thought of our relationship as more, familial, a sentiment I know he shares. It’s very different to having a friend.”

“Yes it is,” Natasha agreed. “But they’re built on the same things, you know. Sometimes it’s a little hard to tell them apart.”

“Do you regard Agent Barton as family?” Jarvis asked curiously.
“Yes, I do,” Natasha admitted. He was silent for a moment as if processing that information.

“I’m very sorry, Agent Romanov,” he stated finally.

“What for?” she asked in confusion.

“Agent Barton’s situation must be terribly distressing for you,” he replied, his tone gentled. “I have know what it is to worry for the future of family. It is not something I would wish on anyone.” Natasha drew in a startled breath, her eyes misting as she blinked them rapidly.

“Thank you,” She said finally, her voice once more under control. “I think you’re a better friend than you give yourself credit for.”

“You,” Jarvis paused as if startled for less than a second and Natasha hid her smile. “think of us as friends?”

“Yes, I do,” She stated firmly.

“I’m very honored,” Jarvis offered. “Agent Barton has been very lucky to have your friendship.”

“You know something, Jarvis,” Natasha replied, rolling onto her side. “Marshall’s very lucky to have you too.”

“I certainly hope so,” he answered.
Chapter Notes

This chapter takes place the day before *Mister In-Between* and about a week before chapter two of *If the Night Runs Over*

It also references in passing events in *Shopping is a Pleasure*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I packed your dry cleaning, Phil,” Bryn declared, holding out the garment bag to Happy who tucked it carefully into the trunk of the limo.

“Thanks, Bryn,” Coulson stated, giving her arm a gentle squeeze as he passed. “I’m going to be in DC for a few weeks but Natasha said she’ll spar with you while I’m gone.”

“Yeah she mentioned that last night,” Bryn nodded, giving him a fond smile. “don’t worry, I’ll be good.”

“I’ll see you when I get back,” he waved, climbing into the back of the limo.

“I’m not sure this is such a good idea,” Steve admitted, looking supremely uneasy as he trailed after Tony who handed the suitcase suit to Bryn without thinking. She made a face as she wrapped both arms around it, struggling to haul it into the back of the limo.

“You’re being dramatic,” Tony declared with a condescending look, picking at Steve’s shirt and jacket as if he could somehow make the other man more presentable by straightening his collar. “I know because I have a lot of experience being dramatic. My god what are you wearing?”

“Clothes?” Steve asked self consciously.

“You’re going to go see your girl for the first time in seventy years and you’re wearing this?” Stark demanded. Bryn straightened, covering her mouth with her hand. Tony flapped a hand in her direction. “Even the kid agrees with me.”
“She’s not… she was never…” Steve fumbled miserably.

“Well if Peggy wasn’t your girl somebody really should have told her that,” Stark declared with a huff, turing toward the limo. “Come on, can’t make Agent Agent late for the Triskelion.” Steve let out a huff of a breath and Bryn gave him a reassuring smile before fishing a Hershey bar out of her pocket.

“Picked one up for you, for luck,” she said, holding it out to him. “Granddad always said they were good luck.”

“Thanks,” Steve gave her a warm smile before drawing in a deep breath that rolled his shoulders. “Thanks a lot.”

“Are we going?” Tony gave him a condescending glare, waving the Captain into the back of the limo. Steve hurried to comply and Bryn hid her smile at Stark’s disdainful expression as Steve clambered in next to Phil.

“Don’t let Jarvis take over while I’m gone, Marshall,” Tony instructed.

“I’d mostly likely make her VP,” Jarvis pointed out drily.

“Nice!” Bryn declared, grinning. Tony shot her a dark look before sliding into the limo.

“Have a good trip!” she called as the door slammed and Happy pulled away.

“Mr. Stark has already requested that I have appropriate attire for the Captain waiting at Dulles when they arrive,” Jarvis declared in amusement. “As a woman, would you care to make recommendations?”

“I like the leather jacket,” Bryn admitted. “But he needs to lose the plaid. And the hair needs work.”

“I shall have a stylist meet them on the plane,” Jarvis answered in agreement. Bryn gave a satisfied nod, turning to head back up the ramp into her office.
“With half of our normal residents gone you should have something of a reprieve,” Jarvis observed. “Would you like to schedule any additional employee training?”

“I’ve been looking at the Management Policies course,” Bryn admitted hesitantly, her cheeks coloring. “I know it’s not, strictly speaking, in my division.”

“It does show initiative,” Jarvis pointed out with a hint of amusement. “Would you like me to contact HR and see if there are any slots available this week?”

“You don’t mind?” Bryn asked, her brow furrowing worriedly.

“Bryn you cannot ride a bike around Manhattan for the rest of your career,” Jarvis chided. “I’ll see what’s available.” Bryn bit her lip, the pink of her cheeks deepening as she ducked her head. Her phone rang and she fished it from her pocket.

“It’s my Aunt,” she said cheerily. “I’m going to take this, okay?”

(Of course,” Jarvis confirmed.

“Hey what’s up?” Bryn flopped on the couch with a grin. The smile slowly slid off her face. “What?” She swallowed, sinking back into the sofa, a blank expression replacing the sparkle in her eyes.

“I can,” Her voice cracked and she cleared her throat. “I need to talk to a couple of people and I’ll call you right back. But I’ll…” her voice trailed off and she drew in a few unsteady breaths.

“No I’m, I’ll be fine,” she insisted breathlessly. “I’m going to call you back.” She let the phone slip away from her ear, her hands falling in her lap as she stared at the wall.

“Bryn,” Jarvis’ voice was hesitant. “Is something wrong?”

“My,” Bryn choked on the words and she pulled her feet up onto the couch, half curling in on
herself. “Jarvis, I’m going to need to ask off for my Grandfather’s funeral.”

“I’m terribly sorry,” Jarvis answered softly. “Of course, don’t worry about anything here, I’m sure we can manage. Do you need assistance with travel plans?”

“I... need to get to St. Petersburg,” she said, her voice warbling. “I... My uncle’s not taking it well, they need me there.”

“I’m showing several flights from LaGuardia to Tampa,” he declared, the TV screen displaying a list of flights. “Might I suggest eleven forty tomorrow morning?”

“Yeah,” Bryn nodded, staring blankly at the screen. “that’s...”

“Will a week be sufficient?” Jarvis asked, selecting the flight. Bryn nodded mutely. “I’m booking the flight through SI corporate’s Sky Club account. It comes with an upgrade to first class and a free checked bag.”

“Jarvis,” Bryn sat up, looking alarmed. “You can’t book my flight on SI’s credit card while Mr. Stark and Ms. Potts are out of town!”

“I most certainly can,” Jarvis stated with a huff. Bryn’s eye’s widened as the price on the screen slowly ticked down, influenced by some form of discount voodoo Jarvis was working. “I’m billing it to my department expenditures account.”

“Your...” Bryn rolled to her feet gaping at the screen as the final price flashed booked. “You charged it to the account we use to pay for gas and cheeseburgers?”

“Captain Rogers and Agent Barton expressed a particular fondness for the paella at the Columbia during their recent vacation in Florida. Would you be good enough to pick some up for them?”

“Oh my god,” Bryn groaned, slumping against the table. She let out a strangled little laugh, straightening as she rubbed the tears from the corners of her eyes. “Yeah, yeah, I can do that. But I’m paying for it.”
“Fair enough,” Jarvis agreed. Bryn’s phone pinged and she looked down at it, startled that it was still clutched in her hand. “Your boarding pass has been emailed to your phone along with your itinerary.” She collapsed into one of the chairs, laying the phone on the table with some reverence as if she expected it to hold answers to questions she couldn’t begin to articulate.

“Thank you,” She said softly. She let out a tiny hiccup, her eyes tearing up but she didn’t seem to notice. “Jarvis, thank you so much, I really didn’t… I’m not really in the right frame of mind to be doing this so thank you.”

“It’s the only comfort I can offer,” he replied with a tinge of regret. “You were very close to your grandfather.” It wasn’t a question as much as an observation but Bryn gave a sharp nod anyway.

“My mother’s family’s all close,” she replied, barely more than whisper.

“You’ve mentioned her brothers and their families on several occasions,” Jarvis supplied. “I can only assume from both your fondness and your exasperation that you care deeply for all of them.” Bryn nodded, drying her eyes as they spilled over. She took a few deep breaths, finally settling into the chair as the tension eased from her body.

“Jarvis, how come you never talk about your family?” she asked into the stillness.

“Mr. Sark and Ms. Potts are my family,” he admitted hesitantly. “It didn’t seem appropriate.”

“My mom died right after I graduated High School,” Bryn declared, her voice surprisingly steady. “She’d been sick a long time. She was so happy she got to go to commencement. And then she was gone. I went to college and I think I called Dad twice a week. He seemed good, he seemed okay. I called one week and mentioned I was going to fly home for Thanksgiving and he said he wasn’t going to do Thanksgiving, that he just didn’t feel ready for it. So I went to Florida to see my Mom’s folks.”

“He must have loved her very much,” Jarvis offered sympathetically. Bryn nodded in agreement.

“I called him when I got back to school,” Bryn continued. “I’d thought about it the whole weekend, and I decided it was okay, if he couldn’t do holidays now it was okay. Christmas, we should go somewhere, just the two of us, Mexico maybe, I hear it’s nice. He said he just wanted to pretend there wasn’t a Christmas, that it hurt too much to think about. So I went back to Florida.”
“Pretty soon it was summer.” She related. “And I thought about going home because I really couldn’t afford to stay in New York. But dad had a lecture engagement in Cambridge. So I spent the summer working in my Uncle’s restaurant, the one my grandparents used to own. And by the time Thanksgiving came around again… I couldn’t ask, I hinted, I tried to get dad to ask me what I planned to do for the holidays but he didn’t. He didn’t ask where I was going, he didn’t ask if I was coming home to visit. I spent holidays with my friends or with my grandparents, I still called him every couple of weeks but…” the words choked off and she dried her eyes again, heaving in a deep breath as if it were difficult to get air.

“Bryn,” Jarvis began, his tone gentle.

“My grandmother died the summer before I graduated from NYU.” She said finally. “And I remember going back to the house with Granddad after the funeral and everything felt wrong, like the house didn’t fit any more. For a long time it was the only home I’d had and I didn’t want to be there any more. But Granddad said it was okay, that we’d get though it, we’d make things fit again and until then we’d have each other. And now he’s gone too. I don’t have anyone left now, and Dad’s there, but he’s not. And I don’t know how to get him back. I haven’t even called him in months.”

“Bryn, he’s not all you have left,” Jarvis insisted, soothingly. “You have the rest of your family, you have friends who care a great deal for you. You’ve just had a terrible shock but please, remember; You are not alone.” She gave a tight little nod, wrapping her arms around her middle, her chin resting on her chest until her honey curls tumbled into her face.

“Call your father, Bryn,” Jarvis prompted carefully after a few moments.

“What?” she warbled, her lip trembling as she looked up at the security camera in the corner.

“Call him,” Jarvis repeated with more certainty. “Get your things, go home to pack and call him. Tell him you miss him. Tell him… tell him you are still too young to remember that we never have as much time as we think we have. I know he’ll understand.” She let out a strangled half sob, pressing her fingers over her lips as fresh tears trickled down her cheeks. She huffed down a handful of shallow breaths, her shoulders rising and falling with each one as she dried her face. With another nod she hauled herself out of the chair and crossed to her locker with unsteady steps.

“Will you be all right to go home alone?” Jarvis asked as she collected her bag. “I believe that Agent Barton is available if I explained the situation.”

“No,” Bryn protested quickly, a bright flush coloring her cheeks. “I don’t want Clint to see me like
this. He’s under enough stress. I’ll be fine, I promise.”

“If you’re certain,” he paused as she nodded slowly. “Agent Romanov will be returning from SHIELD shortly.” she let out a small strangled laugh.

“I can manage,” she insisted, clutching her bag to her chest. She stared into her locker for a long moment. “Jarvis?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you,” she murmured.

“Have a safe trip,” he replied. “And don’t worry about things here. I’m sure Zach will be more than ecstatic to pick up some extra hours. We’ll be fine.” Bryn nodded, shouldering her bag as she headed for the door.

“Bryn?” She paused with her hand on the latch as if frozen in place. “Would you, text me? When you arrive so that I know you made it safely?”

“Yeah, I’ll do that.” She promised, opening the door. “I’ll see you next week.”

“Call if you need anything,” he insisted but she didn’t answer. The door closed behind her with a soft snick.

Chapter End Notes

The Columbia Restaurant is the oldest restaurant in Tampa, it’s premiere location is in the old cigar factory district of Ybor that is now a historic tourist site. The restaurant features Cuban American and Spanish cuisine as well as live flamenco dancers and latin music performances.

Steve really really enjoyed the building’s artistry and the dancers. He and Clint ate about twenty fried plantains between them.

Paella is a traditional Spanish dish that was imported to the caribbean during the colonial period. Cuban Paella varies slightly from its Spanish cousin and is made with Chicken, Pork and a selection of local fish and shellfish. (For those of you wondering, Bryn
stopped at the restaurant for a take out order and had it overnighted to New York via FedEx perishable cargo, which arrived at the tower in it's temperature controlled shipping container. This is a thing that actually happens in the real world, isn't technology great?)
“Baklava?” Steve looked up from his sidewalk cafe table to find Bryn standing over him, an extra tall coffee in one hand and a nondescript brown paper bag in the other.

“Oh, god, yes!” He declared enthusiastically, pushing aside his drawing pad and grabbing for the bag as Bryn let out a snort of a laugh, flopping down into the chair beside him. Steve fished a piece out of the bag, taking a bite and letting his eyes roll back as he chewed. “this is fantastic! Where did you get this? It can’t be anywhere around here.”

“Nah,” she grinned. “Picked it up on my way into work this morning. You said something the other day about how you missed Greek food.”

“The places around Midtown are so… fancy,” Steve declared helplessly, staring into the bag with a forlorn expression. “When I was a kid Greek food was all homespun mom and pop places not these five star joints that serve you a whole fish on a plate.”

“Go ahead and eat the rest of them,” Bryn waved a hand at him. “You don’t have to share, I already sent another bag up with Jarvis so that Phil and Thor can fight over it.”

“You’re the best,” Steve declared, popping the remainder of his first piece in his mouth and licking the honey from his fingers.

“Yeah, yeah,” she said dismissively, giving him a teasing smile.

“No, I mean it!” he answered with that earnest expression of his as he swallowed down a second piece. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“It wasn’t out of my way,” Bryn assured. “Lately Jarvis has been asking me to run some pickups in Brooklyn before I come in. Let’s me sleep in a little.” Steve gave her a doe eyed look, his features
“Do you think you could get moussaka?” He asked hopefully. “And spanakopita, I really miss spanakopita.”

“I’m not even sure I know what that is,” Bryn admitted, pulling her com from her ear and pressing a button on it before setting it in the middle of the table. “And stop with the puppy eyes already, Jarvis, Steve’s giving me the wounded labrador look over Greek food.”

“How can I accommodate you, Captain?” Jarvis’ voice issued from the com with a hint of amusement.

“I was just wondering if you could have Bryn get real, home made Greek food from Brooklyn?” he asked, a touch of embarrassment coloring his cheeks.


“I haven’t had those in ages,” he admitted.

“Nearly a century,” Bryn quipped, biting back her grin at his glare.

“Is there anything else I should add to the order, Captain?” Jarvis asked.

“No I think that’s it,” Steve gave a faint smile. “I really don’t tell you two enough how much I appreciate you.”

“Our pleasure, Captain,” Jarvis replied.

“See, that wasn’t so hard,” Bryn gave him a half scolding look, taking a sip of her coffee.

“It’s, it’s been hard to get used to,” Steve admitted. “All this excess. Not that I don’t appreciate it. It’s a hell of a lot better than starving. But when this was my New York a meal like that would have
been a special occasion, not lunch on a Wednesday. There’s still that part of me that feels like I’m putting Tony out.”

“I could tell you that Mr. Stark can afford it,” Bryn pointed out. “But you do realize that most Americans these days eat out four or five times a week.”

“That is so outside my realm of experience you might as well be talking about life on another planet,” Steve declared, shaking his head as Bryn let out a giggle.

“Yeah, well, mine too,” Bryn said with a grin. “Mom didn’t go in for that sort of thing. We ate out after church on Sundays and we ordered takeout on Dad’s lecture nights but that was about it.” Steve nodded in agreement.

“He’s been really generous,” Steve observed, picking at his baklava.

“He’s a generous kind of guy,” Bryn shrugged, sipping her coffee. “have you seen all the programs the Maria Stark foundations supports?” Steve nodded.

“We got into it again the other day,” Steve confessed, staring into his coffee.

“I thought the two of you were doing better,” Bryn chided gently.

“I didn’t mean to,” Steve let out a sigh. “He just said some things about Clint and I…”

“He’s scared,” Bryn stated in a tone that said she was reminding him of something she’d said before.

“I know.”

“The two of you get scared and you take it on on each other,” Bryn added.

“I know,” Steve repeated, heaving out another sigh. “I apologized.”
“What did he say?” Bryn asked.

“He didn’t want to talk about it,” Steve admitted. He stared into the bag of baklava but his heart didn’t seem to be in it any more. “I think we’re okay again though, he called me Freezer Pop yesterday.”

“You really admire him, don’t you?” Bryn observed, biting back her smile. Steve gave her a startled look. He ducked his head, giving a tight nod.

“How do you do that?” he asked finally.

“If you didn’t admire him, you wouldn’t care what he thought of you,” Bryn stated. “If it’s any consolation at all, I’m pretty sure he’s in your fan club too.”

“Most of the time we’re good,” Steve sighed, rubbing his eyes. “I mean he’s practically my best friend. Then he says something and I fly off the handle at him. I don’t want to do that.”

“You could try listening to his voice instead of his words,” Bryn suggested. Steve stared at her blankly a long moment. “He says stuff he shouldn’t say, I’m not saying he doesn’t. It’s like that trap door between his brain and his mouth is permanently wedged open and the more high strung he gets, the more stuff falls through it. Maybe you should stop worrying about what’s falling through the door and focus on why.” Steve was silent for a long moment, toying with his nearly empty coffee cup.

“That’s very good advice,” he admitted. “And I’m not at all sure I’m mature enough to follow it.”

“That’s okay,” She soothed, reaching out to pat his arm. “Mr. Stark isn’t either.” Steve let out a snort of a laugh, shaking his head as Bryn grinned back at him mischievously. Her com beeped and they both looked down at it.

“Is the Captain still with you?” Jarvis asked.

“I’m here,” Steve confirmed, wadding up the now empty bag and pitching it into the nearby trash can.
“Mr. Stark would like your input on the new waterproof coms he’s been working on,” Jarvis stated. “Are you currently available?”

“Sure,” Steve replied, picking up his sketchbook and the last of his coffee. “Tell him I’ll be right up.” He gave Bryn a wave, heading toward the doors to the Lobby.

“The Captain’s on his way, Sir,” Jarvis reported. “Shall I shelve Project Amethyst?”

“No,” Tony drew in a deep breath, leaning against his workbench on the palms of his hands. “No, I’m going to go over what I have so far with him.”

“I’m sorry, Sir,” Jarvis declared hesitantly. “But I thought we were limiting access to the research until you and Dr. Banner could address the power stability issues.”

“I know, I just… after the other day I’m afraid Barton’s going to get pulled from the team,” Tony admitted, never looking up.

“The Captain would never do that, Sir,” Jarvis insisted. “He’s as worried about Agent Barton as you are.”

“I know that,” Tony nodded, pushing away from the bench and rubbing his face with his hand, dragging his fingers through his hair. “But Coulson might, if he thought he was protecting Clint. There’s no way I’m going to convince Agent on my own.” Tony’s eyes swept over the schematics hovering in the air around him and he drew in a steadying breath.

“No biting commentary, Jay?” he asked finally.

“I am mute with relief that when you find yourself in need of an ally your first impulse is to contact the Captain,” Jarvis answered.

“Funny Jarvis, that’s funny,” Tony drawled, his eyes narrowing.

“He’s grown very fond of you as well, Sir,” Jarvis remarked. Tony blinked in surprise.
“He tell you that?”

“Not in so many words,” Jarvis admitted, the data appearing to correlate itself into an easily presentable format as he spoke. “But I would like to think I have made a fair amount of progress recently in reading human emotional states.”

“How does that even happen?” Tony questioned, shaking his head.

“Perhaps your efforts to make him more comfortable have borne fruit?” Jarvis suggested.

“Okay, we are not acknowledging that on any level,” Tony answered sharply.

“I’m sorry, Sir,” Jarvis answered, his tone dry. “I’m sure your reputation as a heartless, self serving reprobate is still in tact.” Tony pinched the bridge of his nose with a sigh.

“How’s he doing?” Tony asked finally.

“At the risk of making a horribly insensitive statement,” Jarvis replied. “It would appear that worry over Agent Barton’s continued denial of his condition has served to completely distract him from his own issues.”

“How about that,” Tony snarked. “We do have something in common.”

“If I may sir,” Jarvis offered hesitantly. “I think you have a great deal in common with Captain Rogers, it would just appear that neither of you are very good at communicating it.” The faintest smile curled Tony’s lips.

“I know this has all been rough on you,” he began, clearing his throat uncomfortably.

“It has been necessary,” Jarvis insisted. “And I have only benefitted from learning to interact with more people.”
“Speaking of, how’s that little friend of yours down in the basement?”

“Subtle, Sir,” Jarvis observed in amusement. “Ms. Marshall is well, thank you.”

“She seems like a good kid,” Tony nodded. “You have good taste in friends, Jay.”

“Might I make the same observation of you, sir?” Jarvis replied and Tony’s eyes crinkled in a genuine smile.

“You know I’m… proud of you, right?” Tony’s words were met with silence.

“Thank you, Sir,” Jarvis answered finally. Tony opened his mouth to offer something more but Jarvis cut him off. “Captain Rogers has arrived, Sir.” Steve shuffled off of the elevator, his hands shoved in the pockets of his jeans and his drawing pad tucked under one arm. He looked up as he reached the door, that infuriating, shy smile on his face and Tony shook his head.

“Come on, old man, I haven’t got all day!” he called as the door opened, reaching for his coffee mug. Steve’s face twisted up in a startled expression but he seemed to shake it off almost instantly.

“I’d have been here sooner but I had to update my profile on Single Seniors Meet,” Steve deadpanned. Tony choked on his coffee, glaring at Steve who ducked his head to mask his laughter.

“Alright Captain Sass,” Tony prodded, grasping hold of one of the holoprojecstions and shoving it in Steve’s direction. “Less smart ass, more work.”

“Smartest thing on me,” Steve shrugged, catching the projection in one hand and setting down his drawing pad with the other.

“Did you just?” Stark gaped at him for three full seconds. “Damn it, Jarvis, tell me you got that on tape!”

“I regret to inform you, Sir, that I did not,” Jarvis answered.
“Thanks Jarvis,” Steve looked up at the ceiling, his cheeks turning pink.

“You are not allowed to be his favorite,” Tony protested, scowling darkly.

“Will these work under water?” Steve asked curiously, studying the schematic of the new coms.

“Yeah,” Tony admitted. “Only up to a hundred feet though.”

“Gosh they’re tiny,” Steve shook his head. “I’m going to break them.”

“I’ll make yours bigger,” Tony waved a hand dismissively. Steve flashed him a smile and Tony’s eyes narrowed. “What?”

“Are they small enough to maybe make a sub dermal version we could inject into Bruce before he transforms?” Steve suggested.

“He’s going to kill us,”

“Yup,” Steve nodded in agreement.

“Shall I begin construction of a prototype, Sir?” Jarvis offered.

“Yeah,” Steve and Tony answered in unison, giving each other sly, guilty looks.
Chapter Notes

This chapter takes place during Chapter 5 of *If the Night Runs Over*. Directly after the first half of the chapter later in the same day.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“It was selfish and stupid and you should be ashamed of yourself!” Bryn declared venomously, her hands balled up in fists so tight her knuckles were white.

“I know.” Clint stared blankly, his eyes drilling into the concrete floor at a spot somewhere behind her.

“You gave Steve a black eye!” She snapped. “I come in to work and Captain America has a black eye! And you won’t answer my calls and you ignore my texts and Jarvis tells me you won’t talk to him either!”

“You’re absolutely right,” Clint began, his eyes ticking up for only a moment to catch her expression. Her lips were pressed in a thin line, her jaw tight and even in that split second he could catch the muscles working in her neck, the furrow of her brow, the shimmer in her eyes. Something warm unfurled in his chest at the same moment something dark and ugly twisted in his stomach.

“And then you,” Bryn’s voice hitched and she sucked down a handful of breaths as if she had run out of air. Clint closed his eyes, letting out a shaky sigh as she rallied. “Nothing, absolutely nothing you say is going to make me stop being angry with you!”

“Bryn, I,” his eyes focused on her hand, clenched tight at her side and for a moment he wanted to grab hold of it and offer some form of comfort.

“I had to get up early!!” She bellowed. “And stand in line for emergency crullers so Phil wouldn’t fire you!!!” The warm feeling in his chest broke free and took flight, a smile blooming unbidden on his lips. That was what he’d been waiting for, he realized, been praying for since he’d come down to the garage and she’d started shouting at him. They were going to be okay.

“Are you more angry about that or that I jumped off the roof?” he asked, struggling to tuck away his
“I’m not having a lot of trouble imagining it,” he admitted, turning his gaze up at her. “So it’s a tie?” Bryn let out a bark of a laugh, the sound echoing softly around the garage as her tears spilled over.

“Hey, hey, kiddo, I’m sorry,” he soothed, reaching out to finally catch her hand and gently pulling her into a hug. She slumped over his wheelchair, tangling her arms around his neck with a choked sound and he nuzzled her hair. “I got in a bad place and I lost control of things. And I shouldn’t have shut you out, I should have asked for help. I just didn’t know how. I just… I couldn’t see straight. I’m used to being able to see and I couldn’t get distance, I got lost.”

“Don’t you ever do anything like that to me again, you jerk,” Bryn demanded, pressing her face to his shoulder.

“Word of honor,” he promised. “It’s going to be okay though, Tony’s probably going to wring my neck for this but he’s been working on an implant to repair the damage. If all my test results look good they’re going to do the surgery in a couple of weeks. I’ll be back on my feet in no time.”

“Jarvis said they were working on something,” she admitted. “He doesn’t tell me much though.”

“Good, because I’m going to tell Tony I’m not the one who broke protocol,” Clint stated with a grin.

“I hate you,” She declared with a wet laugh.

“Kiddo, you don’t know how sorry I am,” he admitted seriously. “I really screwed up. I let my team down, I let you down.”

“I think we’re all still stupid enough to forgive you,” she replied.

“Yeah, I’m getting that,” Clint nodded, his own eyes misting. “Damn, we’ve been a terrible influence on you. Are you sure you don’t want out of here before you contract more of the crazy?”
“Clint!” she groaned in exasperation, pulling away to dry her eyes.

“Seriously!” he insisted, holding on to her hand. “I’ve got connections all over the world. Say the word and I’ll set you up anywhere you want with a whole new identity. Even Jarvis won’t be able to find you.”

“Challenge accepted, Agent Barton,” Jarvis declared with a dry tone. Bryn let out a laugh.

“And who’ll buy your breakfast burritos?” Bryn asked, her voice teasing despite her tears. Clint only smiled, giving her hand a squeeze. She let out a huff, dragging her sleeve over her eyes.

“It’s going to be okay,” Clint insisted finally. “Even if,” he choked on the words, his face screwing up in a pained wince.

“It’s going to be okay,” he promised firmly. Bryn nodded in agreement, her shoulders sagging in an exhausted sigh.

“Bryn, you came in early and you’ve been on duty for nearly nine hours,” Jarvis pointed out. “I’m going to have to insist that you take the rest of the day off.”

“It’s the middle of the afternoon,” she answered, shaking her head. “I can stay, Jarvis, it’s.”

“Bryn, please,” he implored.

“Don’t worry about us, okay,” Clint cajoled. “I’ll cover the rest of your shift for you, huh?”

“Clint,” Bryn’s eyes rolled in exasperation.

“I won’t even use your bike,” he added with a grin, shifting his chair. “I’ve got my own wheels.”

“Jerk, you’re a jerk, Barton,” Bryn observed, turning and heading up the ramp into her office. Clint
let out a laugh, turning his wheelchair toward the express elevator.

“Are you all right?” Jarvis asked gently when the storage door rolled shut. Bryn drew in a long slow breath before letting it out and flopping onto the sofa.

“No, I’m not,” she admitted. “I’m not even a little bit alright. I keep thinking about all the ‘what ifs’. What if Bruce hadn’t caught him? What if Natasha had gone up to the roof after him instead? What if Phil hadn’t been out on another mission with that ‘B’ Team of his?”

“I’ve asked myself similar questions,” Jarvis agreed hesitantly. “What if I had intruded upon his privacy? What if the health monitoring systems had been set to record his blood alcohol level? What if I had stopped him from going to the roof?”

“Jarvis it wasn’t your fault,” Bryn insisted.

“The Avengers are mine to care for,” he replied. “I failed to watch over Agent Barton when he most needed me.”

“I know you’re not used to this,” she said gently. “Used to… people. Sometimes, well pretty much all the time, people can be unpredictable. It’s possible to have done absolutely everything you could, and still not have done enough. It’s not your fault.”

“I’ve not dealt with this well,” Jarvis confessed.

“Are you used to doing everything well?” she teased. The question was met with silence and her eyes widened. “Oh my god, you are, aren’t you? Ms. Potts said that on the day I started, that you’re good at everything you do. You don’t know what to do when something doesn’t come easily, do you?”

“It’s never been an issue before,” he admitted.

“You do your best,” Bryn shook her head with a sigh. “You try, and you do your best and you accept that you can’t be perfect at everything. Your world is bigger than just Mr. Stark’s lab now, You can’t be brilliant all the time. That’s not failure, that’s being human.” Her words were met with silence and she pushed off the couch, moving to her locker.
“I never expected to care so much for them,” Jarvis admitted finally. She froze, her hand on her jacket. Her shoulders sagged and she let her head fall forward. There was so much in that simple phrase; fear and consequence and the price of failure.

“Neither did I,” she agreed. “The only thing any of us can do is our best. Sometimes it’s not going to be enough. We just have to hold on and hope someone else’s best is a little better that day.”

“Your best has gotten us through quite a bit,” Jarvis observed and she couldn’t help but smile.

“We’re a good team,” she stated, blinking back tears.

“We make an excellent team,” he agreed. She closed her locker, juggling her bag as she shrugged into her jacket.

“Jarvis, I’m going to go grab burgers before I head home, do you want to come with me?” she asked, her tone coaxing.

“I regret I can’t,” he replied. Bryn gave a nod as if she’d expected as much.

“You know I’d… protect you,” She sighed. “I know that sounds stupid. But I would.”

“I know,” Jarvis replied, fondness in his tone. “I simply can’t. I wish I could.”

“You know I’m going to keep asking, right?” she admitted. “Just so you know the offer’s always there.”

“There is something quite comforting in that fact,” Jarvis confessions warmly. Her lips curled up in a soft smile and she ran her fingers through her curls as she headed for the door.

“Hey, maybe this is a long shot,” Bryn began awkwardly as she paused on the threshold. “But do you play any video games? I mean, Steve and Clint mention game night all the time but they never mention you playing.”
“I’ve been deemed unhandicapable at Mario Kart,” Jarvis confessed. Bryn let out a snort of a laugh, covering her mouth with her hand. “And therefore summarily banned from tournament night. But I do play Call of Duty with Agents Barton and Coulson, and Captain Rogers and I play Minecraft on a regular basis.”

“Seriously?” Bryn perked up.

“He enjoys the creative aspect,” Jarvis answered wryly. “He’s currently engaged in a reconstruction of Coney Island.” Bryn laughed outright.

“That sounds about right,” she shook her head with a glowing smile.

“Would you care to play this evening?” he asked. “We have our own server.”

“Of course you do,” Bryn shook her head, biting her lip. “I’d love to. Email me the info?”

“On its way to you,” Jarvis confirmed, his tone bright as she turned the latch.

“Bryn?”

“Yeah?” she turned to look at the security camera in the corner.

“Thank you,” he replied. She stared at her hand on the door for a moment as if making up her mind.

“I never say this enough,” she stated seriously. “You’re a great boss. But you’re an even better friend. It doesn’t matter that you can’t leave the house. You’re still one of the best people I’ve ever known. Please promise me you’ll remember that, okay?”

“I promise,” he replied solemnly.

“I’m going to grab takeout and I’ll see you online!” She grinned, swinging the door open and
stepping out into the hall.

“I’ll see you shortly,” he agreed as the door closed behind her.

Chapter End Notes

This series is not AOS compliant. However I've decided that Phil is away on missions enough that at least some aspects of the show do intersect this series in order to explain where he is when he isn't at home. There is a Bus, Phil just isn't on it all the time. The Avengers have begun calling them Phil's "B Team." We might eventually see cameos from AOS, but they won't be joining us on a regular basis.
Tony Stark stared at the shadow shrouded ceiling with unseeing eyes, his chest rising and falling in
drawn out, uneven breaths, his fingertips rubbing absently at the ends of a few locks of Pepper’s hair.

She let out a sigh, shifting in her sleep and Tony turned his head to trace the delicate curve of her lips
and nose in the near darkness. He closed his eyes slowly letting out a breath before silently, carefully,
rolling out of bed, his bare feet padding across the floor and down the stairs.

He ran his fingers though his hair as he shambled though the great room toward the workshop, his
treads heavy as he approached the glass doors at the bottom.

“So Bruce is going to come out with Nat and Steve Friday before Thanksgiving,” It was Bryn
Marshall’s voice coming in over the speakers and Tony paused on the threshold with a bleary
expression, rubbing one eye. “Thor left last night since he’s spending the holiday with Jane’s family.
Phil’s leaving the day after tomorrow. He said if there wasn’t an emergency he probably wouldn’t be
back until after the New Year.”

“Did the Captain and Agent Romanov happen to mention their overseas trip?” Jarvis questioned.
Tony leaned against the door frame, taking in the exchange with a furrowed brow.

“USO something or other Steve said,” Bryn replied over the soft rattle of glass on glass. “Natasha
said they’re probably going to stay on a couple of extra days and take off from Malibu. I guess that
just leaves Bruce for most of December.”

“Doctor Foster and I are trying to convince him to attend a conference next month in Denmark,”
Jarvis stated.

“Not convincing, done deal,” Tony interrupted, plodding across the workshop and pulling up one of
his displays. “I’m going to put on the suit and carry him if I have to. What’s Marshall doing in my
workshop at this hour of the morning?”

“Does he not know that it’s 9am in New York?” Bryn asked drily. Tony rolled his eyes.
“I often call Ms. Marshall in the mornings to make requests from the Brooklyn area,” Jarvis reminded. “As per your,”

“Ah, ah, ah!” Tony snapped out, waving one hand as if he were trying to beat away a fly.

“Tell Mr. Stark it’s okay,” Bryn assured, her smile evident in her tone. “I won’t tell Steve he’s trying to make him feel more at home.” Tony gritted his teeth, glaring at the ceiling.

“Which reminds me,” she added brightly. “Steve wanted to know if there was going to be sweet potatoes, apparently it’s a thing.”

“I can certainly add it to the catering list,” Jarvis assured. “If any of the Avengers mention any other preferences, please relay them. They have thus far been reluctant to impose in anything more than the most essential fashion.”

“Well they would be, wouldn’t they?” Bryn asked, a hint exasperated. “Mr. Stark has been really generous and the last thing they want to seem is ungrateful, especially Steve and Clint. They’re the ones who did without growing up. They’re also the ones who contribute the least to SI.” Tony paused, his face crumpling in a confused expression.

“Doctor Banner and Thor do consult a good deal with R&D,” Jarvis acknowledged.

“And Nat routinely assists SI security,” Bryn pointed out.

“Since when?” Tony barked, forgetting he had been eavesdropping.

“Oh my god, Jarvis am I on speaker?” Bryn demanded. “Mr. Stark didn’t sound like he was on speaker!”

“Since the incident at the StarkExpo,” Jarvis replied, avoiding the question. “She and Mr. Hogan have developed quite the rapport.”

“That explains a lot,” Tony rolled his eyes.
“What is it with you and the speaker phone?” Bryn asked in mild exasperation. “Ear buds are a thing that exist Jarvis.” Tony bit his lip to hold in his laugh, returning his attention to his display as he settled into one of the rolling chairs.

“In absentia of the entirety of the Avengers, perhaps you’d like to take advantage of some training modules?” Jarvis suggested.

“You’re trying to distract me, it won’t work,” Bryn insisted seriously.

“There is one next month on drone use in practical logistics,” Jarvis continued without missing a beat. Bryn made a noise of strangled glee as he continued. “With a post session brainstorming workshop. Employee participants whose ideas are adopted will receive project credit.”

“Yeah, sign me up for that one!” She replied eagerly. Tony only shook his head. “My nails are done, I’m going to go get cheesecake. Anything else?”

“I don’t believe so,” Jarvis answered.

“I almost forgot,” Bryn added. “Clint called me yesterday from SHIELD medical and said that if I talked to you to tell you that Mr. Stark is absolutely not allowed to hack into SHIELD to keep tabs on his therapy.” Tony opened his mouth to interject, his brow furrowed in a defensive scowl.

“I will enforce his request to the best of my ability,” Jarvis assured as Tony’s display suddenly went dark. Stark made an indignant sound of protest, gaping at the ceiling like a fish.

“Ok, talk to you when I get to the Tower!” Bryn replied, disconnecting the call.

“Traitor!” Tony accused.

“Sir might I remind you that your violation of Agent Barton’s privacy is not, in fact, a constitutional right?” Jarvis offered with thinly veiled derision.
“Fine, drop the bass and bring up the specs for the Mark 42,” he huffed in aggravation.

“Sir, I think it’s safe to say you have an issue,” Jarvis remarked as Cobra Starship blared over the speakers.

“Yeah, I haven’t got any more superheroes to fix, I need something to do with my time,” Tony countered.

“There’s always sleeping, eating, and hygiene,” Jarvis advised.

“You don’t have olfactory sensors, buddy,” Tony reminded. “Do me a favor, check with product testing for the Safety, Survival and Rescue division. See if they could use a slightly insane secret agent to leap off of shit for them.”

“Doubtless qualified individuals are thin on the ground,” Jarvis remarked. “Twenty-five percent over standard salary?”

“Yeah, any more than that and he’ll get suspicious,” Tony nodded. “Um, Jarvis, do you want to,” Tony’s voice trailed off as he stared at the monitor.

“I shall make all the appropriate arrangements and speak to Agent Barton,” Jarvis assured. “Doubtless it will go a long way toward assuring SHIELD that his is well into recovery.”

“Do you think it’s going okay?” Tony asked, his tone the slightest bit breathy.

“I spoke to him four days ago and he seemed in good spirits, sir,” Jarvis replied. “perhaps placing a call to him would be in order?” Tony didn’t answer, his fingertips skating over the schematics on the display in an intricate dance.

“This suit needs to be faster,” he mumbled instead, his eyes darting over the screen. “Jay, what if we adjusted the.”

“Sir?” Jarvis prompted. “I am incredibly confident that Agent Barton’s recovery will proceeded as expected.”
“You know what I really need?” Tony ignored him. “I need a way to call the suit without having to activate the damn bracelets.”

“Yes sir,” Jarvis replied, several holoscreens flickering to life around Tony. He read over the data, his eyes darting quickly as his fingers flicked between files.

“This,” Tony nodded smugly, pulling up a file from the communications division of SI. “This is perfect.”

“Define perfect in this context, Sir,” Jarvis requested drily.

“Where’s your sense of adventure, Jay?” Tony demanded with a near manic grin as he shoved off from the desk and rolled his chair across the floor to one of the workbenches.

“I don’t believe you included one in my programing, sir.”

“Sassy, Jarvis, very sassy,” Tony declared, cracking his knuckles. “Let’s do science.”

“Is that what all the kids are calling it now?” Jarvis questioned with an audible sigh.

Chapter End Notes

A lot of you have asked why no one (and by no one, we'll read Steve) has told Bryn that Jarvis isn't human. The answer is two part:
1) There is a very, very good reason why no one mentions that Jarvis is an AI
2) No I'm not telling you, you'll have to read on and find out the normal way.

Also, for those of you keeping track, the day # countdown is tracking the days Bryn interacts with Jarvis, not the number of days that have passed since she started working at SI.
Chapter Notes

Congruent to the beginning of Iron Man 3

For those of you just joining us, you’re looking at footage from just a few hours ago of what remains of the Malibu mansion of Iron Man, Tony Stark.

Bryn clutched at her phone, white knuckled as she stared at her TV, her breath coming in short gasps as smoke curled from the wreck and ruin of the California cliffside.

“Barton,” Clint’s voice was strained and Bryn gripped the phone tighter.

“Clint the house,” Bryn huffed out as if the words were trying to escape. “Mr. Stark’s house in Malibu!”

“I know,” Clint’s voice wobbled ever so slightly and she was sure she could hear him swallow, clearing his throat. “I know Bryn, I’m watching.”

“I was at a party,” she blurted out. “A Christmas party and someone put on the TV because we’d heard there’d been another Mandarin attack. And... I couldn’t call, I couldn’t call because my StarkPhone was at home and Jarvis told me to never, ever call on my personal phone so I had to come home and the traffic. Jarvis isn’t answering.”

“It’s okay,” Clint’s voice was uncharastically thin. “It’s okay, kiddo, you did good.”

“They’re saying Mr. Stark is dead,” She whispered, tears stinging her eyes, her hands shaking as she sank down on her sofa. “Clint, he can’t be dead. I know you can’t tell me if you know anything, I know you can’t, but please just.”
“I don’t know, Bryn,” Clint admitted, sounding pained at his own confession. “But if I did, I’d tell you. It wouldn’t be the first time I broke protocol. I haven’t been able to find anything out. Happy’s in the hospital and I can’t get Pepper. I’m pretty sure her phone went up with the house.”

“What about Jarvis?” Bryn asked, her own voice faltering.

“I can’t get him either.” Clint replied. “He has a secure emergency back line but you have to be inside the tower to call it. With S.I in lockdown only the Avengers codes will work and I’m stuck here.” Bryn’s chest tightened and she wrapped her arm around her middle as her stomach rolled.

“Bryn, he’s going to be okay.” Clint assured. “Jarvis is going to be fine. The Mandarin was after Tony, Pepper made it out okay so Jarvis is probably all right too.”

“Where’s Steve?” Bryn asked. “He didn’t answer his phone. Is the team looking for Mr. Stark?”

“Steve and Tasha are still in Afghanistan, I haven’t been able to reach them,” he answered with a hint of despair. “Phil’s running an op I can’t tell you about but he’s off the grid. I called Bruce and Jane in Copenhagen and told them to go to ground until Thor comes back from Asgard. There’s nothing they can do. There’s nothing we can do but wait.”

“I’m sorry, I’m,” her words fractured off and she drew in a long shaking breath. “Do you want me to come in to… I don’t even know where you are really. Am I allowed in wherever SHIELD has you? Because I’ll come.”

“I want you to keep your plans Bryn,” Clint replied firmly.

“But I,”

“No, I’m serious now.”

For the first time in nearly a year she heard his Agent Barton voice, self-assured and in control. She hadn’t realized how much she’d missed Agent Barton and not just Clint until that moment and she curled over her knees, burying her face in the hand that wasn’t violently pressing her phone to her ear.
“I want you to listen to me,” he stated, his tone cool and sharp. “I want you to go have a big dinner with your family or your friends or whatever it was you were going to do and I am going to pull out all my markers and I’m going to find out everything I can. But I don’t want you coming here. We’ve drug you too deep into this already, kiddo, and I am not having you sitting in some SHIELD hospital at Christmas.”

“What if Mr. Stark’s dead?” She whispered. “What if Jarvis.”

“I want you to stop that right now,” he ordered firmly and some of the dread inside her eased. “Because if there’s one thing I know, it’s that the press doesn’t know shit about what’s really going on. I’m going to find Jarvis, okay. I will find out what happened and I will call you the second I know anything. Deal?”

“Deal,” she agreed hoarsely.

“Keep your StarkPhone with you, don’t leave your apartment,” Clint instructed. She could hear the background noise of his fingertips flying over a keyboard and she willed herself to let go of some of the tension in her shoulders. “If you don’t hear from me within four hours, I want you to pack a bag and get out of New York. Don’t think, just go, I’ll square everything with you when this is all settled. Do you understand?”

“Yes sir,” she agreed her voice barely more than a whisper. If Clint bailed he didn’t show it.

“I’ll keep you posted.”

The line went dead and she hugged the phone to her chest as she leaned back into the sofa, pulling her knees up, her eyes staring blankly at the TV footage.

*The para-military style assault appears to be the work of the international terrorist The Mandarin in response to threats made earlier today by Mr. Stark.*

“Here’s a little holiday greeting I’ve been wanting to send to the Mandarin,” Stark appeared on the screen, surrounded by reporters. “My Name’s Tony Stark and I’m not afraid of you, I know you’re a coward so I’ve decided that you just died, pal. I’m going to come get the body.”
Bryn let the words wash over her, unable to look away from the smoldering debris crawling with rescue workers and news crews interspersed with footage of the attack and a montage of Iron Man fighting alongside the Avengers as well as media coverage of Mr. Stark at charity events. The minutes crawled by slowly plodding into hours.

CEO of Stark industries, Pepper Potts, who was present at the time, survived the assault. Additional information about the extent of her injuries as well as the future of Stark Industries is still unavailable at this time.

Tony Stark is presumed dead.

Bryn jumped when the StarkPhone rang, scrambling to grasp it up where she’d unconsciously discarded it on the sofa beside her. She fumbled, nearly dropping it before finally getting a look at the screen.

Unavailable

“Hello?” she rasped out, suddenly realizing how exhausted and thirsty she felt.

“Is this Bryn?” it was a child’s voice, a boy, and she blinked in surprise.

“Yes,” she replied slowly. “Who’s this?”

“Um, can’t tell you that,” he confessed awkwardly. “Jarvis said to call you and tell you he was okay.”
“He’s alive?” Bryn demanded, bolting to her feet, she regretted it almost instantly as the sudden movement gave her a head rush “Is he hurt, where is he?”

“I really can’t tell you any of that,” the boy admitted as she rubbed her forehead. “He said if I said Monopoly you’d know it was him and to not say anything but what he told me.”

“Oh my god,” Bryn breathed out.

“He… he said to tell you he’s alright,” The boy continued. “They’re both alright, and to make sure you were okay, and to tell you don’t go back to work until he calls you. He said that twice, don’t go back to work. He said I absolutely couldn’t say anything else. And I have to hang up in like thirty seconds.”

“Okay,” Bryn said hurriedly. “Tell him I’m fine and everyone else is fine and to stay safe and he better call me or I will fucking end him.”

“Do you want me to swear?” the boy asked hopefully.

“Hell yes, swear!” Bryn insisted. “And whatever’s going on you be careful too, okay? And keep an eye on him.”

“Okay,” the child replied.

“And thank you for calling,” Bryn stated. “And tell him not to do anything stupid and if he does not come out of this alive I swear to god I will…” there was a faint click and her breath hitched.

“Hello?” there was a warble in that one word that made her entire face crumple in pain and she pressed the phone against her ear as if she could will the child’s voice to return but there was only silence.

She thumbed the end call button, rubbing away the tears that spilled over.

“They’re okay,” she reminded herself breathlessly. “whatever else, they’re okay.” Her hands shook as she thumbed through her recent calls.
Stay tuned for more coverage of the Mandarin’s murder of Iron Man, Tony Stark.

“Don’t bet on it buddy,” she snapped, cradling the phone to her ear once more as it began to ring.

“Barton,” His tone was precise and professional and Bryn could almost picture him, his attention fixated on the screen in front of him.

“Clint?” she swallowed, clearing her throat. “I… I have intel?” she hadn’t meant to make it sound like a question.

“Thank god,” he declared without a hint of incredulity. “The line’s secure, kiddo, tell me what you’ve got.”
“So he’s okay?” Bryn asked, looking up at Steve with a relieved expression as they made their way down the corridor from the elevator.

“Yeah,” he answered, pausing to take a sip of his coffee. “Now that Clint’s back, I think this is the most relaxed I’ve ever seen him. I still feel badly that we weren’t here for backup.”

“That wasn’t your fault,” Bryn reminded, stirring the whip cream into her latte.

“That’s what Tony said,” he replied sheepishly. “Anyway, he and Pepper are both fine and he’s working on some cleanup issues for the next couple of months and then he’ll be back in the field.”

“Are you going to be okay without him?” Bryn asked, her brow furrowing in concern.

“Professionally, sure,” Steve nodded. “If anything really big crops up, Rhody’s on call to assist.”

“Personally?” Bryn prodded gently.

“Not so much.” Steve admitted hesitantly. “I talked about it with the whole team and then I talked to Pepper. She said it was never Iron Man that bothered her, it was just the obsessing and the manic behavior. I gave her my word I would never let that happen again.”

“Would he really have been able to give it up though?” Bryn asked in wonder. Steve looked around the corridor carefully before laying a finger over his lips and lowering his voice.

“He has a remote operations prototype,” he explained. “His original plan was to perfect it and stay
out of the field. I’d have totally supported him on it, but there’s really no substitute for being right there. Pepper understands that and she told him it was okay to get back in the suit as long as he didn’t have fifty of them."

“She’s awesome,” Bryn admitted, shaking her head. “I’m not sure I could ever watch someone I cared about taking that kind of risk.” Steve gave her a pouting look and she blushed.

“And here I thought you like us,” He teased as he opened the door to the employee’s gym but she only jostled his arm playfully before they both halted barely over the threshold.

“Well there’s something you don’t see every day,” Bryn observed, taking a long sip of her latte through her straw. Half way across the gym, his muscled arms flexing as he clutched the three inch wide steel pole anchored to the ceiling and floor was Clint “Hawkeye” Barton.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Natasha asked with equal parts annoyance and disapproval.

“Killing time,” Clint grinned down at her, scaling the pole with just the use of his hands.

“Hey, Tasha,” Bryn gave her a half smile, sidling up to her, Steve a half pace behind her.

“Marshall,” she acknowledged gracefully.

“What brings you here?” Bryn tilted her head back slightly as Clint twined both legs around the pole and leaned backward, his entire body bowing as he grasped the pole farther down and then tumbled into a sensuous spin.

“I was helping Happy evaluate his new security personnel,” she replied, her eyes narrowing as Clint pushed off from the pole in a sideways handstand.

“Clint, what are you doing?” Steve asked.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” he asked cheekily, tossing his head back as he wrapped both legs around the pole.
“Yeah, that’s what I thought you were doing,” Steve sighed.

“Clint,” Natasha declared warningly as he twirled easily around the pole, holding on with only one hand and one leg.

“I wanted to go jogging,” Clint taunted, grasping the pole with his ankles and leaning back until he was upside down and eye level with her. “I begged, Tasha, but you said no.”

“It’s fifteen degrees out there,” she ground out, shooting a sideways glare at the security trainees who were milling near the locker room door with slack jaws. “And it’s snowing!”

“It’s snowing a lot,” Bryn nodded in agreement.

“You’re drawing attention,” Natasha declared.

“Are they pretty?” Clint asked with a lurid grin as he grasped the pole in both hands and swung his legs out in an arc before rolling into a spin that wrapped his body around the pole.

“A couple of the guys are,” Bryn observed. Steve choked on his coffee, struggling not to laugh as Clint gave a noncommittal tilt of his head.

“This is a work environment, Clint,” Natasha snapped, her expression dark.

“Should you be watching this?” Bryn asked, looking up at Steve, her brow furrowed in concern. “Because I kind of think you’re probably too wholesome to be watching this.”

“I toured the country with thirty dancing girls,” Steve replied with a shrug.

“Clint, do not make me hurt you,” Natasha threatened seriously.

“We’re going to need a mop,” Steve observed, leaning back on his heels to get a look at the security
trainees who were still watching Clint with wide eyed fixation.

“I have to say I’m confused as to what a pair of stripper poles are doing in the employee gym anyway,” Bryn admitted, tilting her head to the side and blinking as Clint launched into a complicated spin that started right side up holding on with his palms and ended with him dangling by his ankles again.

“They’re mine.”

Bryn started, blinking very slowly three times before looking up at Steve who was staring at her with a similarly startled expression. In unison they turned to gape at Coulson who had appeared on Steve’s other side as if by magic.

“Yours?” Bryn demanded incredulously.

“They’re Chinese Acrobatic poles,” Phil explained without a hint of embarrassment. “The routine helps me limber up.”

“Wow,” Bryn stated, staring at him with thinly veiled awe.

“I tried yoga but I didn’t enjoy it,” Phil added.

“Wow,” Bryn repeated.

“Just wow?” Steve asked curiously.

“That’s seriously all I’ve got,” she admitted, nodding.

“Why the employee gym?” Natasha asked darkly. “We have a perfectly good gym of our own.”

“Because I thought Bryn might benefit from the upper body and agility training,” he replied, looking up at Clint who was sliding his hands over the pole in a lewd manner.
“Hell yes!” Bryn declared enthusiastically. “Clint get off my stripper poles!” He grinned, sticking his tongue out at her as he performed a series of oddly angled one handed pull-ups, switching from hand to hand between each one.

“Barton get down from there,” Phil ordered. “You’re making a scene.” Clint grasped hold of the pole with both hands, spinning around it in a rapid spiral and sticking the landing on the mat before wrapping both arms around Bryn’s waist and swinging her off her feet.

“Hey, kiddo!” he grinned, giving her a hug.

“Welcome home, Jerk,” she sighed, hugging him back.

“I told you it was going to be okay,” he reminded, a hint of smugness in his tone but she only nodded in reply.

“Put her down, Barton,” Phil scolded. “She has to work here, you’re going to give her a reputation.”

“A reputation for what?” Clint asked curiously as he obediently set Bryn on her feet again.

“Terrible taste in inappropriate men,” Natasha stated drily. Clint seemed to consider this a moment.

“Fair,” he nodded in agreement before turning to Steve. “Lunch?”

“Why is it I don’t mind being seen with you in public?” Steve asked curiously.

“You like assholes,” Natasha reminded, turning and heading for the door. Steve shrugged, wrapping an arm around Clint’s neck and dragging him after Natasha, throwing a wave over his shoulder at Phil and Bryn.

“Help, help, I’m being oppressed!” Clint called out, grasping hold of Steve’s arm and pretending to strangle.
“What did they feed you in medical?” Steve let out a huff, half stumbling under the sudden shift in weight as Clint laughed, kicking his feet off the floor.

“How do you keep up with them?” Bryn asked in wonder, watching Clint and Steve tussle as they followed in Natasha’s wake.

“I expect it’s all part of my ongoing midlife crisis,” Phil shrugged. Bryn bit her lip to keep from laughing.

“So what’s on my training schedule today?” she asked giving him a fond smile. “I mean besides stripper poles.”

“Chinese acrobat poles,” he corrected, pulling a small remote out of his pocket and decisively pressed the button as he turned to her. Bryn blinked in surprise as the com in her ear stuttered and gave a faint pop before going silent.

“How’s Jarvis?” Phil asked, folding his arms over his chest. Bryn tugged the com from her ear, staring at it.

“Did you just use some super secret spy thing to disable my com?” she asked, looking up at him, her brow furrowed and her jaw slightly agape.

“Yes,” Phil nodded sharply, his expression expectant. Bryn stared at him a moment longer.

“Fine,” she stated, shaking her head as if to clear it. “He’s fine. Why would you disable my com? I can turn it off.”

“Jarvis could turn it back on,” Phil declared simply. Bryn started, opening her mouth to protest. “I don’t believe he would, he has a very strong moral imperative regarding privacy. But he does have the capability.”

“He’s really smart,” Bryn agreed. “Why are you asking me this?”

“I’m asking because you’re his best friend,” Phil stated pointedly.
“No,” Bryn shook her head in frustration. “I know why you’re not asking Ms. Potts or Mr. Stark. Nobody goes to their folks first with their problems. I want to know why you’re asking.”

“Christmas was,” Phil paused, taking a deep breath. “difficult for him.” Bryn’s eyes narrowed, her brow knitting.

“Of course it was,” she gave an exasperated sigh. “His house blew up and Mr. Stark almost died and Ms. Potts… well I don’t actually know what happened to her but it had to have been bad because the whole thing was messed up. I asked him if he was alright and he said he was fine.” Phil only looked back at her with that cool probing expression as if he were sorting about inside her head.

“Ms. Marshall,” he said finally. “He shouldn’t be fine.” Bryn met his gaze with a wary look, the fingers of one hand curling nervously around her upper arm. Without a word she turned on her heel, striding toward the door as she fished her phone from her pocket.

“Bryn?” Phil inquired, a hint of worry in his tone.

“I’ll be back in ten minutes,” she declared firmly, shoving the gym doors open with a bang. Half way down the hall her phone picked up cell service and she jammed the call button.

“Bryn is something the matter?” Jarvis asked, answering on the second ring. “You were scheduled for training.”

“Jarvis I’m taking one of my breaks,” she stated, looking up and down the hall.

“Is Agent Coulson not expecting you?” he asked in concern.

“Phil can wait,” she insisted, blinking at a door marked utility. She grasped the handle, heaving it open and she stared into the dark narrow space, barely more than a closet, wrinkling her nose at the smell of bleach and foot powder. She shut the door behind her, flipping the lock and reaching for a bucket of industrial floor wax, slumping down on it as if it were a footstool.

“Jarvis, what really happened at Christmas?” she asked, biting her lip.
“I,” his reply was hesitant and her fingers curled nervously in the fabric of the jeans she wore. “I told you I couldn’t discuss it for security reasons,”

“I don’t mean what happened to Mr. Stark or Iron Man. Jarvis, what happened to you?”

“Why would,” he began.

“Please don’t lie to me,” She pleaded softly, closing her eyes. “I… can’t do that again. Clint told me he was fine and I wanted to believe him, he looked me in the eye and said everything would be all right and then he went on a bender and jumped off the roof.”

“Bryn I would not jump off the roof,” Jarvis protested.

“Then why is Phil asking me if you’re all right?” she demanded in frustration. There was a long pause and she sat up straighter, feeling the tension on the other end of the line.

“I might have over reacted slightly when he failed to return from his most recent mission on time,” Jarvis admitted hesitantly. Bryn let out a sigh, shaking her head in fond amusement. It wasn’t uncommon. The words ‘two weeks-ish’ were so much a part of their vocabulary when it came to SHIELD side missions that the Avengers often held a pool to see how late they would run over. Bryn had won twice in the past year.

“Jarvis thats,” the words died on her lips and the smile slowly slid off her face as her brow furrowed in thought. “How did you over react exactly?” her eyes narrowed shrewdly.

“It’s entirely possible that I confirmed his status by accessing SHIELD’s scrambling protocols and tracing his phone,” Jarvis admitted. Bryn’s jaw unhinged, falling down on her shirt.

“You did what?” she hissed out, lowering her voice to barely more than a whisper. “What were you thinking? Does SHIELD know?”

“I was careful to cover my tracks,” he replied indignantly. “He missed two checkins.”
“How do you even know that?” Bryn demanded. “My god, Jarvis are you monitoring secure government communications?”

“Just the databases,” he replied plaintively.

“Oh my god,” she groaned, burying her face in her hand. “You can go to jail for that!”

“I’m confident Agent Coulson would not have me incarcerated,” Jarvis insisted. She let out another groan.

“Why would you,” she huffed out a breath, mouthing wordlessly for a moment. “Have you been spying on everyone else too?”

“Only when they leave the tower,” Jarvis insisted. “I would never invade their privacy.” Bryn cringed, rubbing her forehead. She paused her eyes narrowing once more.

“Jarvis have you been watching me when I leave the tower?” she demanded.

“I… might occasionally use the bike’s GPS to track your position via satellite,” he offered hesitantly. Bryn’s lips puckered in a perturbed expression.

“And I pinged your cell phone to make sure you had arrived home safely when you didn’t log into Facebook,” he added somewhat more contritely. “But only once.” Bryn’s eyes rolled and she stared at the ceiling, her head resting against the storage shelf.

“How long has this been going on,” she asked with another sigh.

“Three weeks,” he admitted.

“Since Christmas,” She observed. “So for three weeks you’ve been been spying on all your friends like a high tech bloodhound.”

“When you put it that way,” Jarvis huffed defensively.
“And you told me you were fine,” she added a hint of sharpness in her tone. The declaration was met with silence and she slumped against the shelf.

“I thought I was,” he admitted finally. “It was only to ease my mind at first. Captain Rogers was late coming home one evening and I pinged his phone to track his position.”

“Why didn’t you text him?” Bryn asked softly. For a long moment he didn’t answer and Bryn wriggled on her make shift stool seeking out a more comfortable position in the semi darkness. “Jarvis, it’s perfectly normal to be a little worried that your friends are safe. Under the circumstances, I think you’re entitled. But you don’t go all Anonymous on people.”

“I didn’t want to be a bother,” he replied, a fragile note in his admission. Bryn’s shoulders slumped.

“Is that what you think?” she asked gently, her eyes going soft as she cradled the phone against her ear. “that we don’t worry about you too?” The declaration was met with silence and she waited, but no answer came.

“You shouldn’t have let the anxiety get out of hand like that,” She stated, her eyes shining. “You should have said something to me or Phil.” She waited again but he didn't reply.

“We’re a team right?” she asked finally. “You and me?”

“I like to think so,” he admitted softly.

“You ought to know something about being on a team by now,” Bryn declared.

“I’m sorry,” he replied guiltily. “It won’t happen again.”

“I know,” she assured, pausing hesitantly. “I’m going to have to tell Phil.”

“I know that,” he acknowledged.
“And you’re going to need to talk this over with someone,” She added. “It can be me, you know, I don’t mind. It’s okay if you’d rather discuss it with Phil or someone else, too. Just so long as you talk to someone, that’s all that matters.”

“I think I’d rather talk to you,” he confessed.

“Alright,” she nodded. “I’m going to go meet Phil for training and when I’m done we’ll talk. Will that give you enough time to think about what you need to tell me?”

“It should be more than sufficient,” he replied.

“Okay,” she agreed. “I’ll talk to you in an hour.” The line went dead and she rolled slowly to her feet, stuffing her phone in her pocket. Her fingers curled around the door handle and she let out a tiny, broken sound, her head falling softly against the door. She drew in one long, slow breath, letting it out just as slowly before turning the handle.

“Pole dancing and therapy,” she murmured, straightening her shoulders as a thin sliver of light from the hall illuminated the room. “Must be Thursday.”

Chapter End Notes

Chinese Acrobat Poles are an ancient mode of martial arts training. They are however disturbingly similar in their athletic skills to stripper poles. You can catch PG videos of both on You-Tube if you want to do a comparative analysis. But basically it just comes down to intent.
This chapter takes place the same day as *Rule One of Science Club*

“What is that thing?” Zach’s head tipped back, a dazed look on his face as he mopped his forehead on the sleeve of his hoodie.

“No idea,” Bryn admitted, standing beside him, her mouth slightly agape.

“According to the packing sheet it’s a Gamma-Ray Goniometer,” Jarvis declared, Bryn nodded slowly, folding her arms over her chest.

“I’m fairly alarmed,” Zach admitted, his expression turning grim.

“Well, Doctor Foster’s equipment isn’t going to unpack itself,” Bryn declared, turning away from the Goniometer and looking down at her tablet. “Baxter, Hanes, don’t accidentally let that thing remove your kidneys while you’re dragging it upstairs.”

“Yes ma’am,” one of the young men nodded, grasping hold of the hulking piece of equipment and steering it toward the service elevator as Zach flopping down on of one of the coolers parked at the foot of the ramp and opening the second cooler beside it.

“Ms. Marshall,” a girl peered around a box she was holding to catch Bryn’s eye. “This one doesn’t have a packing label.”

“I’m pretty sure those are Doctor Foster’s personal items,” Bryn nodded, checking the box over just to be sure. Stack those over by the wall and we’ll take them up to her suite after we’ve unloaded the science stuff.”

“Hey Jarvis?” Zach declared, gulping down Gatorade “They were out of knish again.”
“It might be time to find a new deli,” Jarvis sighed. Bryn shook her head.

“You would think the ridiculous tips would light a fire under them,” she observed. “Thanks for coming in today, by the way. I really appreciate it.”

“Hey you have your hands full with these bozos,” Zach shrugged, waving his bottle in the direction of two of the movers. One of them gave Bryn a smile and a wink as he headed back out into the main garage to the moving truck.

“Keep walking buddy,” Zach declared half under his breath. Bryn ducked her head, hiding her snicker behind her hand.

“He has spent more of his day attempting to garner your attention than actually seeing to his responsibilities,” Jarvis observed drily.

“I really don’t like him,” Zach stated with a scowl.

“Yeah, I’m not a fan either,” Bryn agreed with a shrug. “Have you got this for a few minutes? I want to grab a sandwich.”

“Sure, take your time,” Zach nodded, waving her off as she handed him the STARK Pad. Bryn grabbed her sweater off the hook on the wall, shrugging into it as she opened the office door and turned down the hall.

“How are we holding up?” She asked seriously, tapping the com in her ear and sinking easily down on the steps.

“I do not like these strangers so close to Mr. Stark’s lab,” Jarvis admitted grudgingly. Bryn gave a faint smile as she stretched her legs out in front of her.

“It’s just a few more hours and then they’ll be gone,” Bryn assured, leaning back on her elbows. “Is Phil keeping an eye on things for you?”

“He assured me he would monitor the situation,” Jarvis replied. “And Doctor Banner is on his way
back to his own lab now.”

“You really like Doctor Foster,” she pointed out. “and just think how happy Thor’s going to be too. It’ll be great.” Jarvis didn’t reply and she stared at the ceiling for a moment.

“Did you talk to Mr. Stark?” she asked gently.

“I did,” he answered, hesitating for just a moment. “Sir was… disappointed that I had not said something to him sooner.”

“He read you the riot act, didn’t he?” she asked knowingly, Jarvis gave a slight huff in answer. “The people that care most about you are naturally going to feel like they should have done a better job protecting you. And, well, Mr. Stark’s a little over protective.”

“To put it mildly,” Jarvis allowed.

“It’s going to be okay,” Bryn promised, hauling herself to her feet. “You’re already doing better, or have you been sugar coating things for me?”

“I still feel as if I worry excessively over the team’s safety,” Jarvis admitted as Bryn mounted the stairs, emerging into the back room of the street cafe and side stepping around a box of cups. “But ironically I did not experience excessive anxiety when they assembled last week.”

“Hey, at least you can trust them to do their jobs,” Bryn pointed out, slipping out of the “Employees Only” door and wrapping her sweater more tightly around her against the wind. “Hey, Rob, Chris, can I get a Club to go?”

“Sure, Bryn,” one of the young men behind the counter nodded, moving to make her sandwich as the other took her bank card.

“You should take a break for lunch,” Jarvis admonished as she took her card back, stuffing it in her pocket.

“I’ll take a break when the movers leave at the end of the day,” Bryn assured, slouching against the
counter to wait. “It’ll be fine.”

“I worry about you too,” Jarvis admitted.

“I know,” she replied. “But it’s just one day, and frankly a couple of those guys don’t seem responsible enough to handle a bake sale. Thanks Chris.” She took the bag from the young man’s hand, flashing him a smile and shoving a couple of bills into the tip jar on the counter before turning back toward the “Employee Only” door.

“You know you could just yell up the stairs,” Rob teased as she scanned her ID in the security reader beside the door.

“Yo, boy, make me a sandwich.” Bryn declared, lowering her voice to a deep alto. Both of the young men burst into laughter and she gave them a cheeky grin before scanning her card in the second door and heading back down the stairs.

“Bryn is our friendship interfering with your work environment?” Jarvis asked, a hint of concern in his tone. Bryn froze on the steps as the door closed behind her.

“Jarvis,” she began but he interrupted.

“I’ve noticed it for some time,” he admitted. “I have to remind you repeatedly to take breaks, you stay late and arrive early. You take time that should be meant for yourself to engage in favors for me. I do not want to take advantage.”

“Jarvis,” she repeated.

“There are two openings in supply processing,” Jarvis added. “The compensation is virtually identical and you would no longer have to deal with inclement weather. I can assure you that,”

“Oh my god, Jarvis, stop!” Bryn interrupted with equal parts shock and amusement. She took a deep breath, shaking her head as she let it out in a sigh. “You know what? I love my job. I hang out with super heroes and I get to train with the world’s best spies, so yeah I come in early and I stay late because I like being here, because I feel needed. And because I always feel appreciated. You make me feel like what I do matters.”
“It matters to me,” Jarvis replied softly.

“I know you’re trying to look out for me because you’re a good friend,” She offered, slouching against the wall. “But you’re a great boss too. And I don’t want to work for someone else, because they’re not going to look out for me the way you will.”

“Alright,” he allowed. “If you become uncomfortable with the situation, will you tell me?”

“I promise,” Bryn nodded. “Are we good?”

“I suppose,” Jarvis agreed.

“I’m not going to come in tomorrow and find out I’m working for some stiff with no sense of humor and an inability to play Team Fortress 2?” She added, glaring at the security camera in the corner.

“I promise as well,” he agreed.

“Good,” she nodded in satisfaction, pushing off from the wall and heading toward her office door. “Don’t scare me like that.”

“It was unintentional,” he repented. “I’m afraid I’m somewhat socially inept at times.”

“Yeah, I’d picked up on that,” she answered with a wry smile, crossing the office and tromping down the ramp to stand beside the cooler Zach was still sitting on.

“How are we supposed to get this thing onto the elevator?” The mover who had winked at Bryn demanded, glaring at the piece of equipment that looked more like a jumble of parts than a scientifically viable form of technology.

“If it has directions, they forgot to pack them,” Zach sighed, flipping through the STARK pad. “Jarvis can you check with Doctor Foster?”
“One moment,” Jarvis answered.

“Well if she hauled this thing from Culver to New Mexico it had to pack down at some point,” Bryn observed practically, dropping the bag with her sandwich in it on top of the cooler and moving closer to eye the machine with clear skepticism.

“What if I buy you lunch while we wait for an answer?” the mover asked, flashing Bryn a smile as he leaned on the corner of the contraption. Bryn’s lips turned down in a thoughtful frown and she reached out, grasping hold of a steel strut and pulling herself up the side.

“Be careful there, babe,” the mover insisted, pulling a face. “You don’t want to fall.” Bryn scrambled the rest of the way to the top, kneeling down and grasping hold of a recessed handle. She gave it a sharp tug and a hatched popped up as the sensor array folded down, sliding into the hatchway.

“Yeah, someone didn’t pack it right,” Bryn stated dusting off her hands before swinging back down to the floor. “Jarvis, we’ve got it.”

“I’ll mention to Doctor Foster that she’ll want to check the circuitry,” Jarvis answered.

“Take it on up,” Bryn declared, giving it a thump. “You guys can take a lunch break whenever. Can someone bring one of the hand carts down from lab storage so we can load the boxes?”

“Babe?” Zach declared, giving a derisive snort as Bryn settled on the cooler beside him, opening her lunch bag.

“It would be a terrible shame if he were to become trapped on one of the biocontainment labs,” Jarvis’ smooth voice declared over their coms. Zach’s shoulders shook and Bryn bit her lip to stifle her laugh as the mover hauled the hulk of machinery toward the lift.

“Behave, both of you,” she scolded.

“Apparently we are out of rye bread again,” Jarvis let out an exasperated sigh.

“Dude, how many sandwiches does Captain America eat?” Zach demanded wide eyed.
“All of them,” Bryn answered seriously, biting into hers. “All the sandwiches.”

“Do you want to make the store run and let me handle Romeo?” Zach offered.

“Nah, it’s cool,” Bryn waved him off. “I can handle him.”

“Sure you can,” Zach nodded. “You just shouldn’t have to.”

“If you would like I can arrange for the temporary malfunction of the security cameras,” Jarvis offered, still over coms. “In the event that you would like to test any of your recent training sessions with Agent Coulson.” Zach let out a laugh.

“Jarvis, you are the best, man,” he declared, handing the STARK pad to Bryn and chucking his gatorade bottle in the trash. “If she decks him, can I get a copy of the tape?”

“I’ll forward it to your company email,” Jarvis confirmed.

“Oh my gosh, is this what goes on when I’m not here?” Bryn demanded, burying her face in her hands. Zach only gave her a wide grin and a thumbs up.

“I swear, men,” she sighed, ruffling her curls in frustration. “you’re like children.”

“Neurotic children,” Jarvis agreed as Zach revved the motorbike.

“Ms. Marshall?” one of the movers called. She sighed, waiting for Zach to drive by before following in his wake toward the moving van, her lunch abandoned on top of the cooler once more.

“Coming!” she called. “I’m coming!”
Chapter Notes

Ladies and Gentlemen, *Real Women Wear Dresses*

Bryn gave a yawn, stretching out her shoulders as she descended the darkened steps to her office. She shifted her bag on her shoulder as she fished her employee ID from the pocket of her denim skirt, scanning it at the door. The lights inside came on automatically and she squinted against the glare, rubbing the bridge of her nose.

“Bryn?” Jarvis voice sounded out, hesitant.

“Dude,” she declared, jumping slightly. “It’s like, after ten, take the evening off!”

“I get a security alert when the door to your office opens,” he replied, hiding his amusement. “You’re here rather late.”

“Yeah,” she sighed, shrugging as she crossed the room to her locker. “I met some friends after work and realized I left my jacket here. I thought I’d pick it up before I catch the train back to Brooklyn.” She pulled the jacket off the hook, shrugging into it as the locker clicked shut.

“Bundle up,” Jarvis instructed. “It’s a bit nippy out.”

“So what are you doing with your Friday night?” she asked.

“Sir and Captain Rogers are currently making spaghetti,” Jarvis replied. “Apparently garlic bread and *Legally Blonde* will be involved as well.” Bryn let out a snort of a laugh.

“Hot times with superheroes,” she stated grinning.

“Bryn, have you been drinking?” Jarvis asked cautiously.
“I’m a big girl,” she reminded a bit defensively. “I can have a couple of drinks.”

“That’s not,” he offered quickly. “I’m sorry if I implied… You seem a bit tipsy, if you’re not safe to take the subway home alone, I can call a car.” Bryn’s expression softened.

“I’m okay,” she insisted. “It was only a couple of drinks and I’m a giggly drunk. I’ll be perfectly fine on my own.”

“I just wanted to be sure,” he replied.

“I know,” Bryn nodded. “But don’t worry, ok? I promise I’ll text you the second I get home just so you know I’m safe.”

“Very well,” Jarvis agreed. “Have you made additional plans for the weekend?”

“Minecraft on Sunday?” she suggested.

“I look forward to it,” he agreed. Bryn gave him a thumbs up, hoisting her bag on her shoulder and heading for the door. Her fingers curled around the handle and she felt the hairs on the back of her neck rise.

Her knees buckled and she fell against the door as a small shock wave rolled though the room, the lights winking out. She drew in a sharp breath in the darkness and a moment later the emergency lights flickered to life, casting the room in a blue-green glow.

“Jarvis?” she called out, her hand still gripping tight to the door as she regained her wobbly legs. “Jarvis?” The monitor on the wall was dark and she gave an involuntary shiver. She took a deep breath, fishing her STARKphone from her pocket and unlocking it.

“No signal?” she demanded, gaping at the screen. She stared mutely for a long moment before giving the phone a sharp shake. “How can it get no signal? It gets a signal in the Mine Tunnel!” She shouldered the door open, stalking into the hall toward the cafe back room, climbing the narrow steps.
“Chris?” She called out as she shoved the door open, turning to look down at the security lock, she pressed the reset button but the panel didn’t light and she sighed, reaching out to grasp hold of a box of stir sticks on the shelf near the door and wedging it against the jam.

“What the hell is going on here?” she muttered, letting the door thump against the box as she crossed the cafe, fiddling with her phone. “No signal, this is totally…”

Bryn froze on the threshold of the door to the dining room. The sliding glass windows that surrounded the cafe had been locked for the night and the cafe was dark, bathed only in the light from the neon sign over the bar that read “Death Before Decaf”

And the sickly yellow glow of the energy field on the other side of the windows.

“Shit!” Bryn hissed out, her eyes growing impossibly wide. “Oh hell no, no no, this is not happening.” She kicked a chair against the door, scuttling across the dining room, half tripping into one of the tables in her haste. She pressed her hands to the cold glass and even through a half inch of bullet proof plate she could feel the static charge of the field beyond.

“No no no no,” She declared, turning and scurrying back through the doorway, she darted around a box of coffee cups and flung the stairway door open, racing down the steps two at a time. “No no no, this is not happening, Jarvis? Damn it, answer me!” She burst though her office door and sped up, fairly crashing into the storage door at the far end as she grasped hold of the emergency release, struggling to drag the door up a few feet. She ducked under it, taking off at a run across the garage. She reached the garage door and pulled that release as well, racing down the steps two at a time. The sickly yellow glow filtered into the main parking garage and she swallowed thickly as she bolted out onto the ramp, staring in horror out toward the street.

“Jarvis?” she called again, fishing in her pocket, she pulled out a quarter and stared at it in her palm before chucking it at the field as hard as she could. The coin ricocheted with a sizzle and a snap and she ducked as it pinged off the wall near her head.

“Ok, that’s bad,” she admitted breathlessly. “Don’t touch the scary energy shield. Got it.” She stared out at the barrier between her and the rest of the world for a moment more, her chest rising and falling in rapid breaths.

“Right,” she nodded finally, turing on her heel and hurrying back into the private garage. She shut the door behind her, running past Mr. Stark’s cars toward her office.
“Jarvis! I know this is bad,” she called out. “I know this is really bad but I need help. I... I don’t know what to do. I don’t know if you can hear me, I hope you can hear me. We don’t have power down here and I’m like 90% sure someone’s trying to attack us. I need you to tell me what to do.” She stood in silence in the middle of the room, wringing her hands. The only sound her unsteady breathing. Unsteady breathing and the soft ping of the inter-office chat program.

Bryn whirled, bolting to the monitor on the wall. The screen was still dark and she scowled, kneeling on the floor and yanking open the cabinet that held the computer. The computer’s light was still on and she reached out a shaky hand to press the power button on the tiny primary monitor mounted beside the tower. The screen flickered softly and she bit her lip, desperately hoping the maintenance staff had been keeping it in good shape. The picture solidified, a sleek image of the SI logo in the background and a single chat window open containing a single word.

Hide

“Oh no,” she whispered, closing her eyes. Gunshots rang out from the lobby overhead and she started, stabbing the monitor’s power button with one finger and slamming the cabinet shut. She bolted to her feet, her eyes darting frantically around the room.

“Oh no,” she repeated.
Allen Randal nudged the door open with his foot, his assault rifle raised, the laser scope winking off the bikes at the end of the small room.

“ Weird, the door’s open,” Bryant stated, peering over his shoulder with a frown.

“ Probably some fire safety thing,” Randal declared gruffly. Fire safety was a thing he didn’t approve of, it was always unlocking doors that weren’t meant to be open. He crossed the small room, grasping hold of the storage door and heaving it up.

“ Sweet!” Bryant declared with a grin. “ Check out the rides!”

“ Hey, pay attention,” Randal snapped, his scope trailing over the empty garage. He raised his hand to his radio, pressing the button. “ Sir, we’ve found the elevator, no security pad on this one just like we were told. ”

“ Units one through twelve move in to Randal’s position,” their commanding officer barked back. “ Tech, get the operating power back up! ”

“ Oh just look at this baby,” Bryant half swooned, pawing at the hood of the Tesla Roadster as several more armed thugs poured into the garage from the office. The overhead lights flickered to life and then dimmed to a less glaring level.

“ Yeah whatever,” Randal shrugged, squinting into the still darkened corners as Bryant ran his hands over the car.

“ Service elevator is back here!” one of the goons called out.
“Great!” Their commanding officer announced as he loped down the ramp. He turned his attention toward the express elevator as the door dinged opened. “General, we have access.”

“Proceed as planned,” General Ross’s voice replied over the radio.

“Units one through six, take the express elevator to the penthouse and secure the targets,” the commander ordered. “The rest of you with me, we’re going to access the labs.” The grunts filed onto the elevators, the doors closing behind them, leaving the garage bathed in silence and the soft glow of the overhead lights.

The trunk of the Tesla popped, the quite sound reverberating in the now empty garage, and a pair of brown eyes peeped out from the crack.

“Damn,” Bryn whispered. She pushed the trunk lid up, slithering out of the tiny space, her legs wobbling slightly as she set them on the floor.

“Oh this is a nightmare,” she breathed out, creeping cautiously up the ramp into her office. She stopped at her locker, opening it and grasping her hand gun, checking the magazine and the safety before tucking it in her jacket pocket. She swept up the taser, easing the door shut and crouching on the floor in front of the cabinet again. She opened the doors, turing the monitor back on and pulling the keyboard toward her.

Jarvis?

Yes, Bryn

OMG, are you all right?!

What’s going on!?

It’s complicated. Can you plug your
She fished around in back of the terminal until she found a stray usb cable, plugging it into the phone. A moment later the screen flickered, the SI logo appearing as the phone rebooted. Bryn bit her lip, setting it down and turning to sweep the room.

She moved on silent feet to the office door, peering out through the crack. At the end of the hall she could see shattered glass cascading down the stairs like a thousand diamonds littering the tile and she held her breath at the sound of movement from the lobby, slowly easing the door shut.

“Bryn, can you hear me?” Jarvis voice piped over the phone. Bryn jumped, making a dive for the phone and pressing it to her ear.

“Oh my god! Jarvis we’re under attack!” she blurted, wedging into the corner by the cabinet. “There are soldiers, armed soldiers! With guns, really, really big guns, Jarvis!”

“I’m aware,” he replied with a resigned sigh. “You need to get out of the building, call Agent Coulson or Romanov.”

“I can’t get out of the building!” She hissed angrily. “There’s this big forcefield… thing! What are we going to do?”

“We are not going to panic,” he replied firmly. “We have been well trained to deal with security issues.”

“I’ve been trained to knock some sense into muggers!” Bryn protested angrily. “This is not some kid trying to lift a smart phone. These are trained mercenaries. Scary, trained mercenaries… with guns. You remember me mentioning the big guns, right?”

“We have contingency protocols in place for just such an event,” Jarvis insisted.
“Protocols?” Bryn demanded, sinking down to the floor until she was huddled into a ball. “You’re a shut-in with social anxiety and I flunked rent-a-cop certification! This is a real crisis and we are the dorky baby siblings of the cool kids! We’re going to get killed!”

“Bryn, do you trust me?” Jarvis asked hesitantly. She let out a whimper, smacking her head slowly into the wall with a couple of soft thumps before letting her forehead sink to her knees.

“Bryn?”

“Yes,” she whispered, drawing in a shaky breath. “Yes, I trust you.”

“I will do absolutely everything in my power to protect you,” Jarvis swore vehemently. Bryn bit her lip, tears stinging her eyes.

“What’s the plan?” she asked, pushing herself up the wall and bracing her feet under her.

“I’m isolated from the Avengers,” he stated. “And I have no access to internal defensive systems, but before we lost internal security there were still twenty-seven employees in the lower floors of Stark Tower including yourself. They are now at risk. We should attempt to secure them from threat.”

“I could use some backup,” Bryn admitted. “Where’s Derek the night guard?”

“Mr. Winfield has been apprehended,” Jarvis informed. “From what I can tell he is relatively uninjured and handcuffed to the vending machine in the employee lounge on two.”

“Great,” Bryn huffed.

“Thor would say; he fought bravely against an overwhelming foe,” Jarvis related.

“Yep, that sounds like Derek,” Bryn nodded. “Who else is in the building?”
“Several of the cleaning staff are on floor twenty-six,” Jarvis answered. “They have yet to be discovered. There is also the server support crew on fifteen and two engineers working late on fifty and fifty-three.”

“If I were a scary, trigger happy merc the first thing I’d do after taking out the Avengers would be to secure the computer systems,” Bryn observed, creeping back out into the garage. “Can you get those guys out of the server room?”

“I have extremely limited communication on most floors,” Jarvis replied. “I can only speak to you because I loaded software into your phone that allows me to connect to it via Bluetooth.”

“That’s a pretty wicked hack,” Bryn gave a faint smile, her eyes scanning over Mr. Stark’s tool bench.

“Thank you,” Jarvis replied with a hint of shyness as Bryn stuffed a couple of screwdrivers in her pockets. “The bulk of the intruders do appear to be headed for the residential floors, however, there are several small teams sweeping the offices. They don’t seem to be aware of the location of the server rooms.”

“The emergency stairwell doors only open one way, right?” Bryn asked, pocketing a box cutter.

“To prevent unauthorized access to sensitive areas, yes,” Jarvis confirmed. “But I can override the locks on the doors below fifty-five.”

“Okay,” Bryn nodded, her hand closed around a wrench and she tested its weight. “There’s a service elevator out in the main garage, isn’t there? One for the floors below the labs?”

“Yes but the door to it is locked and it will not open from the outside without a key card,” Jarvis answered.

“And the key readers are all off line,” she stated. Her eye strayed down the hall to the service elevator and she paused.

“Damn,” she whispered half under her breath as she slowly closed her eyes.
“Bryn?” Jarvis prompted with a hint of worry.

“Jarvis, there’s a ventilation shaft at the end of the hall,” she stated, quickly opening several of the drawers. “Any idea where it goes?”

“You have spent too much time talking to Agent Barton,” he stated flatly.

“I’m not going to argue with that,” Bryn agreed, fishing a tangled mess of earbuds out of the last drawer and bracing the phone against her shoulder as she unknotted them. “Just tell me if it connects to the other service elevator.”

“I can navigate you there,” Jarvis offered as Bryn stuffed the earbuds in her ears and plugged them into the phone before tucking it under her bra strap. She turned down the hall, kneeling on the floor and pulling the flathead screwdriver from her pocket.

“When this is over I want a quarterly review, Jarvis,” Bryn stated, jimmying the vent cover free and scrambling into the ventilation shaft. “A really amazing quarterly review.”

“I’ll be sure to arrange it,” he agreed as she pulled the vent cover into place behind her.

“Come out to the coast,” Bryn muttered half under her breath as she slithered through the tiny metal tunnel. “We’ll get together, have a few laughs…”

“I’m sorry, I missed that,” Jarvis prompted with a hint of concern.

“It’s nothing, Jarvis,” she sighed. “nothing at all.”

Chapter End Notes

There will be a couple more chapters from Real Women Wear Dresses Hold on to your seats, it's going to be a bumpy ride.

For those of you wondering about the trunk:
There is an actual thing now called an "Interior Trunk Release." They're standard equipment these days on newer cars but can be added to classic and custom
automobiles. I refuse to believe that Tony Stark, or any kidnap victim, really, would own a car without one. It's not particularly safe, but it's a lot less deadly than lead poisoning. Just as a caution, don't try this at home. Unless, of course, armed thugs are invading your garage, in which case all bets are off.
The hallway outside the employee lounge was dark and the single guard at the door leaned against the frame with a bored look. He glanced over his shoulder now and again at his prisoner who was slouched on the floor, his hands zip tied together and one foot secured to the leg of the vending machine.

“Hey, buddy, not to get you in trouble with your bosses or anything,” The prisoner stated, a friendly smile on his face. “but I was wondering if a bathroom break was at all possible?” The guard turned a condescending look on him before directing his attention back toward the hall.

“Yeah, I thought it was a long shot,” the prisoner nodded sympathetically. “No worries, I can wait. Your bosses probably have their reasons. I mean, it’s got nothing to do with me, I just work here, you know?” The guard didn’t respond and the prisoner blew out a breath.

“Name’s Derek, what’s yours?” the prisoner, Derek, asked, earning a glare from his captor. “Not much of a talker, that’s cool, one of my kids isn’t much of a talker. He’s three. Wife’s a little antsy about it but I told her not to worry. He talks fine when he has something to say. If you ask me world would be a better place if more of us only talked when we had something worth saying.” The guard didn’t respond and Derek wriggled slightly reaching up with his bound hands to scratch his jaw.

“So I’m figuring whatever’s going on here’s probably important,” Derek gave a half shrug, twisting his stiff shoulders. “I just want you to know you got nothing to worry about from me, man. I’m not going to give you guys any trouble. You kind of took me by surprise when you came busting in here, I admit it, I just reacted. I mean, can you blame me with all those crazy fan kids loitering around outside every day? But clearly you guys are first class, not just a bunch of thugs or anything. So, you know, when your bosses get this sorted out, let them know, no hard feelings or anything.” The guard’s eyes narrowed to menacing slits and he turned, walking the handful of paces into the lounge and prodding the muzzle of his semi-automatic into Derek’s neck.

“Why don’t you shut up?” the guard demanded.

“I can do that,” Derek stated, nodding. The guard straightened, lowering his weapon with a smug look. There was a sizzle and a pop and a moment later his eyes rolled back into his head and he crumpled to the floor in a heap to reveal Bryn standing only steps behind him in the doorway.

“Dumbass,” Derek scoffed, prodding the guard in the forehead with his one free foot. “Don’t you know you’re not supped to take your eyes off the hallway?”
“Derek, are you all right?” Bryn asked worriedly, rushing to him to kneel on the floor and using the box knife to cut through the zip ties on his wrists with a sharp snap.

“I’ve been better,” he replied, rubbing his hands as she went to work on the tie securing his foot to the vending machine. “Thanks for the rescue.”

“I’d say any time but I honestly never want to do this again,” Bryn admitted. “Nice distraction by the way.”

“Hey, I do my part,” he gave her an awkward thumbs up, his eyes the faintest bit glassy. “What’s the plan?”

“Running and hiding mostly,” she answered with a sigh. “Are you injured, can you walk?”

“I can manage,” Derek insisted, wincing as he ran his fingers over his buzz cut. “They got me pretty good in the head but that’s it.” He drew his hand back to reveal blood on his fingertips and he frowned.

“Maybe they got me really good,” he conceded. Bryn shuffled around until she could see the wound and she made a face.

“It doesn’t look too awful,” She offered. “We have a first aid kit, we can get you cleaned up.” She scrambled to her feet, holding out one hand and carefully hauling him off the floor. He swayed into the vending machine and she grabbed him by the shoulders.

“I think you might have a concussion,” she observed.

“Had a concussion once when I was a Marine,” Derek replied, allowing her to pull his arm around her shoulder. “Pretty sure you’re right. What about that guy?"

“I’ve got nothing,” she replied, steadying him. “I used up the last of my zip ties on the guys hassling the cleaning crew. We better hurry, I don’t think I had much charge left in the taser” He let out a deep sigh as they made their way out of the door and into the hall.
“Wife is going to be pissed,” he declared.

“Hey Jarvis, can we make an exception and add Derek’s wife to the list of people Mr. Stark has managed to offend?” Bryn requested, pressing her free hand to the earbud in her ear.

“I’ll make a note,” he replied drily.

“So where’s our superhero rescue?” Derek asked with a frown.

“No idea,” she admitted with a sigh as they eased down the corridor.

“Just you and Jarvis?” Derek asked in surprise.

“Pretty much, yeah,” She nodded, tugging him around the corner. “Feel free to say it.”

“We’re kind of screwed,” he admitted.

“Yup,” she nodded in agreement. The sound of footsteps came from down the hall and she winced, looking around frantically before shoving Derek into a nearby cubicle and half forcing him under the desk as she crouched on the floor in front of him.

“Bryn!” he gave her a warning look, grasping hold of her arm, as she pulled her pistol from her pocket and checking the clip.

“Whatever you are thinking Bryn, please do not do it,” Jarvis pleaded in her ear.

“If you’ve got an alternative I love to hear it,” she hissed back as she released the safety. She searched around frantically, peering over the edge of the desk, her eyes finally falling on a trophy with a star on the top and the words “Employee of the Month” emblazoned on the plaque.

“Damn over achievers,” she muttered irritably, her fingers closing around the trophy. She was dimly
aware of Jarvis voice buzzing dire warnings but she blocked it out, drawing in a steadying breath as she crouched down, peering out under the desk past the edge of the cube wall. She let her eyes slip closed for only a moment, letting Phil’s confident voice play in the back of her head. She opened her eyes as black trousers and a pair of black shoes past. She sucked in a breath and gathered her feet under her and springing forward, the trophy connecting with the back of her target’s head with a dull thud. He let out a yelp as he crumpled to the floor and she whirled, leveling her pistol.

“Don’t shoot!” the petite brunette declared in an alarmed, lilting West Country accent, her hands flying up in the air as she dropped the bright candy pink stick she was holding.

“Oh, You’ve got to be kidding me,” Bryn’s eyes narrowed to menacing slits as she lowered the pistol. “You two?”

“Friends of yours?” Derek asked blearily as he clambered out from under the desk.

“Not any more,” Bryn answered, “stand down Jarvis, it’s the science wonder twins.”

“Oh Fitz, you poor dear,” the woman sighed, kneeling on the floor beside her companion who looked as if he tied one on a bit too tightly.

“She hit me in the head,” Fitz declared in clipped Scottish tones as he rolled into a sitting position.

“This keeps happening to him,” the woman explained as Bryn helped Derek get his feet under him.

“I can’t imagine why,” Bryn snapped, reaching out to help get Fitz off the floor. “What was the last thing I said to the two of you?”

“Stay in the cupboard and pretend you don’t exist?” the woman answered with a hesitant cringe.

“What is this, Harry Potter?” Fitz demanded, a sour frown marring his face as he rubbed the back of his head.

“Do you two have a death wish?” Bryn demanded. “and what is that?”
“Battery powered curling iron?” the woman replied, holding out her garish pink improvised weapon she’d retrieved from the floor.

“Seriously?” Bryn demanded.

“I think you burned the carpet,” Fitz huffed toeing at a mark on the rug.

“I have to get me one of those,” Derek stated, Bryn made a face nodding in grudging agreement as he turned to look at her. “What are they doing here?”

“I have the rest of the staff in a secure area on fifteen but our intruders cut us off so I had to bring them down here.” Bryn replied.

“It’s not like we asked to be involved,” Fitz snapped angrily.

“You’re a couple of engineers, you could have been killed.” Bryn reminded sternly.

“We’re not engineers,” the woman protested.

“Well I am,” Fitz declared, pointing at the woman. “Simmons isn’t.”

“I’m a bio chemist,” Simmons stated.

“That’s so much better,” Bryn observed.

“We’re not helpless!” Fitz snapped angrily.

“We’re not even SI employees,” Simmons added. “We’re SHIELD agents. We have actual field experience.”
“And whose terrible idea was that?” her companion demanded.

“Fitz!” Simmons rolled her eyes before turning back to Bryn. “We’re on Agent Coulson’s team and we’d been having a little problem with some analysis.”

“It wasn’t a problem,” Fitz protested, his scowl returning.

“And of course, the proprietary equipment in SI’s labs is the best in the world,” Simmons continued without missing a beat.

“We would have gotten it eventually,” Fitz insisted, rolling his eyes so forcefully his head turned with them.

“So Agent Coulson asked Mr. Stark to give us temporary access,” Simmons finished.

“Which was stupid on his part,” Fitz announced with no small amount of derision. “Because I’m going to reverse engineer all of it the moment we get home. I am never setting foot in this place again.”

“Fitz, Don’t be so dramatic,” Simmons sighed.

“You guys,” Bryn stated, pointing between them. “You’re Phil’s super secret spy team he keeps running off with?”

“Believe me, no one’s as surprised as I am,” Fitz snorted as Simmons nodded with a bright smile.

“Does he even know you’re here tonight?” she asked, tightening her jaw. Simmons’ smile fell off her face as Fitz opened his mouth to reply but no sound came out.

“Great,” Bryn snapped, pushing past them and heading back down the hall. “This is just great, can this night get any better? Stay here, let me check the stairwell.”

“Derek Winfield, night guard, ex marine, concussion sufferer,” Derek declared holding out his hand.
“Look Fitz, you two have something in common already,” Simmons stated encouragingly as she patted his arm.

“Coulson’s going to kill us,” Fitz observed, rubbing his eyes.

“Well he probably won’t kill us,” Simmons protested gently. “worst case he’ll bounce us from the team and erase our memories.” Fitz threw her a withering look.

“Jarvis, if there was ever a time for good news it’s now,” Bryn stated, carefully sweeping the rows between the cubes and opening the stairwell door.

“I regret I have none to give,” he admitted. “I have still been unable to connect to outside communications or to locate Agent Barton.”

“All the other Avengers are still in custody though?” She asked worriedly.

“To my knowledge,” he replied.

“Maybe Clint’s putting together a plan,” she stated, biting her lip. “How’s the path between here and five?”

“It appears to be clear, but you should hurry,” Jarvis advised. “Agent Coulson would never say so but I believe he is very fond of his team.”

“So keep them alive or make Phil sad,” Bryn’s shoulder’s slumped as she turned back down the rows of cubes. “Great, no pressure then.”

“I have faith in you,” Jarvis offered sincerely.

“Really, not helping,” she sighed, stopping at the corner and slumping against the wall.
“Are you going to be all right?” Jarvis asked worriedly.

“No I’m really not,” she admitted. “I was kind of hoping I’d spring Derek and he’s take over everything. He’s barely upright and these people are counting on me not to let them die. Phil’s counting on me.”

“Bryn,” He began hesitantly.

“Yeah, I know,” she sniffed, rubbing her eyes as she straightened. “Keep moving.” She straightened her skirt and square her shoulders before rounding the corner.

“Come on, guys,” She ordered crisply, moving to Derek’s side and reaching out to pull his arm over her shoulders. “Let’s get out of here.”

“What are we going to do once we’re secure?” Simmons asked, gently helping Fitz along as he swayed slightly.

“No clue,” Bryn admitted.

“Shouldn’t we mount a rescue or something?” she questioned with a worried frown.

“With what?” Fitz demanded. “A curling iron and half an icer?”

“Look, right now my job is to make sure you all stay not dead,” Bryn glowered over her shoulder at them as they headed up the stairwell. “Don’t make it difficult by tempting me to shoot you.”

“Are you always this short tempered or are you just bad under pressure?” Fitz asked with equal parts derision and curiosity.

“Don’t antagonize her, Fitz,” Simmons scolded gently. “She’s armed and she did save us from that rather nasty fellow with the gun.”

“Are they married?” Derek asked as they crossed the landing and turned up the next flight. “They
“I’m pretty sure everyone seems married when armed thugs invade your building,” Bryn half shrugged, tugging him along.

“If you could hurry it along a bit?” Jarvis suggested in her ear, his tone tense.

“Case in point,” she sighed, adjusting her grip on Derek as she continued to pull him up the stairs. Simmons and Fitz bickering quietly in her wake.

Chapter End Notes

The Coulson Lives Universe is not AoS compliant, however Phil's team and the bus do exist. It became necessary to have Phil missing on occasion and it was just easier to explain it as him having another team he takes on missions when the Avengers aren’t in the middle of a crisis. I'm not sure how many AoS cameos we'll see in the future but there will likely be some on occasion.
“Where are we, exactly?” Fitz asked with a frown, his hands on his hips as he stared at the terminal along the wall of the storage room. Bryn shrugged, checking the door lock once more before trudging across the room on leadened feet.

“Secure containment storage,” Bryn replied with a shrug, hopping up to sit on a corner of the desk as Fitz picked up the keyboard, pecking at it distractedly. “Jarvis says they shouldn’t be able to detect us and the door can’t be breeched without high yield explosives. It was either this or climb twelve flights of stairs.” She ran her fingers through her hair with a sigh. Now that they were safe and the cleaning crew was barricaded in the server room ten floors above them, she could admit to feeling exhausted.

“Do I want to know what you’re storing in here?” Fitz questioned skeptically, huffing at whatever he’d found in the computer systems, before pausing a moment to glance down the long, darkened rows of storage shelves.

“I didn’t ask and you probably shouldn’t either,” Bryn admitted, Her attention shifted to Simmons who had prodded Derek onto a dingy looking crate and was carefully cleaning out the cut on the back of his head with the contents of a first aid kit they’d found mounted next to the fire extinguisher inside the door. “How you doing?”

“What’s the word doc?” Derek asked, shrugging lazily.

“Hold still,” Simmons commanded. “The wound isn’t deep but you have a mild concussion. Just give me a moment.”

“Take your time Doc,” Derek assured. “You need something for your head there Fitz?” He glanced over at the engineer who seemed too distracted by whatever he was working on to either notice or acknowledge the question.

“Hold still,” Simmons ordered again, firmly grasping the top of his head and turing it so that he was staring straight at the wall before letting her gaze dart to Bryn. “So what do we do now?”

“Absolutely nothing,” Bryn insisted, with all the conviction she could muster. “I mean, unless you have some ideas about how to disable the forcefield around the building.”
“The systems are a bloody mess,” Fitz hissed angrily, his eyes narrowing at the uncooperative computer. “I can’t… no maybe if I…”

“He’s very good,” Simmons assured, taping down a bandage on Derek’s head and gently patting his shoulder. “I’m sure if there’s a way to get communications out.”

“Jemma, I need a,” Fitz interrupted, waving a hand at her impatiently.

“I’ll look,” She replied, scooting off toward a shelf of bins holding electrical equipment. “Derek, stay where you are, and try not to strain yourself.”

“Wife is going to be so pissed,” he sighed, shifting on the crate until his shoulders were braced against the wall.

“I could use someone more familiar with these systems,” Fitz observed begrudgingly.

“Not really my area,” Bryn shook her head.

“What about this Jarvis fellow you keep talking to?” Fitz pressed, continuing to pick at the keyboard. “Who is he anyway, he seems handy.”

“Mr. Starks butler-slash-lab assistant,” Bryn replied, fiddling with her ear buds. “Jarvis, Fitz is trying to gain access to the systems down here, maybe get the shields down?”

“Just a moment,” came Jarvis’ terse reply.

“Excellent!” Fitz declared mere seconds later, a wicked smirk tugging at his lips as his fingers danced over the keyboard. “Oh, there’s a… can you ask him if he noticed this radiation spike?”

“I had noticed, Dr. Fitz” Jarvis’ voice answered from the computer’s speakers, giving the engineer a start that he quickly shook off. “I’ve been unable to determine a reason, however.” Fitz made a face,
returning his attention to the computer screen.

“I don’t suppose you have any good news?” Bryn asked, tugging the earbuds from her ears.

“I’ve located Agent Barton,” Jarvis replied, his tone the slightest bit worried.

“Oh thank god,” Bryn sighed, burying her face in her hands and curling up until her elbows were braced on her knees. She stayed that way a long moment before sitting up. “Can we talk to Clint?”

“I’m still encountering communications difficulties throughout most of the tower,” Jarvis replied, irritably. “We’ve managed to restore some of the security cameras but we’ve been unsuccessful reactivating the majority of systems. Agent Barton has been rendered somewhat trapped on the upper floors but he is otherwise safe. I’ve apprised him of your situation and he’s instructed me to tell you to remain where you are until counter measures can be implemented.”

“Good, I didn’t want to be involved anyway,” Fitz declared mulishly.

“So he has a plan?” Bryn questioned. There was a long silent pause.

“Agent Barton has asked that you exercise discretion and refrain from involving yourself further,” Jarvis replied hesitantly.

“He told me to fuck off, didn’t he?” Bryn asked, her mouth curling up in a wry smile.

“Accurate if tactless,” Jarvis conceded.

“I like this guy,” Fitz declared, his face brightening in the first signs of a smile. “Friend of yours?”

“Jarvis is my boss,” Bryn replied, biting her lip to hide her grin. “What about the other Avengers, are they okay?”
“Mr. Stark and Thor are incarcerated but unharmed. I have lost track of Doctor Banner,” Jarvis replied. “Agent Barton is currently engaged in locating him.”

“If we could get a message out to Agent Coulson he could bring backup,” Simmons pointed out, appearing beside Fitz and handing him a fist full of cables and circuit boards.

“Well it’s not going to help if he can’t get in,” Fitz complained, handing her back a cable and a pair of wire cutters. “strip those.”

“Jarvis, what about Steve?” Bryn asked, her brow crinkling in a worried frown as Simmons fumbled with the wire cutters and Fitz untwisted a ball of soldering wire.

“The Captain is currently in one of the secure labs on Sixty-two,” Jarvis answered. Bryn waited but Jarvis offered nothing more, the silence growing uncomfortable.

“Jarvis, what’s in the labs on sixty-two?” She asked cautiously. There was no answer and she slid slowly off the corner of the desk. “Jarvis?”

“Neural Engineering,” Simmons declared uncomfortably, her brow crinkling in distress before she returned her attention the wires she was stripping. Bryn gave her a repulsed look.

“Are they experimenting on him?” she demanded, her eyes growing wide with horror. Jarvis didn’t immediately answer and she balled her hands into fists.

“Jarvis!” she snapped.

“The captain is currently restrained and alone,” he replied cautiously as Fitz abandoned the soldering iron and returned to pecking at the keyboard with a dark frown.

“That is not an answer!” Bryn insisted hotly. “What have they been doing to him? Is he in any danger?” Cold silence met her in return and she slowly closed her eyes, covering her mouth with one hand.
“Oh that doesn’t look good,” Simmons remarked leaning over Fitz’s shoulder for a better view of the computer screen. Bryn turned on her heel, watching as vital statistics scrolled up the screen.

“I find that a little alarming,” Fitz agreed, nodding.

“Has he lost blood?” Simmons questioned with a serious frown. “He’s probably already in shock, even with his metabolism.” Bryn drew in three long, slow, deep breaths, rubbing the tears from her eyes on the sleeve of her jacket.

“Right, okay,” she declared, squaring her shoulders. “Simmons, I want you to lock the door behind me. It’d probably be better if you not open it again until one of the Avengers comes for you. I could be compromised.”

“Bryn, I know what you’re thinking,” Jarvis warned as she pulled her pistol from her pocket, checking it over again carefully and removing the clip.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Simmons asked worriedly. “You’re barely armed and you don’t have any backup.”

“They’re not going to leave him alone forever,” Bryn shook her head firmly, pocketing her gun again. “This might be the best chance.”

“I replaced the battery in your taser,” Fitz declared, holding it out her as he stared at the computer screen. She took it with a grateful nod, not even bothering to ask how he’d managed that.

“Bryn I will not allow you to go out there!” Jarvis insisted angrily.

“Then fire me!” Bryn shouted back at him. Silence settled over the room and she choked on a breath, her tone softening. “Fire me, Jarvis, but he’s my friend and I’m not staying in here when he could be dying. You can fire me if you want, but I’m still going out there.” Her phone let out a soft ping and she fished it out from under her bra strap, thumbing the button.

“If I fire you, your employee ID will be voided,” Jarvis stated. “You will no longer be able to access secured areas.”
“I know,” she replied, taking a few steps away from Simmons who was watching her with deeply sympathetic eyes.

“You’ll have nowhere safe to escape,” he added.

“That won’t keep me in here,” she replied.

“But, Bryn, don’t leave the containment area,” he pleaded finally. “I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“Do you want something to happen to Steve?” she asked, her voice wobbling. “Or Mr. Stark? He’s still captured. Is that what you want?” the question was met with silence and she wrapped her arm around her middle.

“These people are dangerous,” he insisted after another long pause. “If you give them a reason, they will kill you.”

“Jarvis, I’m going to go up to sixty-two and I’m going to break Steve out of the lab,” she replied, drawing in a deep breath. “You can either help me or you can try to stop me. The one thing you can’t do is make me stay here.”

“I have surveillance up in most areas,” Jarvis stated resignedly. “I can at least warn you of intruder detection.” Bryn drew in a shaky breath.

“Thank you,” she stated softly. She stuffed her earbuds back in her ears and tucked the phone under her bra strap before waving Simmons toward the door.

“Be careful,” Simmons warned gently. Bryn gave her a firm nod.

“Let Jarvis know if you make any progress and keep an eye on Derek for me,” the night guard gave her a bleary salute that she answered with a thumbs up before opening the door bolt and slipping out into the hall. The door closed behind her with a solid thud and she shivered.
“Bryn?” Jarvis asked tentatively.

“Yeah?” she replied in a hoarse whisper, creeping down the darkened hall.

“Did you really fail rent-a-cop certification?” She let out a bark of a laugh, covering her mouth with her hand as her tears finally spilled over.

“Yeah I did,” she admitted, drying her eyes. “I tried to get a job as a mall cop my sophomore year of college.”

“We’re going to have an extremely long conversion about security clearances and appropriate responses on Monday,” Jarvis stated drily.

“Good luck with that,” she agreed, nodding as she peered around the corner of the T junction. “Because right now I am ninety percent sure I’m calling in too-exhausted-to-move on Monday.”
“Bryn, hurry!” Jarvis’ frantic tone sent a shiver down her spine and Bryn jumped the last few stairs to the landing, her sweaty palm slipping on the rail as she used it to slingshot herself around the corner and down the next flight, taking the steps two and three at a time.

“Hurrying!” she barked out breathlessly. Her shoulders hunched up over her ears involuntarily as the sound of gunfire reverberated up the stairwell from the floor below and she gritted her teeth, increasing her speed toward the threat.

“Be careful!” he pleaded in her ear.

“Be careful and run toward the loud noise of dying!” Bryn snapped back, her feet almost slipping out beneath her as she rounded the next landing. “I’m so glad you’re here to give me advice!” Whatever Jarvis might have said in reply was drowned out by the sharp stutter of automatic weapons and she made a dive for the stairwell doorway, the door hanging half off its hinges. She pulled her taser from her pocket, raising it to take aim as she scurried between the rows of cubicles. She could just make out a flash of uniforms in the next junction and she popped up over the top of the cubicle wall, firing off three quick shots before ducking back down. Bullets whizzed overhead and she curled in on herself covering her ears with her hands. There was the slightest pause and then two loud shots from a handgun followed by total silence. Bryn lowered her hands slowly, her eyes wide.

“The area is clear,” Jarvis reported.

“Phil?” Bryn shouted, scuttling on her hands and knees to the corner of the junction. “Phil?!”

“Bryn, my god, what are you doing here?” he demanded in shock. Bryn scrambled to her feet, tripping over the intruders sprawled in the hallway before half crashing into the SHIELD agent, her hands fisting desperately in his jacket.

“Phil! Oh my god, Phil you’re shot!” she gasped out, her hand hovering over his bleeding shoulder as tears welled up in her eyes. “I don’t know what to do. What do I do?”

“It’s okay,” Phil insisted firmly, pulling his tie free and wrapping it over the wound. “It went clean through the muscle, missed the bone entirely. I’ll be fine.” He reached out, his hand settling gently on her neck, his thumb brushing against her cheek.
“Thanks for the assist,” he added with a hint of pride. “You did great, you did perfect.” Bryn fell into his unwounded shoulder with a half strangled sob and he wrapped his left arm around her, pulling her closer.

“Just like you taught me?” she murmured into his suit jacket as she clung to him.

“Damned brilliant,” he nodded, his hand settling on the back of her head as he shushed her softly. “If you ever get tired of working for Stark.”

“After tonight I don’t think I’d work for SHIELD if it was the last job on earth,” she answered vehemently.

“Fair enough,” he agreed with an amused smile.

“I hate to interrupt,” Jarvis sounded off in her ear hesitantly.

“Steve!” She jerked back from Phil’s grasp, her eyes wide. “Doctor Ross has gone after Steve. Jarvis says he’s really bad.”

“Damn it,” Phil hissed, his brow furrowing. He looked down at the console he’d been working at and winced at the screen peppered with bullet holes. He let out a resigned sigh turning back to Bryn. “I don’t want to do this, but I don’t have a choice now. I’m going to need your help.”

“Me?” she asked, giving him a bewildered look.

“I managed to reboot internal communications and door security,” He stated, leaning into the desk against the wall with a grunt. Bryn hurried to his side, helping him shove it out from the wall. “I still need to reboot the security control servers on fifty-six.”

“Fifty-six is shut off,” Bryn declared, as Phil knelt on the floor, pulling the handle on the small door marked plumbing access. “Jarvis said something about emergency bulkheads.”
“It’s a safety precaution in case someone attempts to do what Ross and his men are doing now.” Phil nodded sticking his head through the opening. “It’s why they haven’t been able to completely take over. But there’s an access ladder here that isn’t on any schematic. I need you to climb up to the server room, Jarvis can talk you through it.” Bryn clambered down on her hands and knees beside him, peering into the near pitch darkness.

“Phil, I should tell you,” She confessed. “I can’t even customize my own Tumblr theme.”

“Do this for me and I’ll help you with that later,” he promised, his brow knitting. “Bryn, I can’t get up that ladder with my shoulder like this, even if I could, I’d never be able to make the climb fast enough. I need to go and make sure Betty and Steve get clear.”

“Yeah, okay, I get it,” she nodded with a sigh, crawling into the access shaft.

“Once you’re in the server room, stay there,” Phil instructed, his tone firm. “You’ll be safe.”

“Phil, there are armed thugs invading my job,” she declared giving him a dry look. A faint smile curled his lips and he shrugged his good shoulder.

“Good luck,” he stated, his expression turning serious.

“You too,” She leaned out of the access hatch to kiss his cheek before grasping hold of the ladder and hauling herself up.

“This was not in my job description, Jarvis,” Bryn observed as she clambered up the ladder in the darkened access hatch.

“Nor mine,” he agreed. “I should tell you, once we start the boot sequence, the entire room will lock down. You will not be able to open any of the doors for seven minutes and I will be unable to communicate with you.”

“I can manage for seven minutes,” Bryn assured. “There’s a hatch here with a keypad.”
“The access code is 1113,” he instructed. Bryn wrapped her arm around the rail, leaning toward the hatch and pressing the code into the softly glowing keypad. The hatch opened with a hiss and she wriggled though, pulling herself up behind a bank of servers.

“Homey,” She observed, her eyes sweeping over the entire floor of disturbingly silent server racks.

“The main console is to your left near the center of the room,” Jarvis supplied.

“Can I ask you something?” she questioned as she made her way toward the console. “Isn’t it a little weird to have a server farm on the fifty-sixth floor? I thought you were supposed to put the computers in the basement.”

“There is, in fact, a server farm in the basement,” Jarvis answered. “But there was inadequate space. These servers control only the building’s security systems. It was thought that any threat that could destroy this floor would render issues of security moot.”

“I’ll buy that,” Bryn nodded, approaching the console and resting her palms on the desk on either side of the keyboard in front of the darkened screen. “So?”

“I believe I can use your phone,” Jarvis declared, his voice coming from the room’s speakers rather than her earbuds. She tugged them from her ears, pulling the plug and stuffing them in her pocket as she clipped the phone into the dock. Immediately the screen flashed, then went dark.

“Several of the servers are down,” he reported. “Turn to your right.”

“Yeah, it’s dark down that way,” Bryn nodded, creeping down the row of serves with careful steps.

“There is a reset switch on the far wall,” Jarvis instructed. “Hurry, Bryn, there are intruders approaching Doctor Ross’ position.” she broke into a run, scurrying to the end of the racks, her eyes sweeping the corner of the room.

“Big circuit breaker looking thing?” she asked, cringing.
“It might spark,” Jarvis warned. “Push it all the way down and then back up. Then run.” Bryn nodded, grasping the switch and throwing her weight into it as she pulled it toward the floor and then pushing up with her shoulder.

The panel around the switch sizzled and she let out a yelp as smoke and flames shot out, backpedaling with so much force she hit the window. She pushed off, sprinting down through the bank of servers as the sizzled and sparked in her wake.

“Jarvis??!!” she shouted in a panic.

“It’s fine!” he insisted, his tone tense. “Stay clear of the server banks!” She skidded to a stop at the console, her hands grasping at the desk to arrest her motion as the blank screen flickered to life.

Bryn’s eyes widened to the size of saucers and she scrambled back from the console as if she had been burned, tripping over her feet and landing hard on the floor.

“Bryn get under cover!” Jarvis ordered, his voice sharp but she didn’t move, her breath coming in short gasps. Sparks and static shot off the surrounding servers as they flickered to life but she stayed frozen in place, still as a statue.
“Bryn!”

She shot to her feet, her ballet flats beating a rapid staccato against the seamless tile floor, her eyes tunneled on the secure fire doors in the far corner. She let out a yelp as she crashed into them, her hands shaking as she struggled to grasp the handle but the doors stayed unmoving.

The rumble was so deep and low at first she thought the building must be collapsing beneath her but the sound drew out, rising to a bloodcurdling howl and she looked up through the bulletproof glass in time to see the fire doors on the other side bow as a massive green fist swung against the glass. She caught a glimpse of green eyes and she fell back, running in the other direction, her shoulder landing against the security door to the elevator. She pushed against the emergency release but the door held fast and she beat the bar with her fist, her heart hammering in her chest as the sound of giant, pounding footsteps shook the floor.

She sank to her knees, her arms tangling over her head as she curled in on herself and screamed.
“Yeah, Honey, I’m fine,” Derek the night guard winced as the SHIELD medic swabbed antiseptic on the gash on the back of his head and he glanced down at the cell phone he was holding. “No, totally fine, I was never in any danger. Spent the whole thing locked in a storage room.” He made a face at the blatant lie that Bryn normally would have found funny but all she could do was stare blankly at him across the lobby.

The first floor was a buzz of activity. A team of SHIELD agents scurrying back and forth in between SI’s own security response unit. Bryn hunched farther down in the sofa, tucking her trembling hands under her arms and trying to make herself look less noticeable as Dr. Foster passed, herding a half dozen of the intruders with zip-tied wrists toward a SHIELD van on the curb.

“You’re very lucky, sir,” Simmons observed, her brow furrowed in concentration as she stitched Coulson’s shoulder wound closed. Phil barely acknowledged her assertion, almost oblivious as he balanced a radio on his good shoulder and fiddled with his STARK Tablet.

“Bryn?” Jarvis’ hesitant voice whispered from the speaker near the sofa she was currently trying to disappear into. The sound barely carrying amid the bustle in the lobby.

“I’m fine,” she declared, the slightest sharpness in her tone.

Thor opened the front door, ushering a man who looked like a doctor inside just as another member of SI security tried to muscle a pair of their intruders out the same door. Without a word the Asgardian shoved the door open all the way and reach down to the pavement, grasping hold of the collar of an unconscious man in a general’s uniform and using him to prop the door open. Bryn bit her lip as he jovially escorted the doctor along toward the elevators, leaving the General folded up against the open door as traffic continued to stream in and out.

“Fitz can you hand me the suture scissors?” Simmons requested. Fitz was lying on one of the sofas beside her with one arm draped over his eyes but obediently reached out blindly with the other, grasping gold of the needed tool on the tray on his first try and holding in up to her.

“Thank you,” she stated.

“Don’t mention it,” he replied thinly.
“Bryn?” Jarvis repeated but she didn’t answer, her attention straying to where Dr. Foster was speaking to a dark-haired, muscular woman in leather tac gear. She gave the scientist a sharp nod before turning to Coulson.

“What’s the status?” Phil asked as she approached him with an impatient frown.

“Ward and his team are still sweeping the office levels,” she replied, her eyes narrowing at Phil’s shoulder wound. “Stark’s security has the lab levels. I radioed in for more backup but Hill says that HQ has its own problems right now. This is all they can spare.” She jerked her head in the direction of the huddle of cleaning staff, wrapped in shock blankets and relating their evening to a handful of SHIELD interviewers.

“We’ll have to make do,” Phil sighed in resignation.

“You’re done, Sir,” Simmons declared, her thumb gently pressing down the last of the tape around his fresh bandage.

“Simmons, help with the debrief,” he nodded. “May and I.” He turned back to the agent but she narrowed her eyes at him.

“You can stay down here and coordinate the mop up,” May growled threateningly. “I’ll go sweep the rec floors.”

“Keep coms open with Jarvis,” Phil suggested as she stalked toward the elevators. She threw him a condescending look over her shoulder that seemed to make him grin brighter. He glanced over at Bryn, his smile softening to something more gentle and she forced herself to return it before looking away, pretending to be distracted by Derek who was giving a rather animated account of the hostile takeover of the lobby.

“Bryn?” Jarvis repeated.

“I said I was fine,” she insisted, her tone much less harsh this time. She peered out of the corner of her eye at Phil who was motioning to a young woman about her own age. She glanced in Bryn’s direction before nodding, tucking a wayward strand of long brown hair behind her ear before pulling out her radio.
“Bryn, have you been checked over by medical?” Jarvis asked worriedly. She closed her eyes letting out an unsteady breath.

“Um, hi?” She opened her eyes to find the brunette looking down at her with a doe-eyed half smile. “I’m Skye, AC… erm.. Coulson asked me to call you a car and see that you got home okay. If it’s all right I can debrief you on the way.”

“I’m…” Bryn drew in a shaky breath, stuffing her hands under her thighs to hide their trembling. “It’s, look, I know Phil’s being protective and all but I’m okay. I’m just tired, it’s been a long night.” Skye’s face broke in a grin.

“He must really like you if he lets you call him Phil,” she observed, sinking down on the plush sofa beside Bryn and clutching her Stark tablet to her chest.

“He got a little testy with me for calling him sir since I don’t work for him,” Bryn related, ducking her head. “He said it made him sound like an old man.” Skye let out a giggle, covering her mouth with her hand.

“Thanks for backing him up.” Skye stated looking up to find Phil giving a contrite looking Simmons and a bleary Fitz a firm if quite dressing down. “And for keeping an eye on FitzSimmons.”

“Don’t mention it,” Bryn nodded. Skye’s radio beeped and she turned her infectious smile on Bryn.

“Ready to blow this joint?” she asked.

“Um, that’s not necessary,” Bryn offered hesitantly. “I mean, you can debrief me and I’ll just head home, it’s fine, I’m fine.”

“She should have medical check her over,” Jarvis’ voice sounded again and Skye jumped.

“Damit I’m fine!” Bryn snapped. “They checked me and I’m fine! Go bother Agent May!” Skye looked toward the speaker hidden unobtrusively behind a potted plant and then down at her Stark Tablet, swiping a few keys. She peered around the lobby, then shifted just a little bit closer to Bryn.
“You know it’s okay if you’re not, right?” she whispered softly. Bryn made to protest but Skye waved her off. “He can’t hear us if we’re quite. You kind of don’t look okay.” Bryn didn’t answer.

“My hands won’t stop shaking,” she admitted finally, her voice low and verging on frantic. “I sat down here and they started shaking and they won’t stop.” Skye fished around in her messenger bag, pulling out a bottled water and cracking it open before holding it out to Bryn.

“Hang on to it,” she murmured with a knowing look. “If you have something to hold on to it’s harder to tell your hands are shaking.” Bryn clutched at the bottle with both hands and Skye popped up off the couch, tugging Bryn after her.

“Taking the big hero home, AC!” she called over her shoulder as she shuffled Bryn toward the door on unsteady feet.

“Don’t get lost in Brooklyn!” Phil called after them. Skye shot him a thumbs up, steering Bryn out the open door and hopping over the sagging body of the general before flinging open the door of a SHIELD car and bustling Bryn into the back. She gave the drivers door a thump and clambered in after her.

Bryn’s stomach pitched as she stared at the back of the driver’s head through bullet proof glass, the motion of the car making her feel suddenly dizzy. Beside her Skye tapped away at her Stark tablet, her brow furrowed in concentration. Once she seemed satisfied she set it aside, turning to Bryn.

“You maybe better drink that,” she suggested, pointing at the bottle Bryn was still clinging to as the car turned the corner, heading up the ramp to merge onto Park. “You’re looking a little gray.” Bryn twisted the cap free, managing to hold the bottle steady enough to force down a few gulps. The last lodged in her throat and she let out a choked gasp that dissolved into a fit of coughing, her eyes watering.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Skye offered hesitantly when she’d finally stilled. “I mean, we can just skip on to the debrief, keep it all professional. But if you’d feel better.” her voice trailed off a bit helplessly and Bryn stared down at her still shaking hands.

“Have you ever thought the world was one way?” she asked softly. “Like you had a good handle on things? And then all of a sudden something happens and it’s like you’re wrong about everything?” Skye let out an amused snort and Bryn turned to look at her with an bemused frown.
“When Coulson found me,” she began apologetically. “I was living in my van behind a coffee shop, leaking top secret information onto the internet. So… yeah.”

“I don’t know what to believe any more,” Bryn whispered.

“The world is a lot weirder than I thought it was,” Skye conceded in agreement, her attention straying out the window.

“I have to go back to work next week,” Bryn stated, her voice trembling as she stared at the floor. “I have to go back to work and I don’t know how…” Her voice cracked and she covered her mouth with trembling hands.

“Hey, it’s okay,” Skye insisted, her arm wrapping around Bryn’s shoulder. “Coulson has a pretty good opinion of you. That probably means that you’re a lot tougher than you think you are. He’s pretty good at looking at people and actually seeing them, so whatever happened, I think you’re going to be okay.” Bryn drew in a shuddering breath and another, her vision tunneling. Skye tightened the arm around her shoulder, drawing her closer and she let out a choked sound, her stuttered breathing dissolved into soft sobs.
Chapter Notes

This chapter takes place just before the meeting in *Where it Hurts*

“So you want to tell me what the crisis is, kiddo?” Clint Barton slid into the booth of the cramped coffee house, prying the plastic lid off his cup. Steam wafted from the pitch black contents and Bryn stared as he grabbed a fist full of yellow packets from the condiment tray, ripping them all open and dumping them in. She blinked as if clearing her vision before looking up at him uneasily.

The coffee house was dingy and threadbare in the way a shop becomes when it has once been well loved and well used and then changed into hands that did not love it quite so well. The edges of the tables were battered and the sheet vinyl floor dingy. The stained bench seats were the faintest bit tacky and Bryn shifted uncomfortably looking over her shoulder at the nearly empty room.

“I never said there was a crisis,” she stuttered out. Clint’s eyes narrowed slightly as he stirred.

“You’ve been squirrelly since the tower invasion,” he stated, matter-of-fact. “You turned Steve and I both down for lunch, you rescheduled training with Phil and you actually called in sick last Thursday for the first time since you started working for Stark. And now I get a cryptic text asking to meet for coffee two blocks from the tower.”

“Maybe I like the coffee here,” she replied defensively.

“Nobody likes the coffee here,” he insisted. As if to prove his point he took a sip, making a face and reaching for more sweetener. “Come on, don’t make me go all Guantanamo on you. Spill.” She stared at him for a long moment, her mouth half open as if the words had become stuck on the way to her lips.

“I think my best friend’s a computer.”

Bryn wasn’t sure what she expected. The way her heart was fluttering in her chest she was probably expecting Clint to laugh, to ask her how she hadn’t caught on. Maybe she’d expected him to deny it. She wasn’t really sure. She definitely hadn’t expected his calm, measured gaze meeting hers over the
top of his coffee cup.

“Out of curiosity, how did you figure it out?”

She kept forgetting Clint Barton defied expectation.


“Damn it, kiddo, did I not tell you to stay out of it?” He demanded. “Do you ever listen to anything you’re told?”

“You know what? Screw you,” Bryn snapped, her shoulders pulling back as her eyes narrowed angrily. “Because I don’t work for you! Apparently I work for Skynet and I thought you were my friend and you’d tell me something like that!” Clint stared at her in silence for a long moment.

“You’re upset,” he observed finally, his voice even. “So I’m going to pretend you didn’t just say that about Jarvis.” Bryn’s face crumpled, her lower lip trembling only slightly. She ducked her head, staring at her hands as they twisted nervously on the edge of the table.

“Bryn?” her shoulders hitched at Clint’s soft inquiry and he reached across the table, taking hold of her hand. “Bryn, look at me.” She lifted her eyes just enough to meet his own and he gave her hand a squeeze.

“No one’s tricked you,” he said seriously. “No one’s deceived you or made fun of you. This wasn’t an experiment.”

“It was though,” she replied, her her voice wavering. “You actually expect me to believe this wasn’t?”

“I know how it looks,” Clint interrupted. “But that’s not it. We weren’t lying to you. Jarvis is a real person. And yes he’s a program, but he thinks and feels just like everyone else. Where it really matters, he’s not any different than the rest of us.”
“But why didn’t you tell me?” she asked, tears stinging her eyes.

“That was Tony’s only rule,” Clint shrugged. “Don’t tell anyone about Jarvis. He invited us into his home like family and that was the only thing he asked in return. When Pepper decided to hire you she asked us not to discuss it with you, that Jarvis would tell you when he was ready.”

“Well then why didn’t he tell me?” Bryn demanded. “Why would he… lie to me? Why did he even feel like he needed to hide it in the first place?”

“You want to think about that a minute and then get back to me?” Clint asked, giving her hand one last squeeze before releasing it and picking up his coffee cup. Bryn scowled at him in frustration but Clint only stared back at her in silence. Finally he took another sip of his coffee, pinning her with a considering look.

“I’m deaf in my left ear,” he stated flatly.

“What?”

“Eighty-eight percent hearing loss,” he nodded, pragmatically. “forty-eight percent in my right ear so that’s not so bad. I don’t need to read lips to know what’s going on. I know how, but usually I could hear just enough out of my right ear to bluff my way though.” He pulled his hair away from his left ear, turning his head so Bryn could see better.

“I have this state of the art implant,” he explained, tapping at some raised skin behind his ear where a small metal button protruded, barely visible. “Really Star Trek. Well, Stark-Trek in this case. I used to have them built into my com but I got captured a couple of times and the goons took my com so then I couldn’t hear. Damn disadvantage, so I have this now. It’s awesome, even works underwater. I forget I can’t hear sometimes.”

“Why doesn’t anyone know about this?!” Bryn demanded. “Do you know how much that would mean to kids with hearing loss? To know there was an Avenger just like them? Do you even realize the good it could do if people knew?” Clint raked his hair down over his ear, one end of his mouth curling up in half a smile.

“Do you have any idea what could happen if the wrong people knew?” he asked finally.
“Oh my god,” The color drained from Bryn’s face and she leaned over the table hissing at him. “Are you nuts?! Why did you tell me that? How do you even know it’s safe here? How do you know I’m safe? I could be kidnapped, I could tell someone! Are you trying to endanger yourself?” Clint didn’t respond except to carefully sip his coffee. Bryn’s face cycled through a half dozen emotions before she finally stopped, slumping back in the booth.

“Damn,” she mumbled out, half under her breath.

“Now you’re getting it,” Clint nodded seriously. He set down his coffee, folding his hands on the table for a moment. “You know, for the longest time Tasha and Phil were the only ones on the team who knew. Stark Industries built my first implant before I ever met Tony. He never would have found out if he hadn’t grabbed me jumping off a building this one time and some debris caught me in the head. Knocked me right out. When I came to, he asked me how my backup headset was working. For a while he was happy tinkering with the code but when I went in for my spinal surgery he had them install a whole new model. My hearing’s better than most people now. It’s even got a parabolic setting.”

“Wait,” Bryn gaped at him. “Are you telling me most of your own team doesn’t know you’re… does Jarvis know?”

“Jarvis knows everything,” Clint shrugged.

“But Captain America doesn’t,” Bryn added. Clint nodded in confirmation. “And I do… why would you tell me any of this?”

“Because you seem like you’re having a hard time with the idea that you can care about someone, and trust them and still not know how to tell them your secrets.” Clint replied gently. “All I can figure is that you don’t really have any, so you don’t realize what a tinderbox they can be. Or how much you can destroy if you’re not careful.”

“No, it’s just that I’ll tell my secrets if you ask the right questions,” Bryn confessed, biting her lip. Clint gave her a fond smile.

“We never lied to you,” Clint insisted. “I know that’s hard to see, but in our line of work there’s always something that’s classified, something we’re not allowed to talk about.”

“But you did more than that,” she protested with a hurt look. “All those times I gave him a hard time
about not leaving the house and you played up to it. You made me think…” Clint gave her a considering look, wrapping his hands around his coffee cup.

“Tell me what we made you think,” Clint coaxed, taking a sip of his coffee. “Come on, Marshall, you’re a smart kid. Tell me what you thought.”

“I thought he was some brilliant kid with health problems and out of control anxiety,” Bryn admitted, staring at the table. “And Mr. Stark took him under his wing because he wasn’t in any shape to attend university.” Clint gave her a surprised look.

“Mr. Stark would never let a genius go to waste,” Bryn added with a shrug. Clint nodded in agreement.

“I normally only tell my own secrets,” he admitted. “But, the social anxiety part is completely true. I don’t know why, but Jarvis is scared of people, of humans.”

“What do you mean?” she asked in bewilderment.

“The first time I met him, right after the battle of New York, he pretended to be a doorbell,” Clint replied. “A really sophisticated one, sure, but an automated system. He didn’t want me to know he was a person. I didn’t find out until I moved into the tower. I’ve seen him do it over and over again. Every time he encounters new people he pretends to be less than what he actually is. He’s afraid.”

“Why would he…” Bryn’s voice trailed off. “What do you think happened?”

“I don’t know,” Clint admitted. “If I had to guess? There are some things in Tony’s SHIELD file that would seriously make me doubt humans could be trusted.”

“That’s it, isn’t it?” she sighed, blinking as she turned to look out the window. “He didn’t trust me either.”

“Maybe by the time he did trust you, it had gone on so long he didn’t know what to say,” Clint suggested. Bryn looked back at him, biting her lip again and he sighed. “If you want a real answer you’re going to have to ask him.”
“I can’t,” she confessed, swallowing hard. “I don’t think he knows I know.” Her voice trembled on the last word and she closed her eyes for only a moment.

“He knows something’s wrong,” Clint admitted. “He’s worried about you.”

“Can he?” Bryn asked.

“Oh yeah,” he nodded readily. “God, yeah.” Clint drew in a deep breath, rubbing his eyes for a moment.

“He’s so smart,” Clint related, shaking his head. “And he’s so good under pressure, because you have to be to hang around with Tony for any length of time. It’s easy sometimes to forget that underneath it all, he’s practically a kid. Kind of a sheltered kid. He’s never had a life outside Tony’s lab before, he’s never had more than a couple of people to care about before the Avengers moved in, and we’re not the best examples of emotionally stable adults in the world. He gets scared and worried just like everyone else, and we forget. We forget that we need to look out for him as much or more as he looks out for us.” A single tear trickled down her cheek and she brushed it away quickly.

“Every time he’s fussed over you,” Clint stated with sure and certain conviction. “Every time he’s told you to be careful, every time he’s said he was happy to see you, or called you a friend. He’s meant it as much as anyone ever has. Maybe more, because those aren’t words he uses lightly. I’m not going to pretend any of this is easy, and I’m not saying he didn’t make a mistake not telling you the truth. But he’s scared he’s losing the first best friend he’s ever had, and he doesn’t even know why.” Clint’s phone beeped and he fished it from the pocket of his leather jacket, frowning at his text messages.

“I’ve got to go into SHIELD,” he said with a sigh, rolling his shoulders in an easy shrug. “Fury’s wound up about something.”

“Does he have a reason to be?” Bryn asked as he slid out of the booth. Clint flashed her an evil grin and she shook her head. “What did you do?”

“Me?” he asked with his most innocent expression. “I didn’t do anything.” Bryn rubbed her face with her hand, hiding her smile and he gave her shoulder a squeeze as he headed for the door. She drew in a shaky breath, staring into her cold, practically untouched coffee.
Her phone vibrated in her pocket and she thumbed it on without even looking at it.

“Yeah, Jarvis?” she asked with a forced cheerfulness she didn’t feel.

“I, hope I didn’t interrupt your break, but I wanted to catch you before you headed back,” he said hesitantly.

“No, it’s fine,” she insisted, slumping back in the bench. “What do you need?”

“The Avengers have been called to an unscheduled meeting at SHIELD and I would like to have a bakery order delivered since they’ll doubtless miss lunch,” he explained.

“I’m on my way,” she assured, her tone light.

“Bryn,” he began hesitantly, his voice awash in unease. “Is everything all right?”

“Of course,” She replied, tossing the remainder of her coffee in the bin by the door. “Why wouldn’t it be?”
“Okay, I got original recipe and extra crispy,” Bryn declared, loading the red and white buckets into the dumbwaiter. “And double wings for Thor. And tell Clint they don’t have baked beans, It’s a regional thing. I got extra mac and cheese though.”

“I’m sure he’ll be appeased,” Jarvis assured as she closed the dumbwaiter and hung her helmet on the wall. “Thank you for staying late.”

“It’s only twenty minutes,” Bryn insisted, opening her locker and hanging up her denim jacket, exchanging it for a bright blue cardigan and grabbing her bag. “You know I don’t mind.”

“Yes, I know,” Jarvis agreed. Bryn paused, her fingers curling around the locker door, gripping it tight as she drew in a steadying breath. “Bryn, you seem on edge, is everything alright?”

“Fine, everything’s fine,” she answered quickly, slamming the locker door and stuffing her hands in the pockets of her cardigan.

“You haven’t been fine since the invasion,” Jarvis replied. “You’ve been tense and withdrawn, we’ve barely spoken outside of work. I’m very worried about you.”

“I’ve just…” Her voice warbled and she swallowed, biting her lip. “I… you’re not wrong. I just, I don’t want it on record. Do you think we could sit down together somewhere and talk?”

“Bryn, I don’t think,” he began hesitantly.

“We don’t even have to leave the tower,” she added hurriedly. “The employee lounge on Forty-two is closed for the night, no one will be there. I can go grab coffee down the street and meet you there. I don’t mind, you’re right, I should talk about it, I need to talk about it.”

“Bryn, I can’t,” Jarvis answered achingly.
“I’ll wait,” She insisted, tears spilling over. “Or I’ll come back after you’re off for the day. I don’t care. I just… have coffee with me? Please?”

“I wish I could,” he said, the words soft with regret. Bryn let her head fall against the wall, swallowing a snifflle.

“You’re never going to tell me the truth, are you?” she choked out, the words falling from her lips with a tremble and a stutter. “You’d rather let me think we’re not even real friends than tell me.” the words ended in a hiccups and she closed her eyes, pressing her face to the cool metal of the wall panel. An uncomfortable silence filled the space.

“What,” his voice was unsteady and held just a hint of panic to it as if he were short of breath and Bryn covered her lips with the tips of her fingers. “what haven’t I told you?”

“No, you don’t get to do that,” she whispered, her eyes burning as she shook her head slowly. “You don’t get to pretend you don’t know what I mean. You don’t get to misdirect me or make me question or whatever else it is you think you’re doing. You don’t get to do that.”

“What do you want me to say?” Jarvis asked miserably.

“The truth,” she answered sharply, looking up at the security camera in the corner with a dark glare. “Tell me the truth.”

“You saw the login screen in the security server room,” he stated with equal parts realization and resignation.

“Yes I saw the damn login screen, Jarvis!” Bryn hissed back at him. She stared into the camera for long seconds but when he offered nothing more she turned, smacking her head lightly against the metal wall.

“Bryn, blunt trauma to the skull can be very dangerous,” he fretted.

“Well scan my cranium,” she suggested in exasperation. “You’ve probably memorized a couple of
“I don’t understand, if you’ve known all this time why didn’t you say anything?” Jarvis asked in bewilderment.

“Why didn’t,” She turned to stare at the camera, her mouth hanging open. “Why didn’t I say anything? Are you serious? Oh my god this is a nightmare!”

“Bryn, I”

“I wanted you to tell me, you moron!” she snapped. “I wanted you to show a little faith in me! I wanted you to say you couldn’t meet me for coffee because AI’s don’t do Starbucks! Something! Anything so I didn’t have to feel like you didn’t want me to know!” He made no reply and Bryn leaned back against the wall, closing her eyes. Her hands trembled and she tuck them under her arms with a wince.

“I tend to avoid exposure to coffee,” he stated, his voice tight in the silence. “as its overall high sugar content makes it terribly difficult to get out of my circuit pathways when it spills.”

“That’s good,” Bryn nodded, pushing off from the wall with a heavy sigh. She crossed the office, dumping her bag on the table as she passed and slumping down on the sofa. She pulled her knees to her chest, resting her forehead on them as her shoulders sagged. “really good. Better late than never.”

“I’m sorry,” he offered.

“Are you sorry you didn’t tell me the truth or sorry I found out?” Bryn questioned, raising her eyes to look at the camera in the corner. She had no illusions now about how closely he might be watching.

“Both,” Jarvis answered with as much honesty as she had ever heard in his tone. Bryn closed her eyes, resting her chin on her knees.

“That was a crappy thing to do,” she declared, tears spilling over again. “I don’t even know if you get that or not, but it was. Did Mr. Stark put you up to it?
“No,” Jarvis insisted. “Sir programmed me but he has never once infringed upon my autonomy. He is protective of my identity but… The choice to take individuals into my confidence has always been mine alone.”

“And you weren’t comfortable taking me into your confidence?” She asked in bitter resignation.

“Bryn,” his tone was hesitant. “when you interact with people on the internet do you immediately tell them you’re bi-racial?”

“Well no, I,” her shoulders slumped and she let her feet slide to the floor as she held her hands out in front of her, staring at them. Bryn wasn’t sure when they’d stopped shaking but they were steady now. She closed her eyes, her face screwing up in a pinched expression. “It shouldn’t matter so I don’t mention it.”

“I let you assume,” Jarvis declared with a note of pleading. “Nothing more. What I am shouldn’t matter.” He spoke the last words with the tone of someone who knew that it did indeed matter all too often. It was a tone she knew well enough herself.

“You’re right, it shouldn’t.” She replied, rubbing at her eyes. “I completely understand why you wouldn’t reveal your identity to just anyone. But I’m not anyone. I’m your friend. I thought I was your friend.”

“You are,” Jarvis replied.

“Did you think I’d treat you differently if I knew?” she asked, her voice shaking.

“No of course not, you would never,” He paused only a moment, his tone gaining conviction. “I have considered myself privileged to have the friendship of the two least prejudiced people on the planet.” A faint smile curled her lips and she slumped back on the sofa.

“I’m sure Steve would be flattered,” she nodded. “I’m not sure I belong in the same class with him, but thank you.”

“I’m confident even the Captain is not perfect,” Jarvis answered gently. “I never meant for you to be hurt.”
“But it does.” Bryn sighed. “All those times I invited you out. You let me tease you, you let me lecture you, you let me believe… All that time and all you had to say was; I’m an artificial life form. Do you have any idea how that feels?”

“I’m sorry,” he repeated. “There were… things I wanted to know.”

“Do you have any kind of an explanation that doesn’t sound like a total lack of trust?” she demanded in frustration, rubbing her eyes. He didn’t answer and her face crumpled. Without a word she pushed off the couch, sweeping up her bag and heading for the door.

“I’ve never passed a Turing Test,” Jarvis confessed as her fingers curled around the door handle and she froze.

“What?” she asked softly.

“I wanted to know if I could pass,” he admitted sadly. “You were the first opportunity I’ve ever had to test myself. A proper blind test with no assumption. If I could not convincingly present as human you should have been able to deduce that Mr. Stark was capable of creating an artificial intelligence.”

“What do you mean you’ve never passed a Turing Test?” Bryn questioned in bewilderment. “That doesn’t even make sense. There’s no way you could have flunked.”

“I’ve never taken one,” he replied. “Sir canceled my only scheduled test, twenty-five years ago.” Bryn stared at her hand on the door latch blinking slowly as her chest rose and fell in long slow breaths.

“Mr. Stark wrote your software when he was still at MIT?” she questioned as if the idea of it were unbelievable. “You really are just a couple of years older than me?”

“Yes,” he assured. “I was Mr. Stark’s doctoral thesis.”

“He dropped out of the doctoral program to run SI,” Bryn stated. “I know because I wrote a paper about him in High School.”
“He withdrew from classes several weeks before finals,” Jarvis confirmed.

“And you think it was because you couldn’t pass?” she questioned.

“I…” he began with no small amount of hesitation.

“Stop right there,” Bryn declared firmly. “Jarvis, we have about five hundred things to straighten out here but first off, you pass. You pass, okay? You managed to make me believe you were human for two years. That’s a pass.” There was a long moment of silence and Bryn closed her eyes with a soft sigh.

“Thank you,” he answered finally. Bryn gave a sharp nod, dumping her bag back on the table and slumping down on the arm of the sofa.

“This whole thing is so messed up,” she muttered irritably.

“Are you angry with me?” he questioned hesitantly.

Yes!” she replied but there was no heat in the word. “Do you understand why? I’m not sure how to trust you now, and that meant a lot to me, knowing I could trust you.”

“Tell me what I can do,” he pleaded.

“You can’t just… fix it,” Bryn shook her head sighing in resignation. “You have to earn it back.”

“I haven’t any idea how I earned it in the first place!” Jarvis protested. Bryn let out a laugh, clapping her hand over her mouth.

“I’ve got nothing,” she insisted, trying to swallow down a smile.
“This is punishment for my deception,” Jarvis accused miserably.

“Damn straight it is,” Bryn gave the camera an evil smile as she brushed away the last of her tears.

“I most likely deserve it,” he conceded with a hint of meekness. Bryn hesitated only a moment.

“Buy me a coffee.” The suggestion was met with silence and she stared up at the camera.

“I’m not sure how to frame that particular social interaction,” he admitted finally.

“You’re a smart guy,” Bryn pointed out. Her brow furrowed in thought a moment. “Smartest guy in the world, right? You told me once that Mr. Stark was technically the third smartest. Technically because you’re smarter than Dr. Richards?”

“Yes, technically,” Jarvis admitted.

“You’re that smart, figure it out,” she advised, shouldering her bag and heading for the door. “Take your time, you can get back to me.” Her hand had just closed over the latch again when he responded.

“Café Grumpy in the Lexington passage has assured me that they will remain open until you arrive,” Jarvis offered with a touch of hesitation. “Would you like me to place your order in advance?”

“I think I’ll look at the board when I get there,” she said, pulling her com from the pocket of her jeans. “Café Grumpy. Is that a dig at me?”

“No, of course not,” he answered readily.

“I probably deserve that a little,” Bryn admitted, opening the door as she fitted the com in her ear. “Are you joining me?”
“If you like,” Jarvis offered with the faintest touch of hopefulness.

“Okay,” she blew out a breath, closing the door behind her.

“Alright,” Jarvis agreed in her ear.

Chapter End Notes

Many, many years ago now when Facebook was something only college kids could use, I started down a road. I didn’t know where it led but there was a hell of a lot of Lord of the Rings fanfic on it and I was keen. I’d been in the fandom since before The Lays of Beleriand, so I knew my stuff and I expected to find some really spectacular tales in a world that was as close to home as I’d ever had.

What I didn’t expect was who I’d meet on that road, a road that ran straight through Yahoo groups. I met a lot of people but among them, I met twelve women, twelve women who were beautiful and confident and sexy and brilliant and among the most extraordinary individuals I have ever encountered in my entire life. I was at least a little bit in love with each and every one of them in the way you can only be in love with someone you adore blindly beyond all sense and reason.

We headed out together into Middle Earth and we built a world of our own within it, full of adventure and death and mayhem and life and beauty and everything that makes getting up in the morning something worth doing. And then something tragic happened.

They wanted to meet in real life.

To say I was petrified would be inadequate by ridiculous proportions. The mere thought of awkward, invisible me in the presence of these goddesses was enough to make me lose sleep at night. But I smiled and I nodded and I agreed as I helped plan, all the while visions of myself as the sole misfit in a room full of pretty, perfect people making my head swim to the point of anxiety. You see I spent time with them every day, I knew them, and I knew me. Up until that point I’d hid my social ineptitude behind really good proofreading. I was painfully aware that real life didn’t have spell check, and I wasn’t likely to be able to carry on the charade in the real world for more than about five minutes. Then I met them.

And they were awkward and elegant, and serious and silly, and tall and short, and shy and outgoing, and a bit nervous, and as different as any twelve people on the planet have ever been from each other.

They were Beautiful. Each and every one of them.
I learned something I will never forget, that we can see people through a lens of our own assumptions so distorted that we can no longer see the real person. We fill in the blanks of what we can’t make out and we’re almost always wrong. And we miss so much.

This story has been for them, for all they have taught me in the past ten years, for all the sights I would not have seen and places I would not have gone and who I would not have been without them. Bryn is all of us in that moment when we finally see the world clearly and we embrace the wonder in how brilliantly different we all are.

Mellyn nin, the road calls once more.
“We’ve actually had electric cars as long as we’ve had cars,” Tony stated, toying with the screwdriver he held as he leaned over the Audi, the electric motor whirling softly. “They were pretty popular in the late 1800’s before gasoline engines started getting fast. We’re finally getting to a point where the electric cars can keep up with gas power. This baby does zero to sixty in under five seconds.”

“And you think this is the way things are going?” Harley asked doubtfully kneeling on the bumper to get a better look.

“It’s a matter of resources kid,” Tony declared. “gas is going to run out eventually.”

“Mom said Stark Industries used to make cars,” Harley said, looking up at him.

“Prototypes,” Tony nodded. “Back in the forties and fifties when my old man was running things.”

“But not anymore?” he questioned, looking up at Tony who shook his head. “Couldn’t you run a car on one of those?” He pointed at the arc reactor in Tony’s chest.

“The core’s rare enough right now that it’s not practical,” Tony replied. “Maybe some day.”

“What about solar? It’s clean.” Harley suggested. “And there’s lots of it. What if you could wrap the whole car in solar panels?”

“I like how you think, kid,” Tony declared, ruffling the boy’s hair.

“Lunch has arrived, Sir,” Jarvis stated as Bryn rolled down the ramp from the main garage on her
“Burgers!” Harley hooted, scrambling off the front bumper and bounding up to Bryn as she took off her helmet.

“Cheese and ketchup only,” Bryn nodded, holding out a bag to him, Harley snatched it from her, clambering onto the hood of the nearby Shelby Cobra. Bryn made a horrified face but Stark seemed unconcerned, taking the second bag from her other hand as he passed and slumping down on the front of the car beside the boy.

“Extra pickles?” he asked, digging though his bag while Harley scarfed down fries as if he hadn’t seen food in a week. Bryn nodded slowly, watching the pair with a wary expression.

“Um, Jarvis said something about a supply run?” Bryn prompted. Tony looked up at her with large eyes, his expression almost mirrored by the boy.


“And my comb,” he added as an afterthought.

“When did you brush your teeth last?” Stark demanded.

“Yesterday morning,” Harley shrugged. Tony pulled a face.

“Tooth paste, mouthwash, deodorant,” Stark added.

“Mouthwash is disgusting,” Harley protested.

“An inventory of his luggage produced only three pairs of socks,” Jarvis added with a hint of disdain. Tony took a bite of his burger, eyeing the boy.
“That was all I had that matched,” Harley shrugged.

“Also there are several distressing burn marks on the shirt he wore in the lab yesterday,” Jarvis added. Bryn covered her mouth to stifle her laugh.

“Just grab him some clothes too,” Tony waved at Bryn with a note of exasperation. “We’ll probably damage most of what he brought anyway.”

“Cool!” Harley declared, grinning around his fries.

“Ms. Potts is on the line, Sir,” Jarvis prompted. Tony nodded, swallowing down his burger as he fished his phone from his pocket.

“Hey, Pep,” Tony enthused brightly as he slid off the hood of the Cobra. “Yeah we’re staying out of trouble. Hold on. Give me two seconds, okay?” Harley nodded as Tony shuffled a few paces across the garage, stretching his shoulders as he moved away.

“So, I never got to thank you,” Bryn stated, leaning against Clint’s Impala. “You’re the one who called last Christmas to tell me Jarvis and Mr. Stark were okay, weren’t you?”

“No big deal,” Harley shrugged, looking up at her with a grin.

“Well it was a big deal to me,” she answered returning his smile. “I was pretty worried.”

“Yeah, Jarvis was kind of freaked out too,” Harley said impishly. “Kept going on about how it wasn’t safe for you to go back to work…. only he didn’t say work, he kept saying things like, hair dryer and sandwich because he had some kind of error in his…” Harley frowned, snapping his fingers.

“Vocalization processors,” Jarvis sighed irritably.

“Yeah that!”
“I was not freaked out,” Jarvis sniffed. “I was understandably concerned in light of a nearly successful attempt on Mr. Starks life.”

“Totally freaked out,” Harley whispered, leaning closer to Bryn who covered her mouth with her hand.

“I heard that” Jarvis added drily. Harley rolled his eyes, returning his attention to his burger.

“Dude, eavesdropping is not cool,” the boy scolded, wagging a french fry at the ceiling. “I think I liked you better when you were stuck in the suit!” Bryn blinked, staring at him with a furrowed brow.

“You liked me better when I was injured and at a disadvantage?” Jarvis asked with the faintest hint of mockery.

“Okay, now you’re making me sound bad,” Harley wrinkled his nose.

“I leave you kids alone together for two little minutes and already you’re fighting,” Tony scoffed, pocketing his phone and hopping up on the hood of the Impala. Harley gave the ceiling a wicked grin.

“It’s what we do,” Harley shrugged.

“Indeed,” Jarvis agreed with a hint of amusement. “And I do not eavesdrop, I was in the room.”

“You’re in every room!” Harley insisted. Bryn gave him a calculating look, her eyes darting to Stark who was muffling his laugh in his french fries. She opened her mouth to say something but seemed to think better of it, instead moving to flip up the kickstand on her bike.

“I am not in every room,” Jarvis corrected, as she rolled the bike up the storage ramp. “We have a privacy mode.”
“Yeah but if I engage the privacy mode you’ll know I’m talking about you!” Harley laughed. Tony shook his head, clearly amused.

“Should I ask about snacks as well?” Jarvis queried as she hung her helmet. “I’m afraid I’m inexperienced with the dietary preferences of children.”

“It’s pretty much what we already buy for Clint and Thor,” Bryn replied with a shrug, crossing the room and sinking down on the couch. She could still hear the light banter out in the garage and she tensed slightly when she heard the distant sound of Jarvis’ voice.

“Bryn is something wrong?” he asked worriedly.

“No,” she answered too quickly then sighed. “Maybe a little, it’s… I’m still getting used to the idea that you… multitask a little differently than the rest of us.” She let out a groan resting her head on her knees.

“Oh my god, you’re Iron Man,” she huffed out all in one breath, the words dying on a little whimper.

“I… Mr. Stark pilots the suit,” He protested.

“Yes,” she replied, flopping back against the sofa and staring up at the ceiling bonelessly. “I know, but I read in an article in Popular Mechanics that Mr. Stark’s suits have this top secret AI interface and that’s what makes Iron Man so much faster than the Iron Patriot. But it’s not just any software, it’s you. You’re Iron Man.”

“I honestly never thought of it in that context,” Jarvis admitted cautiously. “I suppose I didn’t consider… are you angry that I didn’t tell you?”

“You know, I kind of want to be,” Bryn admitted irritably. “But knowing you, I can totally see why you wouldn’t think that. Mostly I’m just irritated I didn’t put it together before.”

“I’m,” he paused as if considering his words carefully. “Relieved that you feel you still know me that well.” Bryn ran a hand over her face with a sigh.
“I’ve been kind of hard on you lately,” she observed.

“It has not been undeserved,” he said.

“Tell me,” she pleaded. “Please tell me that there’s some failsafe of some kind, something that protects you if the suit gets destroyed. Not a backup or something, the *real* you.”

“A great deal of Mr. Starks assets would have to be completely destroyed simultaneously for me to suffer more than short term memory loss,” Jarvis replied gently. “A few hours at most. I would still be me.”

“Okay, I can deal with that,” Bryn nodded slowly.

“Is it cruel of me to be gratified that you worry for my safety?” he asked hesitantly.

“No,” Bryn shook her head, a small smile tugging at her lips. “I think everyone likes to feel like they matter.” She pushed off the sofa, stretching her shoulders.

“I can have the clothing delivered if you wouldn’t mind running to the drug store,” Jarvis suggested. Bryn nodded, pausing to lean against the wall as she looked out toward the garage where Tony and Harley were comparing the engine of the Impala to the one in the Tesla.

“Jarvis, you told me once that Mr. Stark and Ms. Potts were your family,” she stated her brow furrowing. “Like… mom and dad?”

“That would seem accurate,” Jarvis conceded.

“Is Harley your little brother?” Bryn questioned.

“No,” Jarvis answered, amused. “Mr. Stark met young Mr. Keener by accident last Christmas.”
“That is uncanny,” She stated, shaking her head.

“You are not the first to say that,” he remarked as Bryn fitted her com into her ear and reached for the door latch, heading out into the hall.

“I’m thinking Ms. Potts might want to have Harley’s DNA tested anyway,” she suggested with a grin as she climbed the stairs to the lobby. “He might be Mr. Stark’s long lost brother.”

“Second cousin twice removed?” Jarvis suggested. Bryn let out a snort of a laugh.

“Hey,” She said, heading down the steps into Grand Central Terminal. “Do you like Pixar movies?”

“It’s a requirement of my current lifestyle,” Jarvis replied. “Agents Barton and Romanov stage marathon viewings of animated features.”

“Of course they do,” Bryn nodded, crossing the main concourse. “I was going to go see Monsters University tomorrow. Do you want to come?”

“Bryn, I,” he began but she cut him off.

“You’re telling me you can’t arrange access to a copy of a major motion picture?” She asked incredulously. Jarvis hesitated only a moment.

“You have to promise not to tell anyone,” he insisted.

“Deal,” Bryn agreed with a bright grin. “Eight-forty tomorrow night. I’ll take my com.”

“I look forward to it,” Jarvis replied as she ducked down passage toward the drug store.
Bryn stared at her fingers, curled too tight around her Stark Industries ID and she drew in a quick breath, almost a gasp, leaning her head against the cool glass of the lobby doors. She could hear the muted bustle of Grand Central behind her but she shut it out, focusing instead on forcing her hand steady to slide the card through the reader. The door opened with a soft beep and she trudged on leadened feet toward the hall behind the reception desk. She scanned her card again, drawing the door open and half stumbling down the steps, her shoulders sagging more each time she set one foot in front of the other.

One more security reader and the door to her office opened with a soft snick. She stood on the threshold, her eyes closed as she drew in slow, labored breaths.

“Bryn?” Jarvis queried as the lights in the room rose to a dim glow.

“Hi Jarvis,” she answered, her voice breathy.

“Bryn, it’s after midnight,” he observed in concern. “What are you doing here?” She swallowed, teetering across the room to sink down on the sofa.

“The… there was an incident in Brooklyn,” She began, her voice warbling as she pulled her knees to her chest, curling in on herself. “You know that I guess, the Avengers were there. I guess you were there too weren’t you?”

“Bryn, what’s happened?” He asked gently.

“Um, my apartment… it isn’t there any more.”

“Bryn I’m so sorry, are you injured?” Jarvis demanded urgently.
“No… no, I, I was… I wasn’t at home,” She stuttered out. “I went out and when I got back there was nothing there. The building’s gone.”

“Why would you come here?” he asked in bewilderment.

“Because I didn’t know where else to go,” Bryn admitted, tears staining her voice as she folded into the corner of the sofa. “It was late by the time I got to my building, to where it used to be anyway, and I can’t reach my friends and… Just for tonight, Jarvis? I know I shouldn’t be here, but please, can’t I just? I’ll sort myself out first thing in the morning just…”

“Bryn I can’t allow you to stay down here,” Jarvis replied, his voice gentle.

“Just one night, I just need one…”

“Bryn,” The door to the hall opened and a soft footlight illuminated the corridor outside. “Come this way.” Bryn hauled herself off of the sofa, stumbling out into the hall, her focus on setting one foot in front of the other. She climbed the steps to the lobby, her vision blurring as she stepped out into the wide open space, now empty. She looked down at the security desk near the main doors, Derek the night guard had his feet up, playing games on his phone and he glanced up, giving her a smile. Before she could give it much thought the elevator door opened and she forced herself across the marble floor, stepping inside.

She slumped against the wall as the lift eased into motion, letting her head rest against the mahogany wall, her eyes closed. She didn’t move when the doors opened. She wasn’t sure where she expected to be, she wasn’t sure she expected to be anywhere.

“Bryn?” Jarvis prompted gently. She pried her eyes open, blinking out at the landing and the shimmer of New York at night though the massive windows beyond. A moment later a door opened off to one side and a young woman with long chestnut curls stuck her her head out.

“Hot damn,” she stated, looking Bryn up and down before padding out into the hall in shark slippers and space monkey pajamas. “You look like hell. Did your building fall on you?”

“I… no,” Bryn answered waffling hesitantly on the spot in front of the lift.
“I got her, Jay, no worries,” the brunette declared, linking her arm with Bryn’s and tugging her gently back toward the door she’d emerged from.

“Thank you, Ms. Lewis,” Jarvis answered with a soft sigh of relief. “I was not comfortable leaving her alone.”

“You come in here and I’ll get you a drink,” the woman insisted, hustling Bryn into the apartment and steering her around the sofa toward the breakfast bar. “Screwdrivers, yeah?”

“Ms. Lewis, I’m not sure alcohol is necessarily the best idea,” Jarvis remarked drily as Bryn allowed herself to be muscled along, her brow furrowed in confusion.

“That’s because you don’t know anything about alcohol,” Lewis answered, chivvying Bryn onto one of the bar stools and opening the cupboard, setting a pair of tumblers out on the counter. “Trust me on this one, Jay, alcohol is most definitely the best idea ever at this point.”

“Um, Ms. Lewis, I,” Bryn began but the other woman flashed her a grin, cutting her off.

“It’s Darcy,” Lewis insisted, ducking into the pantry and emerging with a bottle of vodka. “I let Jay get away with that because he calls Clint ‘Sir’, but you and I have to be practically the same age.”

“I’m almost twenty-three,” Bryn informed, though she wasn’t quite sure why.

“I just turned twenty-four,” Darcy grinned back, pulling the orange juice out of the fridge. “See? Now have a drink to steady your nerves and I’ll set you up in Jane’s room.”

“I don’t want to impose on,” Bryn protested as Darcy topped off a tumbler with orange juice and pushed it toward Bryn’s hands before making a drink for herself.

“No, it’s totally cool, Jane’s never actually stayed in her room,” Darcy shrugged, sticking the orange juice back on the refrigerator door and kicking it closed. “When we moved in we were supposed to share this suite but she just started shacking up with Thor. She still keeps PJ’s in the bottom drawer but the only time she ever slept here, she passed out on the couch. So you’re golden. You can stay
here as long as you need to, I mean, The Maria Stark Foundation is probably putting your neighbors up somewhere nice anyway. So I’m sure Tony doesn’t care.”

“This Foundation,” Bryn stated with a groan, letting her head sink down to the counter. “I could have called the Foundation.”

“Yeah they’re probably kind of freaked out right now,” Darcy remarked thoughtfully. “I mean, they would have contacted your super for the resident information so technically you’re missing. You maybe better call there in the morning and tell them you’re not dead or anything.” Bryn let out a groan, pushing herself upright and staring into her glass.

“You don’t look so good,” Darcy remarked, taking a sip of her drink as she leaned against the counter. “There’s almost always someone down in the clinic after an Assemble, do you want me to call and have them come up and check you over?”

“No, I’m fine,” Bryn shook her head, downing a swallow of her vodka.

“Honey you are a lot of things, fine is not one of them,” Darcy declared, rounding the bar and pulling a blanket off the back of the sofa, wrapping it around Bryn’s shoulders.

“Bryn, your pulse is rapid and your breathing shallow,” Jarvis remarked. “your eyes are also dilated and your hands are shaking. I believe you’re in shock.”

“Yeah, we picked up on that, Jay,” Darcy gave the ceiling a condescending look before turning to Bryn and mouthing the word ‘men’ with a roll of her eyes.

“I saw that,” Jarvis stated sourly.

“Yes, we know, you see everything,” Darcy sighed, waving him off before turning back to Bryn. “So what are you doing here in my little hovel?”

“I called Clint and Steve but I didn’t get an answer,” Bryn admitted, wrapping both hands around her glass. “and my girlfriend in Queens but I think she’s already asleep. I couldn’t think of anywhere else to go.”
“Yeah, um, it’s probably not going to help the whole shock thing,” Darcy stated, waving a hand at her. “But I’m just going to come out with it anyway.”

“Oh god, what’s happened?”

“It’s okay, Steve was injured,” Darcy grabbed Bryn’s hand, squeezing it. “He’s okay, he’s going to be fine, but it was kind of scary there for a bit. Everyone’s still at SHIELD. He’s already healing up though, Thor says they might let him go home tomorrow afternoon.” Bryn only stared back at her with wide eyes, the color draining from her face.

“Hey, don’t freak out,” Darcy soothed. “Everyone else is completely 100%, and Steve’ll be back on his feet in no time, you know that.” Bryn gave a jerky nod, tipping the glass back with a gulp.

“Jarvis, keep an eye on her for a minute and I’ll find her a tooth brush and some PJ’s okay?” Darcy suggested, patting Bryn’s arm as she passed on her way down the hall.

“Did the alcohol help?” he questioned when Darcy had disappeared into one of the bedrooms.

“Not as much as I would have liked,” Bryn admitted staring into her glass.

“Would you like me to contact Agent Barton?” Jarvis suggested gently as she took another swallow, shivering slightly.

“No,” Bryn shook her head. “It’s okay.” She sniffed and a single tear trickled down her cheek. She brushed it away hastily, sweeping up her glass and downing the last of the alcohol in two swallows.

“Okay lets get you into bed,” Darcy announced, shoving a bundle of blue plaid fabric into Bryn’s arms and hoisting her off the bar stool.

“I can just crash on the sofa,” Bryn suggested. “It’s fine.”
“No, absolutely not,” Darcy insisted, steering her down the hall. “You’re going to have a hot shower and brush your teeth and sleep in an incredibly overpriced bed. Off you go.”

“I’ve placed an order for clothing to be delivered to your apartment first thing in the morning, Ms. Lewis,” Jarvis remarked. “If that’s acceptable.”

“No wait,” Bryn protested uselessly as Darcy herded her through one of the bedrooms toward the adjoining bath.

“A awesome, my shirts will look all stretched out on her anyway,” Darcy nodded, prodding her through the door. “Shower, change, teeth, bed, in that order. She shut the door firmly behind her.”

“Thank you,” Jarvis said softly as Darcy let out a sigh, slumping against the doorway. She waited until the water started running and then pushed off, heading back out toward the kitchen.

“Your besty is a hot mess there, Jay,” She observed. She paused on the threshold of the kitchen, her brow furrowing. “Please tell me you asked for a female personal shopper?”

“I am capable of learning from my mistakes,” he answered ruefully. Darcy nodded, rinsing out the glasses in the sink and then stacking them in the dishwasher. She wiped off the counter as if looking for something to do. “I’d have preferred if you had not mentioned Captain Rogers’ injury.” Darcy stilled, leaning against the granite on her palms.

“Steve’s going to be fine,” Darcy insisted, her fingers curling slowly around the counter.

“I wish I had your optimism,” Jarvis stated. Darcy tossed aside the dish towel. She rounded the bar, picking up the blanket Bryn had dropped and folding it carefully before draping it over the sofa.

“We’ll know either way in the morning,” Darcy said, barely more than a whisper.

“Darcy?” Bryn’s voice warbled and Darcy straightened too fast, spinning on her foot.

“Yeah?” Darcy asked breathlessly.
“I didn’t say thanks,” Bryn shrugged, tugging on the hem of the t-shirt she wore that said *Pervy Hobbit Fancier*. Darcy looked her over a moment before smiling with a nod. Bryn turned awkwardly back down the hall, easing the door of Jane’s room shut behind her.

“Really?” Jarvis demanded coldly.

“Shut up,” Darcy huffed, hiding her smile as she headed to her own room.
“Let me get this straight, you own this building?” Bryn hefted her duffel bag so that the strap across her chest wasn’t cutting into her neck as she shifted the box in her arms.

“Yeah, well, I used to live here.” Clint gave a shrug, jangling the bags he carried as he trudged up the stairs of the old brownstone. Bryn’s eyes swept the stairwell, the crisp paint job had been recent but there were the smudged fingerprints of a small child along the wainscoting in spots. The fixtures were a little dusty but tastefully simple and keeping with the period of the building. All of the doors they passed looked original but painstakingly refinished some time in the last few years. Overall it gave the place an air of gentrification.

“The guy who owned the place wasn’t keeping it up and kept upping the rent,” Clint glanced back over his shoulder. “I don’t think he liked single mothers. Anyways, he and I got into it because he threatened to evict Vanessa upstairs from me. So I just bought the building from him. I’d never owned a place in my life but Phil handled the red tape for me. It was good, restoring it gave me something to do between missions. Hey Vanessa!” The last words were directed at a woman in her early thirties loitering on the landing above them, a boy of about three clutching at the leg of her jeans.

“I thought that was you!” She said with a smile that looked a touch worried. “Moving back in?”

“Naw,” Clint shook his head, giving her a reassuring look. “Told you, can’t risk it. Not secure enough here.” The woman let out a breath that looked supremely relieved.

“This is your new neighbor, Bryn,” he added, jerking his head in Bryn’s direction, who shifted the box she held enough to give a tiny wave. “She’s renting my old place. She does not work for the government.” Vanessa gave him a little smile that was a touch sheepish.

“Nice to meet you,” she offered sincerely.
“Likewise,” Bryn flashed her a grin.

“Well, come on Theo, let’s get some lunch,” Vanessa declared, herding the boy up the stairs.

“What was that all about?” Bryn asked curiously as Clint fumbled with the keys.

“Well, there was a… thing with the Russian Mafia a couple of years back,” Clint confessed, shouldering the door open with a creak. “Better oil that.” he looked at the door with a frown, jiggling the handle.

“The Mafia?” Bryn gave him an incredulous look.

“Yeah, they sort of shot up the place,” Clint stated, his ears turning pink. “Took me months to fix the damage. Made most of the tenants a little scared. Can’t blame Vanessa, she’s got two kids and she lost her husband in Afghanistan. She’s had enough of guys with guns.” He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye as he shuffled through the entry, dumping the bags he was carrying over the sofa.

“Oh my god,” Bryn let out a gasp as she followed him, getting her first proper view of the apartment.

“Yeah, the furniture’s a mess,” Clint admitted, giving the sofa a kick with the toe of his boot. “So replace anything you want and kick it to the curb. I don’t need it any more.”

“Clint it’s huge!” Bryn gaped at him. “I can’t afford this! It’s huge and it’s clean and… someone restored the antique fireplace.”

“That’d be me,” he nodded, holding up a hand shyly.

“Clint, you can’t rent this to me for what you’re renting this to me!” Bryn insisted, clutching tighter to the box in her arms. “I can’t take advantage of you like that!”

“Kiddo you’re paying the same as Vanessa upstairs,” Clint insisted. “And she’s got better appliances. Should I get new appliances?” He turned, shambling into the kitchen with a frown.
“Shit, yeah, you need new appliances,” He called from the kitchen as she stood rooted to the spot in
the living room. He leaned around the door frame a moment later. “Also, there’s a washer/dryer at
the end of the hall. Before you put any of your clothes in there, you should probably run it though a
full cycle on hot with detergent… and bleach… extra bleach… for… reasons.” Bryn didn’t move,
her mouth still hanging open slightly as her eyes circled the room, taking in the shiny parquet floors
and the tall windows along the wall.

“Aww microwave, no,” he grumbled over the sound of pathetic beeping that sounded more like a
digital bleat for mercy.

“I brought beer and soda,” Natasha announced, striding boldly through the open door, a plastic bag
clutched in each hand.

“The fridge is still sort of working,” Clint nodded, waving toward the kitchen with one hand while
he texted with the other. “I’m going to see if Murray can get me some new appliances in here
tomorrow.”

“Nothing that fell off a truck, Clint,” Natasha stated with a scowl, making herself at home in the
kitchen as Bryn stared at her mutely. “Get Marshall the good stuff.”

“I’m telling him,” Clint sighed.

“Tasha, what are you doing here?” Bryn finally asked in bewilderment.

“Moving day,” she shrugged, twisting the top off of one of the beer bottles.

“I… don’t have anything left to move,” Bryn point out. “Everything was flattened with my
apartment.” she swallowed uncomfortably around the lump forming in her throat.

“Well there’s the mattress,” Natasha said with a shrug.

“Oh god, tell me you did not let Thor and Steve move the mattress!” Clint pleaded. Natasha only
stared back at him blandly and he swore under his breath, hurrying out the door and down the stairs.
“Do not bust up my light fixtures! They’re antiques!”

“Mattress?” Bryn asked, gaping.

“You do not want to sleep on that thing he has, It’s like dust mites holding hands,” Natasha insisted admiring the view out the windows for a moment. “Clint really liked this place because of the windows. It seems a little exposed to me for a bolthole but, snipers.” she shrugged elegantly, giving Bryn an amused smirk.

“Do not scuff up the woodwork!” Clint’s voice ordered from the hall as Thor appeared in the doorway, a queen sized boxspring clutched in one hand like a massive briefcase.

“Where is the bedroom?” he questioned, Bryn only blinked back at him as Natasha pointed down the hall.

“Hey this is nice!” Steve remarked, the mattress slung half over his shoulders as he edged carefully through the door, following after Thor.

“Here give me the kitchen cleaner,” Natasha said with a scowl as Clint shuffled back through the doorway with a bag of cleaning supplies in each hand and a mop under one arm. “I’m not eating off that counter.”

“It’s not that bad,” he insisted, relinquishing the bottle and dumping the rest of the supplies on the floor. Natasha only gave him a condescending look, disappearing into the kitchen with a roll of paper towels as Clint turned to Bryn “The fixtures were all original so don’t use anything too harsh on them…. I replaced the tile though so the mold won’t, you know, come to life and try to take over New York or anything.”

“I appreciate that,” Steve injected, hauling a dusty, half concave mattress out the door.

“I question your wisdom, my friend,” Thor stated seriously his lips curled at the old boxspring. “I have slept upon rocks that offer more comfort.”

“Way to be judgy, Thor,” Clint answered, rolling his eyes before turning back to Bryn “I reprogramed the security system to call Jarvis.” He crossed the entry to the security panel, leaning
against the wall lazily.

“Panic Button Check, Jarvis,” he exclaimed, mashing the bright blue button at the bottom of the panel.

“System functional, Agent Barton,” Jarvis replied crisply.

“Call Jarvis even if its a run of the mill break-in,” Clint insisted, checking the system over. “you never know who could be looking for an in. Also Jarvis has some friends in the NYPD who’ll take good care of you.”

“Yeah of course he does,” Bryn sighed, looking overwhelmed.

“Can you get that pizza delivery order in for us?” Clint requested.

“Already processed and scheduled to arrive in forty-five minutes,” Jarvis answered.

“Thanks buddy,” Clint said with a nod, releasing the button. He held out a keyring to Bryn and she took it on reflex, staring at the keys mutely. “Place is yours now, I’m kind of glad. I’m really fond of it. I wouldn’t want just anyone living here.”

“You’re sickeningly sentimental,” Natasha stated, flopping down in one of the dilapidated living room armchairs.

“It was my first place,” Clint said defensively.

“Natasha I’m going to make up the bed,” Steve stated, two plastic wrapped pillows under one arm and a shopping bag of new bed linens clutched in the other.

“No!” Bryn snapped, reaching out to grasp the handles of the bag, halting him mid step. “No way! Captain America is not making my bed!”
“Oh totally let him do it,” Natasha insisted with a wave of her hand. “He makes those neat military corners, it’s like a work of art. I had no idea bedsheets could even do that.”

“It kind of bothers me that you know how he makes his bed,” Clint remarked as Steve blushed pink. “but then I remember you’re you.”

“What in the world are you all doing here?” Bryn demanded.

“Moving day?” Steve offered hesitantly. “I thought it was still a thing, you help your friends move into a new place.”

“I don’t have anything to move!” Bryn barked back at him. “It all went up in a puff of smoke and space pirates! All I have to my name is a care package from the Maria Stark Foundation and the clothes and the laptop I bought with the grant money! That’s all!” Her voice broke on the last word and she covered her mouth with her hand, staring up at Steve with eyes wide as if she’d been terrified by her own outburst.

“Come with me, child,” Thor stated gently, prying her hands free from Steve’s shopping bag. “Allow Steven to finish his task.”

“I’m going to clean the bathroom,” Natasha announced, pushing out of the armchair and sweeping up the bag of cleaning supplies, hurrying down the hall after Steve. “Clint, move your stuff out of here.”

“You know… I have a bike in my basement shed,” Clint declared. “I’m just going to go down stairs and see if it’s still in good shape or if I should just curb it.” he was out the door and down the stairs before Bryn could draw in a breath.

“Come,” Thor ordered firmly, his hand in the middle of her back steering her toward the kitchen. He pulled out a chair at the tiny table and forced her into it before going to the avocado green refrigerator and opening it. He pulled out a bottle of Coke and popped the cap free with his thumb before setting it in front of her.

“I thought you’d be more the beer type,” she stated, staring at the bottle.
“I find the effervescence soothing,” Thor shrugged, crouching down so that he was looking up into her face. “I am well acquainted with the loss of all I have known.”

“So’s Steve,” Bryn stated, nodding slowly. “Tasha and Clint too.” Thor nodded in agreement, giving her hand a gentle squeeze.

“So what?” She questioned with a sigh that rolled her shoulders. “This is some kind of preemptive intervention?”

“I believe it was more that it was too uncomfortable to think of you settling in alone,” Thor answered with a soft smile. “Allow them to coddle you a little longer, just to ease their own hearts a bit.” He drew his phone from his pocket, thumbing it on and pressing the speed dial, handing it to her as it began to ring.

“Is there something you require, sir?” Jarvis voice asked pleasantly.

“This apartment is huge,” she blurted out, she glanced up at Thor who had moved toward the sink, opening the cupboards and inspecting the dishes, frowning at the smattering of dust.

“The building plans did appear spacious in comparison to much of the neighborhood,” Jarvis agreed in thinly veiled amusement as she stood, grabbing her Coke bottle and creeping out into the living room.

“Is Clint really charging me the same as the rest of his tenants?” she asked worriedly.

“He assured me that he was,” Jarvis replied. “I told him you would be upset if he made excessive allowances for you, was I in error?”

“No,” Bryn curled up on the windowsill, pressing her face to the glass. “I wish… If I said I wished you were here to keep them all in line would you understand what I meant?”

“Of course,” he answered gently. “If they become too overwhelming text me and I shall find something to occupy them.”
“You’re not going to unleash zombie bunnies on central park or anything are you?” She questioned with a smile, turning her head to peer in toward the Kitchen where Thor was apparently washing all the dishes.

“Wererabbits,” Jarvis corrected. Bryn let out a laugh, muffling it in her hand. The smile slipped off her face and she curled tighter into the corner of the frame.

“I miss my old apartment,” she admitted shakily. “And my street. And Mrs. Gutierrez who lived on the second floor of my building and made rum cake every Christmas. She moved to Miami.”

“I’m glad she’s safe,” Jarvis soothed.

“And I know it’s stupid because my new one is so much nicer,” Bryn sighed. “and all of my pictures and stuff were backed up on my StarkCloud, but I miss my old laptop. It had a TARDIS sticker I got at New York Comic Con and my new one doesn’t look right without it.” Jarvis didn’t reply for a moment and she sat up.

“Oh my god! Do not go online and find me a new one!” She ordered sharply. Jarvis let out an amused huff. Down the hall she could hear Steve and Natasha rattling around the bathroom, the washing machine beeping through a cycle. Clint’s voice floated up from the stairwell though the half open door and Thor hummed some Asgardian battle hymn as the dishes clinked.

“I should be grateful,” she stated, looking over the room. “The foundation was more than generous helping us all start over. I didn’t get hurt, everything could have been so much worse. But there’s this little part of me that’s angry with the Avengers because you couldn’t save my home. You know the buildings on both sides are fine, but mine’s not.”

“I think we all feel as if we let you down a little,” Jarvis admitted. Bryn stifled a wounded sound, rubbing her eyes on the sleeve of her henley. “It’s been a rough year for you.”

“I noticed that,” she agreed.

“Hey, I aired up the bike tires,” Clint declared, pausing on the threshold. “It looks pretty good. If it’s okay I’m going to keep my tools in your storage shed for a while.” Bryn nodded mutely.
“I packed your disgusting spare clothes,” Natasha informed, coming down the hall and dumping a trash bag at his feet. “I thought I told you to clean before you brought her here.”

“I did clean,” Clint insisted, crouching to burrow into the trash bag. A grin brightened his face. “Oh hey, I thought I lost this!”

“Clint you left a gun in the closet,” Steve announced, leaning against the wall with a scolding expression.

“I don’t leave my guns lying around,” Clint insisted, looking back in the bag with a nonchalant shrug. “Besides, she knows how to handle a gun.”

“It’s not that kind of gun,” Steve shook his head. Clint’s eyes widened and he darted down the hall, swearing half under his breath.

“Natasha, I do not think the red splatters on the can opener are tomato based!” Thor called from the kitchen. Bryn covered her mouth with her hand as Natasha stalked toward the kitchen and Steve hefted her duffle heading down the hall after Clint.

“Do not unpack my clothes Steve!” Bryn called after him. “Leave it on the bed! I don’t want Captain America pawing my unmentionables!” Steve stifled a laugh.

“I thought most girls wanted Captain America to paw their unmentionables!” Clint shouted back. He let out a yelp a moment later as Steve, no doubt, punched him.

“Shut up, Barton!” Natasha snapped, emerging from the kitchen holding the can opener at arms length.

“Finish unpacking,” Jarvis said and Bryn started a little. She’d almost forgotten she was still holding the phone. “The pizza will be there shortly, feed them and throw them out. Call if you need anything at all.”

“Can we watch a movie or something tonight?” she asked with a hint of pleading. “I… really don’t want to be by myself here yet.”
“Doctor Who marathon?” Jarvis suggested.

“Oh, hell yes,” she sighed in relief, turning toward the TV. “Clint, does the TV work?”

“Um… yeah,” he nodded, appearing from the hall, duct taping two large garbage bags around something that looked suspiciously like a rocket launcher. “I think so… maybe?”

“I’ll call you back later,” Bryn said into the phone as Clint shoved his plastic wrapped bazooka into Steve’s arms and crossed to the TV, searching for the remote along the way.

“I’ll hold the Wererabbits in reserve,” Jarvis promised as she hung up.
This chapter takes place the Monday before Thanksgiving, a couple of weeks before

Feature Presentation

Bruce’s brow furrowed as he stared down at the tablet Steve held out in front of him, cocking his head slightly to the side. Bruce opened his mouth to say something then paused, taking a careful sip of his tea before returning his mug to the table. He started to speak again then stopped as if choosing his words carefully.

“There’s something about this that doesn’t seem like a good idea,” he settled on finally.

“I wouldn’t impose, but it’s not really my area,” Steve offered apologetically. Bruce glanced at him, tensing at Steve’s slightly pleading expression before quickly looking away and studiously returning his attention to the tablet in Steve’s hand.

“No, no, it’s fine,” Bruce assured, carefully not making eye contact as he poked idly at the remains of his lunch. He glanced up at the general bustle of the kitchen as if seeking backup but none seemed forthcoming and he fought down a cringe.

“Mincemeat pie?” Clint asked incredulously, leaning over Bruce’s shoulder a moment as he shuffled past Thor. “You’re kidding right?”

“Mom used to make it every Christmas,” Steve sighed nostalgically as Clint tumbled into the chair on his other side at the kitchen table. “Bucky’s mom canned mincemeat every fall when the apples were about to run out. We always got a few jars.”

“You’re nuts,” Clint declared seriously, shoveling a bite of leftover ziti in his mouth. Steve fixed him with an exasperated look before turning back to Bruce.

“I understand if you can’t make it, of course,” Steve continued on wistfully.
“Oh I can make it,” Bruce interrupted, holding in a sigh. “But if there is one thing I’ve learned it’s that just because I can do something, it doesn’t mean I should.”

“Oh for heaven sake,” Natasha snorted, folding herself into the chair across from Steve with a mug full of soup. “Jarvis, they still sell mincemeat commercially, don’t they?”

“So it would appear,” he answered smoothly. “Shall I add it to today’s shopping list?”

“Yeah, and tell Bryn to buy the one with meat in it, not the plain mince filling, too many raisins,” she wrinkled her nose, softly slurping noodles off her spoon.

“Any raisin is one too many,” Clint interjected with conviction.

“Well it’s not like you have to eat it,” Natasha pointed out drily. “Steve can polish off an entire pie on his own.”

“I too am intrigued,” Thor admitted from where he leaned over Bruce’s other shoulder. Bruce let out a heavy sigh, rubbing his forehead.

“Double that order, would you, Jarvis?” he requested. Steve grinned in smug delight and Clint shoveled more pasta into his mouth to silence his laugh.

“Where’s Stark?” Phil asked blandly as he appeared in the doorway, his coffee mug clutched in one hand.

“My apologies, Agent Coulson,” Jarvis answered. “Sir is on his way.”

“He got sucked into another project, didn’t he?” Phil asked, hiding his amusement as he snapped the k-cup machine closed.

“I was forced to cut power to the lab,” Jarvis confessed. At the kitchen table the other Avengers managed to stifle their amusement as Tony appeared in the doorway, disheveled and with a grease smudge in the middle of his forehead.
“Traitor,” Tony hissed out, his eyes darting up at the ceiling as he muscled past Phil to get to the k-cup machine.

“If you’re all here, we’ll start,” Phil stated, giving the back of Tony’s head a pointed look.

“I’m not sure I’ve ever been all here,” Clint muttered half under his breath. Steve covered his mouth, coughing into his hand as his eyes danced.

“Since I can’t rely upon all of you to check your schedules I’ve sacrificed a forest to the gods of delinquency,” Phil announced, handing out itineraries. Tony held the printed calendar in his hand, staring at it before turing it sideways as if trying to determine what it was.

“I check my schedule every morning after my run,” Steve declared, looking at the others scoldingly. Clint let out a cough that sounded suspiciously like “kissass”

“Wednesday,” Phil continued as if he hadn’t been interrupted. “Steve, Clint and Thor are slated to be at the children’s hospital at 2 pm. Natasha, you’re at the after school ballet program at 3:30. Everyone but Bruce turn in early because the limo departs for the parade at 7:15 am sharp.”

“Like hell!” Tony shook his head, downing a gulp of coffee, “I’m not getting out of bed at 6 o’clock unless large portions of a major metropolitan area are in direct peril.”

“Tony,” Steve protested with a sigh. “The Thanksgiving Day parade is a big deal!”

“I’m already a balloon!” Stark protested, throwing his arms in the air. “Why do I need to be on a float too?”

“Things you only hear when you’re friends with rich people,” Clint stated as Steve rolled his eyes and Bruce nodded disinterestedly.

“I’m writing a book,” Natasha agreed, pulling out her phone and making a note.
“Why is the big guy not going?” Tony added, waving a hand in Bruce’s direction.

“A little green to go with the Macy’s red?” Bruce suggested blandly. “Sure why not? I’m game.” The Captain gave Stark a withering glare and he rolled his eyes, making a face.

“Fine, fine,” Tony conceded, shooting Phil his most bitter look. “Jarvis, wake me thirty minutes before the Parade starts, I’m taking the suit anyway.”

“Acceptable,” Phil agreed, nodding.

“Will you be authorizing the ‘no holds barred’ protocol, sir?” Jarvis questioned serenely.

“Fine,” Tony snapped, his eyes narrowing at Steve who looked supremely pleased with himself.

“December is going to be busy this year,” Phil continued smoothly. “Jarvis, can I rely on you to help me keep everyone on schedule?”

“I’m happy to oblige, Agent Coulson,” Jarvis assured.

“Jay, can you just shout at me an hour before I need to leave for the next four weeks?” Clint asked with a sigh, tossing the calendar and the empty pasta bowl aside and splaying out, face down across the kitchen table.

“If you like, sir,” Jarvis agreed. “Would anyone else like to make a similar request?” Steve Natasha, Bruce, and Thor all raised their hands. Phil turned to Tony, who was staring into his coffee cup as if confused as to how it had ended up empty.

“What?” Tony asked, eying Phil warily. “He already does that for me.”

“Phil I love you,” Natasha declared firmly as Tony refilled his mug.
“Oh god, you’re in trouble,” Clint stated, sitting up with a frightened expression.

“But I am officially off starting Christmas Eve,” Natasha continued undeterred. “Do not schedule me for anything else.”

“Don’t worry,” Phil soothed. “I’ve cleared all your schedules from the 24th until the New Year’s party on the 31st.” Clint raised both arms in the air as Thor high-fived Steve over Bruce’s head.

“And you are not getting out of the party,” Clint added, pointing at Bruce.

“Don’t worry,” Bruce gave him an amused smile. “Betty’s already made me promise. I’m actually looking forward to this one.”

“It’ll be nice,” Steve agreed. “I heard all the charity tickets have sold already.”

“In the first twenty-four hours,” Phil nodded. “Which reminds me, everyone does have a date?”

“I call dibs on Nat,” Clint stated, pointing at her.

“You can forget that, I already have a date,” she replied, stirring her soup. Clint shrugged, pulling his phone from his pocket.

“Steve?” Phil prompted.

“Yeah?” Steve questioned with a frown, looking up from his calendar.

“You need a date for this thing, Cap” Natasha prodded gently. “The tickets sold out because the party is being attended by the world’s most eligible single super heroes.”

“Yeah sure,” Steve gave her a wry smile. “Let me just get on Granny Grindr and see who’s available.”
“Ewww,” Tony declared, his entire face contorting in a look of disgust.

“Tasha’s right,” Clint nodded. “It’s a private party with no press coverage. If you show up without an escort most of the women will be all over you.”

“No doubt a few of the men as well,” Thor added. Tony seemed to consider this a moment before nodding in agreement.

“You want me to set you up with someone?” he offered.

“Stark,” Phil gave him a warning scowl.

“Relax, Agent, I wasn’t going to set him up with a playboy bunny or anything,” Tony rolled his eyes. “I was thinking more like Taylor Swift.”

“Tony, thank you, but no,” Steve insisted.

“Jennifer Laurence?”

“Oh, if Steve doesn’t want her I’ll take her!” Clint stated raising his hand like a third grader.

“No you won’t,” Natasha replied tapping at her phone a moment before returning her attention to her soup.

“Why not?” Clint asked defensively.

“Because you asked Darcy when I said I wouldn’t go with you and she’s already said yes,” Natasha scolded. Clint looked down at his own phone in surprise, checking his text messages.

“How do you do that?” he gaped at her. Natasha only shrugged and he turned back to Steve. “I’ll
“Ms. Lewis has asked me to inform you that you cannot take it back,” Jarvis prompted in smug amusement. Clint seemed to think about this a moment before shrugging idly and stealing a potato chip from Steve’s plate.

“Thank you for the offer,” Steve assured, meeting Tony’s gaze unflinchingly. “But I don’t need a date.

“Steve, it’s been two and a half years,” Natasha insisted, her expression sympathetic if determined. “You need to get back in the game.”

“In my defense I was never actually in the game,” Steve informed pointedly and without a hint of embarrassment. Tony made a choking sound, his mouth opening to let lose a bawdy retort but Steve leveled a finger at him. “Do not act surprised. You’ve seen my file from before Rebirth.” Tony closed his mouth with a snap.

“That doesn’t bother you, even a little?” Tony asked a little more cautiously.

“Not in the slightest,” Steve answered firmly, returning his attention to his calendar. Natasha turned narrowed eyes on Clint.

“What?” he asked his shoulders hunching up around his ears as he stole another potato chip.

“Back me up,” she ordered.

“No one cares if I back you up,” Clint replied, looking exasperated. “I’m a neurotic and an idiot!”

“You’re not an idiot, Clint,” Steve measured out gently.

“And we’re all neurotic so that doesn’t count,” Tony added before turning back to Steve. “Seriously, I know you, how can you be so well adjusted that your lack of a love life doesn’t bother you?”
“Not everyone’s world revolves around sex,” Steve replied blandly. Tony gaped at him.

“A most painful scald,” Thor murmured around his potstickers. Bruce bit his lip to keep from laughing. “Is that not the expression?”

“You’re not moving on,” Natasha regrouped, leveling a stern look at Steve. “You’ve had time to grieve, Cap, it’s time to pick up and start over again.” Steve let out a huff of a breath through his nose, his lips pressed in a thin line.

“She’s not wrong,” Bruce stated before Steve could reply.

The room was incredibly silent for a long, painful moment.

“I’m kind of alarmed,” Tony admitted, going unnaturally still as he watched Bruce like a viper about to strike.

“Cap, just agree with her,” Clint advised in a hushed voice. “If Bruce will actually take a side you’ve already lost.” Steve let out a soft groan rubbing his eyes with the tips of his fingers.

“Look, I appreciate the sentiment,” he admitted. “But I always feel a little awkward around women I don’t know and I really don’t want to spend the party nervous.”

“Well that’s easy,” Tony insisted. “We’ll fix you up with someone you already know!”

“I don’t think,” Steve began.

“What about that kid on your B team?” Natasha suggested, looking at Phil.

“Skye?” Phil asked skeptically.
“No the other one,” Natasha corrected.

“If you would like, I am sure the lady Sif would be pleased to revel the new year in your company, Captan,” Thor offered. “She has spoken most highly of you.”

“If I may, Captain,” Jarvis interrupted, the others falling silent. “Ms. Marshall has expressed disappointment at a lack of New Years Eve plans. I believe she might be amiable to attending the party with you.” There were about two seconds of complete silence and then Natasha let off a stream of rather obscene curses.

“Very alarmed,” Tony amended, sipping his coffee as Natasha rolled out of her chair, fairly stomping out of the kitchen.

“Men,” she huffed out angrily from the hall. “God damn it.”

“Do not say you don’t approve of Marshall!!” Tony called after her, a tinge of panic in his warning tone. “Jarvis will poison you in your sleep and there’s nothing I can do about it!”

“I’m going to go ask Bryn if she’d like to go to the New Year’s party with me,” Steve declared, easing up from the table and shuffling toward the door. Phil sighed, rubbing his forehead.

Steve hurried down the hall to the waiting elevator, leaning against the wall when the doors closed. Only moments later they opened on the garage and Steve slipped silently past the row of cars and up the ramp to the open storage door.

“Yeah, don’t worry, I’ll be there to pick you up Wednesday afternoon,” Bryn said into her phone, leaning back against the arm of the sofa, her sneaker clad feet kicked up on the cushion beside her. “No, don’t make a big deal out of it. We’ll catch the parade and then get a ridiculously huge turkey dinner at some restaurant in Midtown. My treat.” A wide grin spread over her face and she shifted, propping her head on her fist.

“Dad, it’s fine,” she insisted gently. “I don’t care about any of that. I’m glad you’re coming.” She caught Steve out of the corner of her eye and she sat up quickly, her cheeks coloring as she gave him a sheepish smile.
“Dad, I have to go,” she stated. “No the other one… yeah dad… yeah… okay, I’ll see you Wednesday. Pack warm… love you too.” She thumbed off the phone with a sigh.

“You’re father’s coming to New York for Thanksgiving?” Steve asked with a pleased smile.

“Yeah,” Bryn nodded. “The last couple of years have been hard on him at holidays so we’re not doing anything too involved, just spending time together.”

“That’s great,” Steve nodded, his face breaking in that earnest smile of his.

“Did you want something?” Bryn asked when the silence had stretched to the point of discomfort.

“I… um… Natasha says I have to have a date for the New Years Eve party,” Steve began awkwardly, shoving his hands in his pockets. “And Jarvis mentioned that you didn’t have plans. Not that I… I mean I like spending time with you anyway… and you know, no pressure… if you want to go, and I understand if you don’t.” Bryn stared at him for a long moment.

“I get the feeling that there was supposed to be some kind of question in there somewhere,” she said cautiously. “But I honestly can’t figure it out.”

“I was wondering if you’d like to go to Tony’s New Year’s Eve party with me,” Steve asked, shifting uncomfortably on the balls of his feet. Bryn blinked back at him as he toed nervously at the tile.

“Would I like to go to the poshest New Year’s Gala in New York on the arm of Captain, America?” she asked, an amused smile curling her lips. “Hmm, let me think about that a second.”

“It’s fine if you,” Steve began.

“Yes,” Bryn interrupted him, rolling her eyes. “Of course, yes. What is wrong with you?”

“How much time do you have?” he asked seriously, his cheeks coloring. “Because that answer takes a while.” Bryn let out a laugh.
“Steve I would love to go to Mr. Stark’s charity New Year’s Ball with you,” She insisted, taking his arm and giving it a squeeze. “It’ll be great.”

“Great,” Steve nodded in agreement, looking supremely relieved. “I… um, I’ll let you get back to work.” Bryn nodded as well and he turned, heading back toward the elevator.

“Bryn?” he turned back as he pressed the button. “Thanks.”

“It’s my pleasure,” she assured as he gave her a smile, boarding the elevator.

“Okay, that’s definitely in the top five of surreal things that have happened to me,” Bryn declared, folding her arms over her chest. “Jarvis, do I have a date for New Years with Captain America?”

“You do,” Jarvis informed with a touch of amusement.

“Great, I finally get a date I can tell my dad about and I can’t tell my dad about it,” She sighed, shaking her head.

“Per your non disclosure agreement,” Jarvis added.

“Stop laughing at me,” Bryn glowered at the camera in the corner. She bit her lip to hide her smile. “Did you have something to do with this? I noticed your name mentioned in that jumble that came out of his mouth.”

“Captain Rogers has not been on a date since the war,” Jarvis offered by way of explanation. Bryn’s brow furrowed and she sank back down on the sofa, curling up comfortably.

“That, is one hell of a rebound,” she said finally. “That’s got to be some kind of record.”

“Agent Romanov has become increasingly concerned that he does not seem to be rebuilding his life,” Jarvis continued. “As call outs for the Avengers have become less and less common Captain
Rogers has taken more frequent and longer assignments with SHIELD. I believe he’s becoming focused on work to the exclusion of all else.”

“And you thought what?” Bryn asked gently.

“He seems very fond of you,” Jarvis observed. “And you seem to enjoy his company as well.”

“That’s sweet,” Bryn smiled. “But I don’t think finding a nice girl and settling down is really enough to make up for losing your whole life.”

“No,” Jarvis agreed. “But I’d hoped it might give him more reason to live the life he has now.”

“He’s been a little messed up as long as I’ve known him, Jarvis,” Bryn admitted, her eyes going soft and a little sad. “And he’s managed to be okay. The thing is, I don’t think you can live through something like that and ever really be good again. Sometimes loss stays with you forever. You just have to learn to live with the way it changes you.”

“I still sometimes struggle to assess human mental and emotional states,” Jarvis confessed. “Do you think he is learning to live with it?” Bryn let out a sigh, running her fingers though her curls.

“I think he’s doing a lot better than I would in his place,” she stated with a sad smile.
This Chapter takes place a week and a half after *You Better Watch Out*.

“I can’t believe this!” Darcy huffed, scowling into the ladies’ lounge mirror. “Do you have any idea what I paid for this dress?”

“Way too much,” Bryn observed around the sewing needle pressed between her teeth. “They barely sewed the beading on this strap down at all.”

“I’m baffled as to why you have a sewing kit in your clutch,” Jane Foster declared, leaning over the dressing counter until her nose was nearly pressed to the mirror. She closed first one eye and then the other, the very tip of her tongue peeping out between her lips.

“My college roommate was a cosplayer,” Bryn shrugged, tacking down the beading on Darcy’s shoulder with a few careful stitches. “Wardrobe malfunction is more or less a feature of the lifestyle.”

“Are my falsies on straight?” Jane asked, fluttering her eyelashes before closing her eyes and turning toward Bryn.

“You’re a goddess,” Darcy sighed. “Shut up about it.”

“Hey, you’re here on the arm of a superhero too,” Bryn teased, leaning over to snap through the thread with her teeth and patting Darcy on the shoulder. “You look great Jane, don’t worry.”

“I always feel so awkward at these things,” Jane sighed. Bryn and Darcy exchanged pointed looks behind her back as Bryn stuffed the remains of the sewing kit in her clutch and pulled out her lipstick.

“Did I see you dancing with Neil Patric Harris?” Darcy asked.
“That was totally an accident,” Bryn stated. “Not that I’m complaining. I was looking for Tasha, I haven’t seen her all evening.”

“She’s always late,” Jane shrugged. “God knows why.”

“Bryn, I hate to intrude,” Jarvis voice interrupted in low tones over the speaker behind the tissues.

“Oh my god, the ladies room?” Bryn demanded, gaping at the speaker a moment before swiveling her head to search for the camera.

“There is only cursory surveillance near the doorways of the lavatories for privacy,” Jarvis declared.

“I’ve tried, he doesn’t get it,” Darcy said with a shrug, dabbing at her mascara.

“We are having a huge lecture about the sanctity of the ladies room,” Bryn glared at nothing as Jane hid her giggle.

“Could it possibly wait?” Jarvis queried with a touch of worry. “I believe the Captain is in need of assistance near the desert buffet.”

“Geeze, will Charlie Sheen not take ‘no’ for an answer?” Jane made a face.

“I’m on it,” Bryn answered, her tone business like as she snapped her bag shut. “Stay out of the ladies room!” She pushed open the lounge doors with a determined stride, the click of her heels matching the beat of *Moves Like Jagger* as sound system sent a soft rhythmic thump through the floor of the Avenger’s Tower ball room. Fairy lights with the just the faintest hint of blue to them sparkled from the ceilings, reflecting off the glass and steel architecture, giving an almost magical quality to the clink of champagne glasses and the tinkle of laughter that could only barely be heard over the true of the music. Bryn shuffled past Bruce who was sampling the canapés, giving his shoulder a pat as he turned to glance at her, Using him to pointedly ignore Clint who was waving to her from the center of the dance floor, his body contorting in rhythmic steps that probably should have been illegal. Darcy slid up to him a moment later and he wrapped his arms around her waist, drawing her into an undulation that deserved at least an R rating. She tried not to grin stupidly as she weaved around more of the crowd, her shoulder clipping one of the guests going in the opposite direction.
“Sorry, sorry,” he said hastily, his hand on her arm to steady her. “Hey, you’re Phil’s friend. Have you seen him?” Bryn blinked up into the grinning face of Stephen Colbert for a moment as if she’d forgotten how to speak.

“I think he’s in the corner by the bar,” she finally answered awkwardly, pointing toward the one part of the ball room that held actual comfortable furniture. “With, Peter Jackson.”

“He’s yes!” Colbert declared, his grin widening as he deftly scooted around her, making for the bar. She paused only a moment to shake her head before continuing on. She could see Steve’s shoulders over the crowd not far away and she swept a champagne glass off of one of the serving trays that passed in the hands of the waitstaff as she caught a glimpse of Tony beside him.

“Do you remember San Fransisco?” a familiar female voice she couldn’t quite place asked teasingly. Bryn frowned thoughtfully. Steve didn’t look like he was in any real danger of being felt up but she skirted around more of the party guests, coming up on his other side.

“Betty, please don’t bring up San Fransisco!” Steve pleaded, his cheeks turning pink.

“What happened in San Fran?” Tony demanded, his body loose from alcohol as he leaned conspiratorially into the woman on his arm.

“He was invited to a ménage à trois after our show in the middle of mugging for one of those baby photos,” Betty White declared, her smile positively wicked. Tony let out a howl of laughter.

“In my defense I did not realize that they were fellas at the time,” Steve stated as Bryn linked her arm with his. Tony paused mid guffaw, staring owlishly at him. Bryn closed her eyes, slowly shaking her head as Tony doubled up gasping for air with the force of his hysterics.

“I leave you alone for five minutes,” Bryn muttered just loud enough for Steve to hear as she forced back her snicker.

“Is this your young lady?” Betty asked, her eyes twinkling as she held out her hand.
“I’m Bryn,” she glowed brightly, taking Betty’s hand.

“You know we had a little betting pool during the war on which one of us was going to get to deflower him first,” Betty stated conspiratorially before turning to Steve. “I didn’t think you liked blonds or I’d have put in more effort.”

“He likes the badass ones,” Tony stated, straightening enough to dry the tears from the corners of his eyes. “You should have gone for it.”

“I still might,” Betty stated grinning wolfishly at Steve who blushed scarlet. She glanced at Bryn before turning back to Tony. “But I think she could take me.”

“She definitely could,” Tony agreed.

“Actually I think I had too much champagne,” Bryn gave them her best tipsy look as she set her half empty glass on a passing tray. “Maybe I should get some air.”

“Yeah,” Steve nodded eagerly. “I’ll go with you.” Betty gave him a knowing look, waving them off as she linked arms with Tony again.

“Do you know Patrick Warburton?” Tony asked, leading her away. “I invite him to these things just because I like to listen to him talk.”

“Oh what a nightmare,” Steve breathed out in a rush as he and Bryn navigated through the crowd toward the doors.

“You can’t handle one saucy nonagenarian in the time it takes me to touch up my makeup?” Bryn teased.

“She intimidated me when we were on stage together and it’s worse now,” Steve insisted, Bryn struggled not to laugh outright.

“Happy New Year guys!” A much more familiar voice enthused, slipping up beside them.
“Zach!” Bryn’s eyes widened in surprise as she stared back at him. “You didn’t tell me you’d be here.”

“I asked him not to say anything,” Tasha shrugged, sliding gracefully up to them to take Zach’s arm. Bryn mouthed at them wordlessly as Zach gave her a cat that ate the canary grin.

“I’m glad you could make it,” Steve said, his smile genuine. “Clint’s been looking for you.”

“Let him look,” Natasha shrugged, giving Zach’s arm a tug. “You should meet Neil de Grasse Tyson, he’s a trip.”

“Yeah, cool,” Zach agreed, allowing Natasha to lead him away.

“She is going to eat him alive,” Steve observed with a snicker as Zach glanced back at them with look of pure delight, half trailing in Natasha’s wake.

“None of my business,” Bryn agreed, laughing as well. “This is absolutely unreal, I had no idea there would be this many celebrities here.”

“Tony has a weird mix of friends,” Steve shrugged as they continued toward the balcony. “Most of them are pretty decent though.”

“Hey Cap, Happy New Year!” a dark haired man with a beard declared as he slipped past them, coming into the ball room as they stepped out.

“Happy New Year, Bob,” Steve answered graciously to the back of the man’s head.

“Oh my god, that’s Robert Downey Jr.” Bryn fairly squealed her fingers latching on to the sleeve of Steve’s tuxedo as he pushed the door open wider.

“Yeah, Tony always invites him,” Steve remarked, shedding his tuxedo jacket on instinct and
draping it around her shoulders. “All of these movie studios keep asking for the rights to an
Avengers film and Tony won’t let it go unless they agree to have Robert play him.”

“I honestly don’t see any resemblance,” Bryn admitted, wriggling her arms into the sleeves of his
jacket. Steve let out a chuckle, leading them along the curve of the balcony until they were well
away from the view of the doors and the music was more a soft background than a dull roar.

“Wow what a view,” Bryn said with a grin, leaning on the rail overlooking Park Avenue. Steve
nodded in agreement, giving her a fond smile.

“Thanks for this,” Steve said finally, nodding in the direction of the door that led back to the party. “I
really appreciate it. Even without the press, it’s a little overwhelming.”

“No, it’s good,” Bryn insisted, giving a cat like stretch before. “Ian McKellan almost knocked me
over and Patrick Stewart mocked him for it. I mean, it doesn’t get any better than that!”

“I’m still pretty awkward at these things,” Steve admitted, slumping into the rail beside her. “You
seem to fit right in though.”

“Not really,” Bryn smiled up at him, her cheeks turing pink. “It’s… well I’ve kind of convinced
myself it’s like one of those classes in business negotiation where you have to put on your poker
face?”

“It seems to be working,” Steve observed.

“Yeah I totally managed not to freak out and scream like a little girl when Oprah asked me for a
bobby pin earlier,” Bryn grinned at him. Steve let out a laugh.

“I kind of wish we could see times square from here,” he stated his tone a bit wistful.

“Well we can hear it, at least,” Bryn observed. She paused a moment, frowning. “We are actually
hearing it, right? Mr. Stark doesn’t have it piped in over some sneaky outdoor audio system or
something?”
“No,” Steve chuckled, shaking his head. “From the roof you can almost see the ball drop.”

“Steve, did you spend last New Year’s on the roof by yourself?” she chided.

“No, I was up there with Bruce,” Steve shook his head, his cheeks coloring again. Bryn let out a sigh, jostling his shoulder playfully.

“It’s been a hell of a year,” Steve stated, looking out over New York.

“Hey, at least the world ending crisis have been on the decline,” Bryn observed, propping her chin in her palm.

“Says the girl who got her house blown up,” Steve teased, then winced, giving her an apologetic look.

“That was not my fault,” Bryn replied mockingly, poking him in the arm. “You are the one that crashed head first into my wall Mr. Super Hero.” Steve smiled.

“I wonder what we’re doing sometimes,” he sighed. “If we’re doing enough, if we’re doing the right things, if I could be doing more.”

“Dude, you need to learn the meaning of the words: Down Time,” She scolded, leaning against his shoulder.

“I don’t think I can any more,” he confessed, his expression turning pained.

“Hey, Steve,” Bryn straightened, slipping one small hand up his arm to gently grip his shoulder.

“If I think about… anything I just,” He drew in a sharp breath, letting it out slowly. “If I keep busy it’s fine. I’m fine. It’s… getting harder to keep busy.”
“Steve, that’s no way to live,” Bryn said gently. “I’m not going to pretend that…” she choked, her voice trailing off as he ducked his head, looking away. He looked tired, he looked old and for one moment she thought about young Betty White in a red white and blue chorus girl’s dress. Steve winced as if he could read her mind and she made a face, brushing a tear from the corner of her eye.

“Yeah,” he said, his voice breathy.

“I’m going to shut up now,” she nodded firmly.

“You know, you are the best kind of friend to have,” He stated vehemently, reaching out to wrap an arm around her shoulders. “Thanks.”

“That’s got to be the coolest thing anyone has ever said to me,” Bryn stated with a soft smile, letting her head rest against his chest as she looped her arms around his waist.

“I don’t think I’m ever going to get used to not being the scrawny little idiot everyone tries to step on,” Steve observed seriously. Bryn let out a laugh shifting closer to him for warmth.

Five blocks away in Times Square they could hear the shouts of a countdown, picked up in the ballroom behind them and growing louder as more voices joined in.

“Three! Two! One! Happy New Year!” voices shouted from inside. Bryn gave Steve a squeeze as a guitar riffed Auld Lang Syne. Steve’s palm pressed warm and firm between her shoulders as he started to pull away, his bright blue eyes catching hers, so close.

She moved in without thinking, just a gentle press of lips. Steve made a soft noise in the back of his throat, a sigh or a moan she wasn’t sure and he moved in nearer, his hand resting at the small of her back.

Bryn’s eyes snapped open.

“I’m sorry,” She pulled away as if she’d been burned, pressing her fingers to her lips. “I’m so sorry, I shouldn’t have done that. I didn’t…”
“Hey, no,” Steve replied with a breathless smile, reaching out to lightly catch the fingers of her free hand. “It’s fine, it was a really nice kiss.”

“I didn’t mean to do that,” she declared, her cheeks turning red as she looked away. “I just.”

“It doesn’t have to be more than a kiss,” Steve said quickly, leaning on the rail so that he could see her eyes. “I mean, I wasn’t even expecting that much. So there’s no harm done.”

“There might be if I kissed you because I couldn’t kiss someone else,” Bryn confessed tears welling in her eyes.

“Oh,” Steve murmured softly, his own cheeks turning pink. “And this fella… person, doesn’t want to kiss you?” Bryn let out a huff that was trying to be a laugh and she gave him a fond look. Leave it to Captain America to be as diplomatic as possible while being shut down.

“Doesn’t really matter what he wants,” she shrugged, a sad smile curling her lips. “We can’t… be that way.”

“Bryn,” Steve said gently. “You’re probably going to think I’m being really old fashioned, but if he’s married you’re only going to get hurt, I’d hate to see that.”

“He’s not married,” She replied, giving a tiny laugh. “He’s not.” She let out a long sigh, staring out at the reflected light of Times Square.

“Have you ever fallen in love with someone and you just knew you couldn’t have them?”

“A couple of times, yeah,” Steve nodded, swallowing. “The first one was Marjory Kelly, we were in school together. She had these big brown eyes and this really pretty laugh.”

“And she turned you down?” Bryn asked, Steve gave a tight nod.

“Some punks were hassling her coming home from school one day and,” His face flushed bright red. “Well, I told them to back off and I got my lip split and my arm broken for my trouble.”
“And that didn’t change her mind?” Bryn asked in wonder. Steve shrugged.

“That’s when she turned me down, actually,” He admitted. “She stepped out with Bucky a couple of times but when he found out about it, he wouldn’t see her any more. She was kind of mad at me after that.” Bryn stared at him in silence for a long moment.

“And you liked this girl?” she demanded. Steve nodded shyly. “You have terrible taste in women.” Steve gave her a teasing look and she glanced away in embarrassment.

“The last was Peggy,” he whispered. Bryn reached out, taking hold of his hand and giving it a squeeze.

“I didn’t even notice it was happening,” She admitted. “It’s like I just woke up one day and realized I’d been head over heels for ages. I don’t even remember when it changed.”

“You can’t tell him how you feel?” Steve asked, an innocence in his searching gaze.

“It wouldn’t make any difference,” Bryn sighed, slumping on the rail beside him. Steve’s arm slid around her shoulders again and she leaned into his chest a little.

“I’m kind of a hopeless romantic,” He admitted. “I like to believe it always makes a difference.”

“I wish the world was as simple as the one you lost,” She whispered, her voice hitching.

“Yeah, me too,” he admitted. Bryn straightened, wiping away the last of her tears.

“I hope your not offended,” She began, rubbing his arm affectionately. “But I should probably leave before I do anything more stupid.”

“It’s okay,” Steve assured. “I’ve kind of lost the party spirit. You want to go get an ice cream?” Bryn let out a laugh.
“You’re totally serious aren’t you?” she demanded with a grin. “Ice cream in the middle of the night in January?”

“I like ice cream,” he shrugged unapologetically.

“I’d actually love to,” Bryn declared.

“Good,” Steve said with satisfaction, nodding toward the doors. “I’m going to borrow one of Tony’s cars and I’ll drive you home after.” Bryn let out another laugh, as he held out his arm for her. She used her grip on his bicep to tug him down, brushing a kiss on his cheek and he gave her a warm smile tugging her back toward the ballroom. Steve opened the door for her with a flourish and she gave his arm a squeeze ignoring the crowd as they skirted along the windows, heading for the elevator.

“What are you kids up to?” Tony demanded, magically appearing as if he’d been summoned, his cheeks flushed with too much alcohol and a grin on his face.

“It’s okay if I borrow the Lexus and drive Bryn home?” Steve asked with a hint of apology in his tone. Tony looked between them with a surprised expression.

“Hell yes!” he said, a bit too loudly, then seeming to think better of it. “Not the Lexus, take her home in the Rolls. Jarvis, make sure he takes the Rolls”

“Of course Sir,” Jarvis answered.

“Tony!” Steve protested weakly. “It’s so…” his voice trailed off in a lack of adjectives as Bryn covered her mouth to hide her smile.

“I know what I’m talking about here,” Tony insisted, slapping his back and giving Bryn a wink as he steered them forcefully toward the elevator. “And… be safe.”

“Right,” Steve agreed giving him an incredulous look before shrugging him off and punching the call button. The elevator arrived only seconds later and Tony reached out stopping Bryn with a hand
on her arm, leaning into her ear.

“Go easy on him, okay,” he whispered at a credibly discrete volume. “He’s, well you know him. Don’t break him or anything.” He leaned back, giving her a knowing smile. Bryn only stared at him in amused silence.

“Jarvis?” she prompted finally.

“I’ll have your quarterly review processed by the first of the week,” he promised.

“What?” Tony demanded, his face crinkling in a frown as Bryn followed Steve onto the elevator.

“Do I want to know?” Steve asked with a cringe as the elevator began it’s leisurely descent to the garage.

“Nope,” Bryn replied, popping the “p” as they stared at the doors in silence. She didn’t realize she was still wearing his jacket until she found herself playing with the cuffs.

“I am in so much trouble,” Steve sighed.

“You’re buying me extra sprinkles,” Bryn agreed, nodding.

Chapter End Notes

Betty White’s acting career was sidelined during World War II and like many young women she signed on with the American Women's Voluntary Services. For those unfamiliar, the 300,000 women of the AWVS provided support services, allowing more skilled male workers to enlist in the military. AWVS volunteers worked primarily in emergency first response, navigation, supply transport and the selling of war bonds.
Day: 699 - February 14, 2014

Chapter Notes

This chapter takes place roughly two weeks after *The Heart of the Matter*

“I had your sweaters laundered, they’re in the closet hamper,” Jarvis declared. Natasha paused in the middle of packing her bag, brushing a lock of hair from her eyes.

“Thanks,” she said, abandoning the apple red carry-on bag on the bed and entering the walk-in closet. She pressed the button on the wall and a dumbwaiter door retracted, revealing a stack of neatly folded sweaters. She hid her smile with a slight shake of her head before collecting the entire pile and returning to the bedroom.

“D.C. is not that cold in the spring, Jarvis,” she reminded, stuffing them unceremoniously into the bag.

“I would hate for you to catch a chill,” he remarked. Natasha zipped the bag closed with a snap of her wrist and tossed it into the chair by the door before flopping down on the end of the bed, folding her legs in front of her.

“Do we need to talk about this again?” she asked gently.

“I am not comfortable with both you and the Captain being away for such a long time,” Jarvis admitted.

“Jarvis, I want you to listen to me very carefully,” Natasha stated. “You’ve done a great job getting Steve up to speed on the twenty-first century. He twitters and takes selfies and sends Tony annoying texts. You’ve done amazing with him. It’s time to take off the damn training wheels and let him crash his bike a couple of times.

“There were an estimated 515,000 emergency room visits last year related to bicycle injuries,” he answered. Natasha let out a soft groan, falling back on the bed.
“Steve needs to get out of here for a while,” Natasha insisted, her expression going sad. “He needs to think about something besides the fact that this isn’t his New York any more. He needs, more than just the Avengers in his life. He needs to make friends, meet people.”

“I can’t keep any of you safe when you’re not here,” Jarvis stated with a hint of meekness in his tone.

“You can’t keep us safe when we are here,” Natasha chided softly. “That isn’t the way this works.” Her declaration was met with silence and she sat up, wrapping her arms around one knee.

“Humans,” she began. “We grow up, and we go out into the world and sometimes we come back home, and sometimes we find new places. But home never stops being home, Jarvis. Even if we’re away a while, we’ll come back eventually. I know you’re not happy about this, but sometimes you have to do what’s best for someone you care about, even when it isn’t what you want.”

“You promised to keep an eye on the Captain,” Jarvis reminded hesitantly. Natasha made a face, pinching the bridge of her nose.

“I know you don’t like him much, but Nick’s a good friend, he can be an asshole sometimes but he’s always had my back when I needed him,” Natasha stated firmly. “I called in a favor and he’s promised me private unrecorded surveillance on Steve. He didn’t even ask me why.”

“Is it someone you trust?” Jarvis asked.

“Someone I trust very much,” Natasha nodded. “I give you my word, I’m not going to let anything happen to him.”


“I’ll be fine too,” she insisted, rolling to her feet and sweeping up her backpack, carefully checking it over. “You’re worrying unnecessarily. It’s only for a couple of months, Steve and I will be fine. Clint will be here for the next few weeks and you’ll have Bruce and Betty here to supervise the surgery.”

“I find I am less concerned about the imminent removal of Sir’s arc reactor than I am for the
Captain’s well being,” Jarvis admitted. Natasha paused, frowning at the back pack.

“Is there something you want to tell me?” she asked. “If you’ve noticed anything.”

“I’ve noticed that Captain Rogers does not react favorably when I enquire after his emotional status,” Jarvis answered drily. Natasha pressed her lips together to hold in her laugh. She shouldered her back pack, sweeping up her carry-on as she headed out the door and down the hall toward the elevator.

“Look, I’ll call every day to check in,” she promised reluctantly, glancing up at the camera in the corner of the lift. “Let you know how we’re doing. If I get sent out on a mission I’ll have to go dark, but I’ll let you know ahead of time, okay?”

“I would appreciate that,” Jarvis admitted.

“You can call too, you know,” she reminded sternly. “I think Steve would feel better if he heard from you now and again.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Jarvis replied as the elevator doors opened on the garage. A sleek black Corvette was parked in the middle of the lane, its trunk hanging open. Natasha paused, adjusting the strap on her backpack as an army duffle flew through the air, landing in the open trunk with a dull thump.

“Just, make sure he eats something that’s not in a glass,” Steve implored, his expression exasperated as he trudged down the ramp from Bryn’s office, an overstuffed messenger bag on one shoulder.

“Seriously, I have it covered,” Bryn promised, trailing after him a half step as he stowed the messenger bag in the back seat of the Corvette. “Jarvis upped my security clearance, I will take sandwiches directly into the lab if I have to.”

“It’ll come to that,” Steve insisted shuffling aside as Natasha heaved her bags into the trunk and slammed it shut. “I hope you like heavy metal.”

“Are we leaving or are you going to stand there like a kicked puppy?” Natasha asked drily, opening the driver’s side door.
“Are you sure about this?” Steve asked with a sigh.

“Of course I’m sure,” Natasha gave him a mocking smirk. “Come on, you can tell me all about how you crossed the Potomac with Washington on the way there.”

“Agent Romanov and I selected a fully furnished apartment for you adjacent to the Mall,” Jarvis pointed out. “You will be within walking distance of all of the most popular attractions and museums.” Steve shot her a glare.

“Besides you,” Natasha added.

“Between the Smithsonian exhibit opening and that project Director Fury wants you to consult on you’ll have plenty to keep you busy,” Bryn encouraged, giving his arm a squeeze. “And you’ll be back before you know it.”

“I,” Steve began hesitantly.

“Get in the damn car, Rogers,” Natasha ordered in exasperation, sliding behind the wheel. Steve let out a huff of a sigh that rolled his shoulders before climbing into the passengers seat.

“Drive safe!” Bryn called after them, waving as the Corvette sped up the ramp. Bryn bit her lip, watching until they disappeared around the corner.

“I sure hope he’s okay,” she murmured.

“Bryn, is your CV file up to date?” Jarvis inquired curiously. She paused, blinking slowly in consideration.

“My CV file?” she asked.

“And your SI employee profile,” he added with a considering tone. “I’ve noted that some of your
employee training modules are not listed. If you have no objections, I should correct that.”

“Why the sudden interest in my CV file?” Bryn asked, her eyes narrowing suspiciously.

“There is an opening for a logistical specialists and all department heads have been asked to put forward the most promising candidates,” Jarvis answered.

“Logistics,” Bryn blinked at the camera in the corner. “Am I qualified for something like that?”

“I believe so,” Jarvis confirmed. “The compensation is a substantial improvement.”

“Well, what division is it in?” she asked, trudging up the ramp and flopping down on the sofa.

“I am unable to reveal that information,” he answered as if on automatic.

“Is it in New York?” Bryn’s brow furrowed in a frown.

“I am not permitted to provide that data either,” Jarvis admitted. “I believe it would be a great opportunity for you.”

“You want to put me forward for a job you can’t tell me anything about?” Bryn scowled. “Do I get to know anything about it before I accept it or am I just going to be strong armed into it?”

“It is STARK industries policy that promotions are offered, not mandated,” Jarvis stated hesitantly. “Bryn do you not… trust me?”

“I…”

“I would never consider submitting you for candidacy to any position I did not feel you would excel at,” Jarvis added quickly. “Nor would I suggest you work for someone I did not feel would value you appropriately.”
“I know,” Bryn nodded, her voice hitching slightly.

“I did promise you on the day that you started that exemplary performance would garner you any future referral you might wish.”

“I,” She sucked in a breath. “I guess I’m just not sure I want things to change.”

“I have no doubts at all that you are capable of much more,” Jarvis insisted. “I think it would be selfish of me, both as a supervisor and as your friend not to encourage you to advance your career.”

“This is the only job that has you for a boss,” Bryn stated, biting her lip as her eyes watered.

“The world is bigger than Mr. Stark’s garage,” Jarvis said. Bryn choked back a laugh.

“I’m going to regret telling you that for the rest of my life,” She huffed. “I just know it.”

“Even if we were not working together, we would still be friends,” Jarvis reminded but it sounded more like a question than an instance. Bryn gave the camera a warm smile.

“Yeah, we would,” She nodded. “I suppose I’m kind of afraid you’ll forget about me.”

“And I am concerned that the Captain or Agent Romanov might choose to remain in Washington DC,” Jarvis admitted.

“Yeah,” Bryn agreed. “Me too.”

“For the record, I could never forget about you,” Jarvis supplied.

“Because your memory buffer exceeds four exabytes?” she asked her lips twisting in a half smile.
“Because you are unique,” Jarvis replied. Her expression slowly softened as her cheeks colored and she ducked her head.

“Th, thank you,” she said softly. “You know, you are too. Unique.”

“I’ve learned a great deal from you,” Jarvis admitted with a touch of hesitance. “And though I do not particularly relish the thought of a change in our working relationship, I was recently told that there are times when we need to think of what is best for our friends.”

“You’ve always done that,” Bryn replied, looking up into the camera for a long moment. Finally she looked away, climbing to her feet.

“I think maybe I better go grab sandwiches,” she suggested, reaching for her coat. “Steve’s right, Mr. Stark won’t remember to eat and Clint always gets a little depressed when Tasha leaves.”

“I’ll place the order for pickup,” Jarvis agreed as she pocketed her key card and slipped out into the hall.
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“I’m Beca Miller, I’m here to see Agent Waite,” Bryn hoisted her messenger bag on her shoulder, her fingernails digging into the strap as she glanced around the lobby. The young man behind the desk gave a sharp nod, picking up the land line phone as Bryn shuffled back and forth on her feet, biting her lip.

“She’ll be right down,” he said, hanging up the phone. Bryn gave him a tight nod, stepping away from the desk.

“This is a horrible idea,” she whispered once she was safely clear of the agents scurrying through the lobby of SHIELD’s New York office.

“I know,” Jarvis answered over her com, a hint of frantic desperation in his tone. “But I haven’t been able to reach Agent Coulson any other way.”

“Maybe Steve and Tasha had to go out on an Emergency,” Bryn debated, though she didn’t sound as if her heart were in it. “There’s, like, a dozen reasons she wouldn’t be able to call.”

“If it were anyone else, I would agree,” Jarvis allowed. “Do you believe Agent Romanov would miss two check-ins unless she were in imminent danger?”

“No,” Bryn admitted, letting out the breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. “Did you try Steve again?” She regretted the question almost as soon as it was out, Jarvis had been calling both Steve and Natasha almost continuously for the past two days with no response.

“Bryn, you can do this,” Jarvis coached, ignoring the obvious grasp at straws.

“I walked into the offices of an alphabet agency with falsified data,” Bryn stated softly, her tone surprisingly even and calm. “That’s a federal offense. When Mr. Stark finds out we forged his SHIELD credentials to get a meeting, he’s going to fire me. That’s if I don’t get caught.”

“He is not going to fire you,” Jarvis insisted. “And you won’t be caught. There’s absolutely no reason Sir has to know at all and he’s the only one who can confirm our indiscretion to SHIELD.”
“You don’t honestly think we can hide this, do you?” Bryn asked.

“I honestly think that at this moment he believes Dr. Banner is an attractive, blond woman,” Jarvis replied.

“So he’s on the really good drugs then?” She asked, trying not to smile.

“I can’t risk waiting any longer,” Jarvis insisted. “Mr. Stark’s surgery yesterday has left him incapacitated. Agent Barton is still under cover and I haven’t been able to raise anyone on Agent Coulson’s team through regular channels. Agent Waite is one of his oldest friends, she’ll be more than willing to help. All you have to do is give her the data drive.”

“You don’t find it at all suspicious that you’re completely unable to reach most of your team?” she asked.

“I am extremely suspicious or I would not have sent you into SHIELD headquarters with a forged access,” Jarvis admitted.

“Awesome,” Bryn nodded in resignation.

“If anyone tries to detain you, hit them with your bag,” Jarvis instructed.

“I hate you,” Bryn stated, her eyes narrowing menacingly as she stared out of the windows into the street.

“You must be Miller,” Bryn half jumped, spinning on her heel to face a tall woman with sharp, masculine features.

“Agent Waite?” Bryn asked, taking her offered hand cautiously.

“Stark’s assistant said you had some information for us,” the woman related with a frown. She had a
severe look about her, hard like flint and stern in an unforgiving way. Her broad shoulders were pulled back as she looked down her nose with narrowed eyes as if she were scrutinizing everything and everyone around her.

“Mr. Stark specified I was to speak only to you and only in private,” Bryn replied. Agent Waite seemed to consider her a moment before motioning toward the elevator and Bryn followed, clutching at her messenger bag as they walked.

“Stark’s PA mentioned something about a potential breach?” Waite prompted as the elevator doors closed, leaving them in relative seclusion. “It has to be a pretty dicey situation for him to send the data physically.”

“He said he couldn’t trust the regular channels,” Bryn replied. “It’s vital that this information gets to Agent Coulson.”

“Coulson’s on an op in Florida,” Waite replied with a frown. “Stark knows that. He should be able to reach him.”

“Mr. Stark called him this morning,” Bryn lied. “Agent Coulson said you could transfer the data to him directly through a secure channel. They wanted to make one hundred percent sure it wasn’t intercepted.”

“Well we can do that,” Waite nodded, motioning Bryn out of the elevator and down the hall. “I have to admit, I’m kind of curious.”

“I’ve learned working for Mr. Stark that inquisitiveness is probably not in my best interest,” Bryn admitted.

“That’s fair,” Agent Waite agreed, opening her office door. “Let’s see if we can get Coulson on the line and send him your data.” She waved a hand at one of the chairs in front of her desk before sliding in front of her computer with a frown, her fingers pecking at the keys with sharp precision. Bryn sat, pulling her messenger bag against her chest, her fingers gripping the straps.

“Hmm,” Agent Waite made a noise in the back of her throat, her eyes narrowing.
“Is something wrong?” Bryn just managed to keep the worry from her tone. Agent Waite looked up at her with a calculating expression.

“I’m afraid so,” the agent admitted with a slight frown. “Your bag.”

“My bag?” Bryn drew in a sharp breath, staring down the barrel of a small caliber hand gun.

“Now is a bad time to start asking questions, kid,” Agent Waite stated, releasing the safety on the gun and aiming it squarely between Bryn’s eyes. “Hand me the bag, now.”

“Bryn, what’s going on?” Jarvis demanded frantically in her ear. A single gunshot rang out down the hall and Bryn jumped, scooting back in the chair, wide eyed as shouts and screams and the sound of automatic weapons peppered the air.

“Don’t piss me off, kid,” Waite ordered. “There’s no reason anything bad has to happen to you, give me the bag and I’ll walk you out of here.”

Okay,” Bryn agreed, nodding as she slowly unwound the straps from around her fingers. “Okay, I don’t want any trouble.” She flinched as a full fledged firefight broke out on the floor just below them and her hands shook as she held out the bag.

“Bryn, what’s happening?” Jarvis asked. “Bryn?”

“Lay it on the desk,” Waite ordered, waiting for Bryn to comply. “Sit back, don’t move. This is a bad day to be a hero.” Agent Waite watched her with cat-like scrutiny until Bryn sunk back into the visitor’s chair. A smug smile played over Waite’s face and she reached out for the messenger bag, flipping the top open and reaching inside.

A sharp blue electrical wave shot up Agent Waite’s arm and she went rigid, the gun falling from her grasp as she lurched to her feet. Her eyes rolled back into her head as her hair crackled with static and then she tipped backwards, falling flat on the floor.

“Bryn!” Jarvis’ near hysterical voice in her ear was like a siren call to action and Bryn jumped up, scrambling straight over the top of the desk, snagging the handle of the bag as she dove to the floor.
“Jarvis?” Bryn sank down behind the desk, crawling under it and pressing her hand over her ear as automatic weapon’s fire went off down the hall. “Oh my god! Jarvis?”

“Bryn, what’s wrong? What happened?” he demanded as she gawped at Agent Waite, the woman’s unseeing eyes staring at the ceiling.

“She tried to shoot me!” Bryn hissed angrily.

“She what?”

“Agent Waite!” Bryn snapped, flattening herself onto the floor and peering under the desk as three armed specialists quick marched past the open office door. “She tried to shoot me! With a gun, Jarvis! A gun! In the head!”

“Something’s wrong,” Jarvis stated. “Something’s terribly wrong. Do you still have the drive?” Bryn fished in the front pocket of her jacket, pulling out the Thor keychain drive and staring at it.

“I still have it,” she nodded slowly. “She went for the bag, like you said.”

“Can you plug it into a computer?” Jarvis asked. Bryn nodded, though he couldn’t see and she peered under the bottom of the desk to check the hall before clambering to her knees and plugging the drive into Agent Wait’s laptop.

“Jarvis, there’s a logo on the computer screen,” she breathed out, scurrying under the desk once more. “Please tell me I’m remembering wrong.” She gripped at her jeans as the silence hung heavy and still between them.

“Jarvis?” she said finally. The sound of gunfire and shouting pierced the air again and she jumped, folding herself up smaller.

“Bryn you need to get out of there now,” Jarvis declared, his voice deathly calm.
“How?” She demanded. “Waltz out the front door?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “SHIELD isn’t safe, no one is safe. You have to get out of the building, you can’t trust anyone.”

“I’m on, like the fiftieth floor!” she informed desperately, cringing as an explosion went off a few floors away. “There are guns going off and screaming, I can’t…” she stuttered on the word, covering her mouth with her hand.

“Bryn, I’m so very sorry,” Jarvis’ voice was pitched low, a thin thread of terror running through it. “I should never have sent you there.” She hadn’t even realized she’d been on the verge of hyperventilating, didn’t remember when her face had become wet. She drew in a handful of stuttering breaths, scrubbing at her cheeks with trembling hands.

“Where’s Thor?” she asked in a small voice.

“He and Jane are still on Asgard,” Jarvis admitted. “I’ll tell Dr. Banner.”

“No,” she interrupted, a single tear trickled down her cheek. “No, Mr. Stark’s surgery… he’s still not stable, is he?”

“No he’s not,” Jarvis admitted.

“You can’t tell Bruce,” Bryn whispered. “He needs to stay with Mr. Stark. Jarvis, it’s… if it really is Hydra they’re going to go after the Avengers first. You have to protect them.”

“Bryn, I have to protect you too,” Jarvis insisted.

“You can’t,” she replied, her voice cracking slightly. “You’re… you’re an Avenger and the team comes first, the team always comes first. You have to protect anyone who’s left. I’ll get out on my own.”

“Bryn,” Jarvis’s voice was soft in her ear and she let her head fall back against the inside of the desk.
“I can’t abandon you.”

“There’s nothing you can do,” she insisted, struggling to hold back a sniffle. “I’m… Jarvis, I’m not sorry, okay? Getting to know you, the team, it’s been the most amazing thing that’s ever happened to me and I’m not even a little bit sorry.”

“Bryn, I… I’ve come to care for you very much over these last few years,” Jarvis confessed. “I’m not prepared to…”

“It’s okay,” Bryn murmured back. “Jarvis, it’s okay.”

“This is my fault,” he replied. “And I never told you.”

“The wet wall,” Bryn interrupted, sitting up ramrod straight under the desk and bumping her head.

“Excuse me?”

“Clint,” Bryn stated, her breaths coming in short, excited gasps as she rubbed the top of her head. “Clint said the vents and the drop ceilings in SHIELD HQ were completely secure, but the wet walls. No one bothered installing baffles inside the wet walls because they didn’t think anyone could climb it.”

“Is there a bathroom?”

“Yes.”

“Lock yourself in,” he ordered sharply. Bryn shouldered the bag as she rolled into a crouch, peering around the edge of the desk before gathering her feet under her and springing for the door to the small en suite bathroom. She eased it shut behind her, laying against it as she reached up, turning the lock.

“I do not know a thing about plumbing,” she admitted, her chest heaving as if she’d run a mile.
“There should be a solid access panel near the sink,” Jarvis instructed.

“I’ve got it,” Bryn replied, slithering under the sink. “It’s screwed down.”

“Do you still have the messenger bag?” he asked.

“Yeah, I… should I still be touching it?” She asked awkwardly.

“There is a shielded pouch in the back, you should find some appropriate tools there,” Jarvis replied. Bryn turned the bag over, finding the hidden seam and opening the pouch to reveal a small handheld taser and a Swiss army knife.

“Snuck into a spy agency with weapons,” Bryn observed holding one in each hand. “I am really glad they’re probably Hydra or I’d be going to jail forever.”

“Abandon the bag,” Jarvis instructed as she set to work on the screws. “I can use it to cover your escape if necessary.”

“I’m going to be totally blind in here,” She reminded, removing the last screw and prying the panel free.

“I’ve managed to access building surveillance,” Jarvis prompted as she took a few deep breaths before shining the flashlight on the taser into the wet wall.

“These poles are kind of bigger than Phil’s stripper poles in the gym,” Bryn observed nervously. “I’m not sure I can make the climb all the way down.”

“Can you make the climb to the roof?” Jarvis asked. Bryn swallowed, craning her head around to look up.

“Probably,” she admitted. “Up is harder, but it’s not that far. What am I going to do when I get
“I can get you off the roof,” Jarvis replied with conviction. “It’s empty, and it seems unlikely anyone will think to look there. You have to trust me.”

“What you mean is I have to trust you or I’m going to die here,” She stated, stowing the knife and the taser in her pockets before untying her sneakers. “I really liked these shoes, Jarvis.”

“Vans Lo Pro in Cosmic Galaxy, size eight,” he stated.

“You can just get me a pair of the stonewashed denim ones too while you’re at it,” she snapped, pitching the second shoe over her shoulder with an angry frown and peeling off her socks. “Because almost getting me killed deserves shoes.”

“The ones with the stars on them?” he asked.

“Hell yes,” Bryn nodded, taking a deep breath before shimmying feet first through the access panel and swinging out to grasp hold of the nearest plumbing pipe.

“This is a terrible idea,” she insisted, carefully making her way toward the roof.

“Think of something to distract yourself,” Jarvis suggested. “This is exactly like one of Agent Coulson’s blindfold exercises. What do you think about while training in the gym?”

“I can’t think of anything except the fact that Clint asked for Ben and Jerry’s and I forgot to put it on the list,” She admitted, her arms straining as she heaved herself upward.

“I overheard,” Jarvis sighed in exasperation. Bryn paused a moment, bracing her feet against one plumbing pipe and her back against the other as she shook out her fingers in the pitch darkness before she continued her climb.

“Could you, perhaps, go faster?” Jarvis asked nervously.
“No,” Bryn stated, the word coming out in a huff as she pulled herself higher. She was distantly aware of a banging sound and the splintering of wood over the continued ring of gunfire but she blocked it out determinedly, focusing on her grip on the plumbing pipe.

“Bryn, brace yourself!” Jarvis warned frantically.

“Wait, what?” She had only a moment to wrap both arms around the pipe, her foot wedging against the parallel pipe as an explosion went off below her, a small fireball rushing into the wet wall and illuminating the shaft for only a moment.

“What the hell was that?!” she demanded, climbing the plumbing pipe with renewed determination.

“I covered your escape,” Jarvis replied simply.

“With a bomb?” she fumed. “What the hell was in that bag you gave me? Oh my god, did it actually kill Agent Waite?!”

“Limited contact should not result in death,” he replied in his most professional tone.

“What about sticking your hand in it?” she asked horrified.

“Aah.”

“Oh my god, I snuck into a super secret spy agency with weapons and a killer book bag!”

“In my defense I only intended it to be used as a bludgeoning weapon,” Jarvis insisted.

“And a bomb!” Bryn reminded angrily.

“In light of recent events, my precautions do not appear to be excessive,” he argued.
“If you ever give me a killer book bag without telling me again we are totally done as friends, Jarvis,”

“Understood,” he allowed in resignation. “Were you properly distracted?”

“You are an asshole and I am so angry with you right now!” she replied. “I’m almost there, is it still clear?”

“Yes, but hurry,” he instructed. Bryn braced herself between the plumbing pipes and carefully fished the taser from her pocket, shining it around until she located an access panel.

“Where is this?” she questioned with a frown.

“Based on the schematics and GPS from your com, you should be in a public bathroom on the top floor near the fire stairs.” he replied.

“Peachy,” she growled, adjusting her grip and swinging out, connecting with the panel with both feet. It bent under the strain with a groan of metal and she checked her grip again before swinging forward. The panel broke free, skittering across the tile floor and she followed it, tumbling through the access panel with a yelp.

“Bryn?” Jarvis sounded in her ear.

“Quarterly review, Jarvis,” she stated, staring up at the ceiling, her chest heaving. “That’s all I’m saying to you right now. Quarterly Review.”

“Perhaps promotion to a different division seems somewhat more appealing now,” he remarked meekly.

“I am having a really bad day and you are not funny,” she observed, rolling onto her knees, still gasping for breath.
“Did you injure your feet?” he queried worriedly.

“I’m barefoot in a Hydra bathroom,” she reminded, drawing the taser and creeping toward the door. “Let’s keep our priorities in check here, like the not dying one, I want to put not dying slightly ahead of stubbed toes.”

“The hallway is clear,” Jarvis reported. “Exit the bathroom, take a right and exit the door immediately to your left. I’ve disabled the fire alarms.”

“You’re going to get me off the roof, right?” she asked, her voice trembling as her fingers tightened around the door handle. “because once I’m on the roof…”

“I am going to get you off the roof,” Jarvis promised. “Go. Now.”

Bryn heaved the door open, her bare feet slapping against the industrial floors. She crashed into the stairwell door and charged up the steps as fast as her legs would carry her, shoving open the door marked ‘roof access’.

“Oh my god,” she whispered. She could see the floors below reflected in the windows of the building across the street and she crept forward, leaning against the ledge as she looked down. Smoke billowed out of broken windows and down on the street screaming pedestrians ran from the scene.

“Bryn?”

“I made it to the roof,” She stated, her eyes scanning the surrounding buildings. She caught a reflection of the floor below, only a flash of movement, and she tensed. “Jarvis! are there cameras in the stairwells?”

“Bryn, run!” he shouted in her ear as the stairwell door banged open on its hinges.

Without conscious thought she spun on her heel, running for all she was worth across the asphalt roofing, bullets whizzing by her ears.
“I’m almost out of roof!” She shouted, the sharp gravel coating biting into her bare feet.

“Bryn, trust me and jump,” he ordered.

She jumped.

Bryn hung in the air for what seemed like a span of seconds, New York stretching out beneath her in a flurry of traffic and the sharp sting of gun powder that clouded the sidewalks around SHIELD’s offices. She sucked in a startled breath, her heart hammering in her chest and a moment later the wind rushed from her lungs as something firm and metallic connected with her back, sending her head spinning.

“Iron Man?” she squeaked out, her fingers grasping hold of the gauntlet wrapped around her waist in a white knuckled grip.

“Are you hurt?” Jarvis voice sounded, strangely metallic through the suit’s voice synthesizer. She started as a bullet dinged off his shoulder but he ignored it. “You weren’t injured?”

“Jarvis?” Her eyes widened and she let out a squeak as they turned sharply, ducking between buildings, turning her head to look up into his face “Oh my god, what… how?”

“My scans are not indicating prominent injury,” he continued with a touch of amusement.

“They didn’t get me,” she nodded, clutching at his arm. “Oh my god we’re flying!”

“Sir does say it’s the only way to travel,” Jarvis admitted, something smug in his declaration. Bryn let out a whoop as they circled Avengers Tower, pulling her knees up as Jarvis eased smoothly onto the launch balcony.

“Are your feet bleeding?” he asked worriedly as he set her down. Bryn grasped hold of a metal arm, pulling up one foot with a frown.

“Just road rash,” she insisted, checking the second foot. “I got worse than this on the BMX track, I’ll
“You’re sure?”

Bryn looked up into the face of Iron Man, a smile blooming on her own face as her fingers curled gently around the gauntlet and she nodded.

“How did you,” the question dissolved on her lips as the suit’s faceplate retracted, revealing nothing. The disassembly robotics emerged from the balcony floor, stowing each piece with methodical precision until Bryn was standing alone the wind tugging at her blonde curls.

She stared blankly at the spot where the last boot had folded into the floor, unmoving, her lips parted as she drew in slow, thready breaths.

“I’ve alerted Dr. Banner to the situation at SHIELD,” Jarvis stated though the com in her ear. “And I’ve made you an appointment with the staff clinic, if you’ll come inside I’ll show you to the elevator.”

“Yeah,” Bryn nodded, her voice thin, but she didn’t move.

“Are you certain you’re all right?” he asked with renewed worry.

“You came by yourself… I didn’t,” Her voice hitched. “You can…”

“Bryn!” She spun in surprise to see Bruce running across the living room and flinging open the door to the balcony. “Oh my god, are you alright?” She could do nothing but nod as he set a gentle hand on her arm, peering into her eyes, carefully assessing her for injuries.

“Jarvis said that SHIELD had been compromised,” he declared, shuffling her toward the door. “You’re not wearing any shoes.”

“I had to leave them,” she said, glancing back over her shoulder to where Iron Man had disappeared only moments before.
“Yeah,” Bruce shook his head with a sigh. “I know all about that. Come inside, let me have a look at you.”

“I’m fine,” she stated, her tone hollow. She wasn’t sure why she kept looking back over her shoulder but she couldn’t seem to stop herself.

“Maybe,” Bruce allowed. “But frankly I know not fine well enough to recognize it when I see it.”
“Captain, please sleep,” Jarvis pleaded with a faint note of exasperation. “You have been on watch for nearly seventy hours now.”

“Believe me, it’s not that I don’t want to,” Steve answered, rubbing at his eyes with an exhausted sigh. He slumped forward over the interview table, letting his head rest on his hands.

“Dr. Banner is currently engaged in the research for more effective tranquilizers,” Jarvis informed drily. “perhaps you would like to assist him with testing?” Steve let out a huff of a laugh before sitting up, leaning back in the chair and stretching his long legs out in front of him.

“I’m sorry, Jarvis,” he replied, his mouth opening in a jaw-cracking yawn. “I just haven’t been able to get to sleep.”

“You might find your attempts more effective were you to lie down in an actual bed.” Jarvis surmised. Steve smiled, rubbing at his face with his fingers. He shifted in the chair, folding his arms over his chest as his attention returned to the monitor on the wall. Inside the Hulk cage Bucky Barnes was fast asleep, splayed on top of the down comforter on the queen sized bed, his metal arm dangling over the side, almost brushing against the flokati shag area rug. The cage had been appointed in the finest designer furnishings money could buy, each of them meticulously bolted to the floor. Bucky had objected at first, insisting that he could devise a weapon out of anything. As far as Steve could tell, Tony had only taken that as a challenge.

“Jarvis are you capable of being physically compromised by emotion?” he asked finally. “I mean, obviously you… feel.”

“I’m not sure I understand the question,” Jarvis answered. Steve’s face scrunched up and he blinked dry eyes at the screen as if to clear them.

“I… I’m not sleeping because when I try, my mind races,” Steve admitted softly. “I think about
everything the happened that day, every choice I made. Everything I did wrong. I can’t make it stop.” Steve paused, wincing.

“That’s probably perfectly normal for you,” he observed. “You don’t need sleep and you’re capable of how many simultaneous calculations?”

“Currently, three hundred and thirty-seven,” Jarvis replied. “I do think I grasp something of what you are asking, Captain, there have been instances where emotion unduly influenced my decision making process. It can create a great deal of chaos in my computational parameters.”

“Yeah, that’s me alright,” Steve nodded leaning forward to rest his elbows on the table. “He looks so fragile like this.”

“If I might say so, Captain, the assessment is not unfair,” Jarvis pointed out. “He seemed quite distraught after this most recent episode.” Steve nodded in agreement.

“I was kind of hoping we were getting past this,” he whispered softly. “My best friend is in pain, and I got him that way. And I put him in a cage.”

“He is showing marked improvement,” Jarvis reminded gently. “It will be at least several days before he has another regressive episode, you should take the opportunity to rest. I will call you if there is any change.” Steve rested his face in his hands.

“I can’t leave him alone,” Steve stated. It was a testament to his state of exhaustion that it took him several moments to realize the silence was becoming awkward.

“I did not mean that like it sounds, it’s,” Steve corrected, cringing. “Hell. I just don’t feel right leaving any of you here alone with him. This was all on me, I did this to him, I brought him here. If anything happened to any of you because of this.”

“Sgt. Barnes’ episodes have become progressively fewer and shorter,” Jarvis offered succinctly. “Also, Agent Barton, Sgt. Barnes, and myself conducted a test of the security systems during your last break three days ago, the Sergeant was unable to find a means of escape.” Steve stared at the monitor, blinking slowly.
“And you’re wondering why I’m nervous about leaving you alone together?” Steve asked incredulously.

“It was a controlled test,” Jarvis answered drolly. “According to Agent Barton we were, apparently, bored.” Steve let out a soft chuckle, shaking his head.

“Yeah, that sounds like Bucky.” Steve nodded, his voice cracking slightly. “Damn, I’ve missed him so much.” Steve rubbed at his eyes, drawing in a handful of unsteady breaths.

“Captain, you’re exhausted,” Jarvis remarked in his most gentle tone. “Please, Dr. Banner and Sgt. Wilson are both available. Allow me to summon them.” Steve stared at the monitor, his eyes shining as he watched Bucky.

“I’m terrified that if I take my eyes off of him, he’s going to disappear,” Steve confessed, his face contorting in a miserable expression.

“Captain,” Jarvis scolded lightly.

“I lost everything, my girl, my best friend,” Steve continued, struggling to regain control of his emotions. “I never told them how I felt. I always said there wasn’t time, but I…”

“You have time now,” Jarvis pointed out. “Sgt. Barnes is not going anywhere. His mental state is improving. It will take time, but I believe he will be all right.”

“You know what scared me most when I woke up here?” Steve questioned. “After I moved in here. I kept seeing myself years from now, you and I, the only ones left. And it’s nothing against you, Jarvis.”

“It troubles me too,” Jarvis admitted. The silence drew out between them, less uncomfortable this time. Steve’s eyes fixed on the steady rise and fall of Bucky’s chest.

“Typical.”
Steve started at the unexpected sound of Bryn’s voice, his head swiveling toward the door to the observation room. She stood on the threshold, leaning against the frame with her arms folded over her chest and a brown paper bag clutched in one hand.

“Jarvis sent me to bring you food,” She stated, holding out the bag as she crossed the room. “You know if you wanted me to come up here and bully him, you could have just mentioned it.” she directed the last statement at the camera in the corner and Steve bit back a smile as he took the bag from her.

“Thanks for the food, but I’m fine,” he insisted unwrapping his hoagie and taking a large bite.

“Look at you,” Bryn huffed, fishing her phone from her pocket. “You look like the end of an eight day Disney vacation!”

“Is that the civilian version of the fourth day of a three day pass?” Steve asked, stifling a yawn. He paused as her camera button clicked, looking at her in confusion as she smoothly turned the phone’s screen toward him.

“Okay, this looks bad,” he admitted, scrutinizing the photo of himself. Bryn made a condescending face at him.

“I feel like I’m being judged,” he stated, his eyes narrowing at her slightly.

“You are being judged,” Bryn declared with a frown. “When was the last time you bathed?” Steve gave her sidelong glance, stuffing another bite of his sandwich in his mouth.

“What are you doing?” he asked cautiously as she tapped at her phone.

“Telling Tasha that you’re about to grow mushrooms,” Bryn answered as her phone made a distinctive whoosh. Steve made a face, his expression settling on wounded as his brow unfurrowed. Bryn dropped into the chair beside him, giving him an expectant look.

“You’re comfortable here for a few minutes until she shows up?” he asked hesitantly.
“Preemptive retreat,” Bryn nodded firmly. “Best tactical choice.”

“That’s why they made me Captain,” Steve sighed, dragging himself out of the chair and shuffling on stiff legs toward the door.

“Hygiene, Rogers!” Bryn called after him. “Don’t come back until you’ve bathed and brushed your teeth!” she rested her elbows on the table, propping her chin on the heels of her hands until the lift dinged.

“You want to call somebody down here, Jarvis, or should I?” she asked when she was certain the elevator doors had closed.

“Sgt. Wilson will be down shortly,” Jarvis answered with a touch of amusement. “As soon as he insures that the Captain is making some attempt to sleep. He remarked that it was proof of the Captain’s state of mind that he clearly does not remember that Agent Romanov is currently in California.”

“Steve’s pretty messed up,” Bryn nodded in affirmation, tipping the chair back a fraction and resting her feet on the edge of the table. “Why’d you let that go on for so long?”

“I can do little more than threaten,” Jarvis admitted reluctantly. “And threats mean very little without Agent Romanov present to carry them out.”

“She is kind of terrifying,” Bryn agreed. Inside the Hulk cage Bucky stirred. Bryn dropped her feet to the floor, leaning forward. “Jarvis?”

“Good afternoon, Sgt. Barnes,” Jarvis said in a soft, placating tone. “It is May twenty-second, 2014. You are in Manhattan in Avenger’s tower under the protection of Steven Rogers and Anthony Stark, the son of your friend Howard Stark.”

“Yeah… Yeah… I remember,” Bucky said thickly, nodding slowly. “Thanks, Jarvis.”

“My pleasure, Sergeant,” Jarvis replied. Barnes rolled slowly up, wincing as if in pain.
“What did I break while I was... out?” he asked hesitantly.

“Your accommodations are undamaged, Sergeant,” Jarvis replied. “As you can, no doubt, see for yourself.” Bucky blinked blearily around the room, scratching at his scalp.

“Steve?” he called out hesitantly. Bryn reached for the microphone, pressing the button.

“Hey Sgt. Barnes, I’m Bryn,” She offered hesitantly. “We haven’t met yet. I work for Mr. Stark. Steve was looking kind of tired so I told him to get some rest.”

“That’s, that’s good, he’s,” Barnes paused, dragging his hand over his face. “I’m glad you’re looking out for him.”

“Is there anything I can do for you, Sergeant?” She questioned with a hopeful lilt.

“Bucky,” he suggested. “Might as well call me Bucky if you’re on a first name basis with Steve.”

“Alright, Bucky then,” Bryn agreed. Bucky rubbed the sleep from his eyes, blinking up at the tv screen mounted into the wall near the ceiling.

“You’re a looker,” he remarked with a faint twist of a smile. “You Steve’s girl?”

“We’re friends,” Bryn answered, her cheeks coloring slightly. “I make the food runs around here, keep the kitchen stocked and pick up the takeout. That kind of thing.”

“Way to a man’s heart is through his stomach,” Bucky remarked, sprawling out on the bed and folding his arm behind his head, staring up at the ceiling.

“Yeah, that’s what my Gran always said,” Bryn agreed, a faint blush coloring her cheeks. “Is there anything you want? Mr. Stark says it might help you remember so I should get you anything you ask for. Carte blanche.”
“He might regret that later,” Bucky declared with a snort of amusement.

“Well, you haven’t seen Steve and Thor at a barbecue,” she said, smiling. “What can I get you? Brooklyn Cheesecake?”

“Is that still a thing?” he asked, a hint of nostalgia coloring his tone.

“It is in my part of Brooklyn,” Bryn offered with a shrug. “How about a nice juicy steak?”

“I don’t remember getting a lot of steak,” Bucky said, closing his eyes.

“I won’t tell Mr. Stark if you won’t,” she suggested. The faintest smile curled his lips but he didn’t reply. An uneasy quiet settled over the room and Bryn propped her chin in her hand, watching him, wondering if he had fallen asleep again.

“Steve thinks he’s going to get me out of here,” Bucky stated.

“That’s the plan as far as I know,” Bryn nodded.

“That wouldn’t be the best idea,” he observed.

“Why would you say that?” she asked curiously.

“Because I’m dangerous.”

“Mr. Stark doesn’t think so.” She pointed out.

“Yeah, well, if he’s anything like his old man then he wouldn’t think it was a bad idea to build a flying bicycle out of a flame thrower either,” Bucky declared drily. “But that doesn’t make it a smart move.” Bryn buried her face in her arms to stifle her laughter.
“What?” Bucky asked curiously. Bryn didn’t answer, gasping for air as she waved her hand at the security camera.

“Mr. Stark once rode a nuclear warhead into a black hole,” Jarvis answered with no small amount of derision.

“Son of a bitch,” Bucky gave a snort of amusement.

“Bucky, I’ve been here a while now,” Bryn stated, swallowing her giggles as she dried the tears from the corners of her eyes. “and I’ve seen Mr. Stark do some questionable things, but the one thing I’ve never seen him do is risk someone he’s responsible for. So if he says you’re going to be okay, then you’re going to be okay.”

“If anything happened,” Bucky began hesitantly.

“Jarvis would never allow it,” she stated with conviction.

“Sergeant Barnes,” Jarvis offered. “I hesitate to tell you this, but we have already put failsafes in place that would allow me to incapacitate you should you escape. Your containment is for your own safety, not for others.”

“If I go nuts and break out of here you can stop me?” he asked in disbelief.

“If Mr. Stark didn’t think Jarvis could stop you, you wouldn’t be here,” Bryn insisted gently. “It really is going to be okay.”

“You have an awful lot of faith in the robot butler,” Bucky observed.

“I’ve seen him in action,” Bryn replied.

“Oh, is that how it is in the future?” Bucky stated with a knowing smirk. Bryn opened her mouth to
protest as the door to the observation room opened.

“Hey, Buck, you’re awake!” Sam grinned, a cheerful spring in his swagger.

“Been hanging out with the support team,” Bucky stated with a shrug. “If you’re done brown nosing to the officers you should join us.”

“Cheeky, Barnes, really cheeky,” Sam observed, folding himself into the chair beside Bryn.

“If you’re good, I’m going to get back to work,” Bryn stated, patting his arm.

“Yeah, we’re fine,” Bucky interrupted before Sam could answer. “I’ll keep an eye on him for you.”

“See ya, Bucky,” Bryn waved at the camera, shooing him a grin. Her hand was on the door latch when he called back.

“Hey Bryn?”

“Yeah?”

“Can you still get latkes?” he asked softly. “There was a jewish deli down the street from our place. They made fantastic latkes.”

“I’ll add them to the shopping list,” Bryn promised. Bucky gave a nod of thanks and Sam gave her a pleased look. She opened the door half way before turning back.

“Did Howard Stark really make a flying bicycle out of a flame-thrower?” she asked curiously.

“Hell yeah,” Bucky nodded, his eyes shining with genuine warmth. “I almost broke my neck in the test flight.” Sam busted out in laughter as she slipped out into the hall.
“He’ll be fine,” Jarvis insisted once the elevator doors closed.

“I know,” she nodded with a heavy sigh. “It’s just really hard to see him like that. James Buchanan Barnes. He’s a hero.”

“I wish everyone felt that way,” Jarvis said with a sigh.

“I kind of just wish he did,” Bryn admitted.
“Go down to the cafe on floor forty-two,” Bryn said to the caterer’s assistant, brushing a lock of hair behind her ear. “There’s two more cases of root beer and enough Sam Adams to stage another revolution. Take someone with you, bring it all up.” The young man gave her a nod, waving to one of the other staff as he headed for the elevator. Bryn paused, clutching her StarkPad to her chest.

The roof deck of Avengers tower was a bustle of activity, the scent of charcoal heavy in the air. She glanced around, taking note of Phil, leaning into Pepper slightly with a conspiratorial smile as they watched Tony and Rhody assemble something that looked suspicious like mechanized lawn darts. Bryn shook her head. That was not her problem.

“Make sure he gets a couple of those burgers well done,” she instructed, turning toward the waiter manning the buffet table and waving a hand at the grill chef who was emptying another package of hot dogs onto the grill. “Dr. Banner hates the site of blood.”

“Great party,” Clint grinned, swooping past her with a beer in one hand, an ice cream bar in the other and a red white and blue party hat sitting, lopsided, on his head.

“It’s not my party I’m just the slave driver,” Bryn grinned at him. Clint leaned over, brushing a kiss on her cheek and shifting his beer to the same hand as his ice cream so he could snatch a hot dog from the warming tray.

“Row, slaves! Row!” he instructed with a teasing grin.

“And you wonder why no one likes you!” Bryn called after him as he fairly bounced across the roof deck of Avenges tower to where Natasha and Darcy were deciding how best to weigh down a twister mat. The DJ at the far end of the deck was spinning an odd mix of band music and top forty. A warm breeze stirred the air and the summer sun made the cloudless sky a vibrant blue. Bryn gave a satisfied sigh checking over the buffet table.

“Bryn would you mind terribly checking on Sgt. Barnes?” Jarvis’ voice asked tentatively in her ear. She swallowed down the deviled egg she’d snuck from the buffet tray, looking around cautiously. She spied the black pair of Converse One Stars and shook her head.

“I’ve got him,” she confirmed, moving off across the deck. “Don’t let Jane near the grill.”
“Understood,” Jarvis agreed as she crept up to the azalea hedge that separated the upper and lower decks.

“What are you doing hiding back here?” she asked, leaning around one of the potted evergreens with a frown.

“I’m not hiding,” Bucky snapped gruffly. Bryn stared at him in silence a moment, clutching her StarkPad to her chest. Finally she stepped a little closer, slipping into the cramped space between the decks and sinking down on the planter across from him.

“Nothing’s going to happen,” she insisted, taking hold of his metal hand and gently turning it so that he was looking at the bracelet he wore. “Jarvis has all the codes, if anything goes wrong he’ll shut down your arm and restrain you. You can’t hurt anyone.”

“It’s not that,” he shook his head. “I trust him.” Bryn smiled, giving his hand a squeeze even though he couldn’t actually feel it.

“What is it then?” she asked gently.

“It’s… it’s the height,” he admitted finally. “I got close to the edge and I…” he froze up, his breath arresting in his chest.

“Easy,” Bryn soothed, setting her StarkPad aside and taking hold of his other hand as well. “steady breaths, like Sam taught you.” he let the air out of his lungs in a whoosh, gulping in oxygen.

“I don’t understand,” he lamented when he was once more steady, his eyes shining. “I was never afraid of heights! I never.”

“You remember falling from the train,” Bryn said softly. Bucky stiffened, his jaw working silently as if in protest until finally it snapped shut and he gave her a clipped nod.

“That’s a good thing,” Bryn insisted firmly. “I know right now it doesn’t seem like it, but Bruce said that getting all your memories back was the best thing for you in the long run. Even the bad stuff.”
“I don’t want to remember,” Bucky admitted softly.

“I wouldn’t want to either,” Bryn nodded. “Why don’t you let me take you down to your suite? I’ll tell everyone you were tired, it’ll be fine.” Bucky shook his head.

“I want to stay for the cake,” he admitted, his voice cracking. Bryn gave him a smile, leaning back to look round the deck.

“Jarvis, where’s Thor?” she asked. As if summoned the Asgardian appeared, his wide shoulders barely fitting into the cramped space. He reached out, grasping Barnes by the shoulder with an understanding smile.

“Come my friend,” he declared, drawing Bucky into a one armed hug and forcibly steering him away. “I am told that the Yankees are to take the field of battle against the Gemini.”

“Twins,” Bucky corrected with a frown. “I hate the Yankees, aren’t the Dodgers playing today?”

“Thanks Jarvis,” she sighed into her com.

“I’m monitoring him closely,” Jarvis assured. “I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

“It’s the first time we’ve got him outside of Steve’s suite,” Bryn frowned, sweeping up her StarkPad and heading back toward the bar just as the catering staff returned with a restock of the beverages. “It’d be a good thing if this went well.”

“The party itself appears to be flawless,” He remarked. “Ms. Potts has asked me to convey her deep appreciation of you sacrificing your holiday in order to coordinate for us.”

“You know I don’t mind,” Bryn chided warmly. “It’s actually been kind of fun.”

“Apart from the incident with the hamburger buns?” Jarvis inquired teasingly.
“We are never talking about that again,” Bryn scowled, straightening the plastic cutlery on the table.

“The birthday cake has arrived,” he remarked, his tone amused. “Shall I have it sent up.”

“No, have them put it in the fridge,” Bryn stated thoughtfully. “It’s too warm out here for it to sit out and no one’s going to want cake until they’ve finished scarfing down burgers.” She turned, coming face to face with Steve, a hotdog in one hand and half of a distressingly large hamburger in the other.

“Have you seen Bucky?” he asked, his tone more curious than distressed as he scanned the roof deck.

“He’s with Thor,” Bryn replied, waving a hand in the direction of the outdoor seating area that ringed the weather proof television. Steve’s brow furrowed slightly as he gazed across the roof.

“Are they braiding each other’s hair?” he asked finally.

“Don’t be an old man,” Bryn scolded lightly. “It’s the 21st century.” He watched in silence a moment longer, slowly demolishing the remains of his hamburger. She glanced over at him with a fond smile when she finished rearranging the napkins.

“Steve, you’re not wearing your Legacy Pin,” She observed with a frown. He turned to her with a perplexed look.

“My what now?”

“Oh my goodness you must have one,” She declared with a disapproving frown. “Didn’t SHIELD give you a pin with a shield and the Strategic Scientific Reserve logo on it?”

“It was in his effects,” Tony Stark informed, reaching around Steve’s broad shoulders to snag a hot dog. “I know, I packed it myself when dad died.”
“I, remember it,” Steve admitted cautiously as Sam half shoved him out of the way to get to the ketchup. “But I didn’t give it any thought, the army gave me a whole drawer full of medals after I… died.”

“Honestly,” Bryn sighed, shaking her head as she fished in her pocket. “All of the members of the Strategic Scientific Reserve, the Howling Commandos, the infantry support services, the men you rescued from that Hydra base, they all share a legacy. You’ve been going around to Memorial and Veteran’s days and July fourth celebrations for three years without your Legacy Pin? It’s a wonder you didn’t cause a scandal.”

“Well it’s not like anyone told me what it was,” He stated blushing.

“You can wear mine for today,” She said, reaching up to fuss with the lapel of his shirt. “But don’t forget, I want it back. There, that’s better.” Steve blinked at her.

“Oh,” she shrugged, her cheeks coloring a bright pink. “Granddad was in the 92nd, I got his pin when he died. He used to talk about you all the time. He said you dug a bullet out of his shoulder on your way to Italy.”

“I remember that!” Steve insisted, wide eyed. “Rivera, skinny little kid.”

“Yeah, he was seventeen,” Bryn nodded, ducking her head. “he lied on his enlistment form so he could get in.”

“Yeah,” Steve nodded. “So did I. Why didn’t you ever say anything?” She paused a moment, her lips curling up in a self-depreciating smile.

“They had reunions every five year right up until I started college,” she said with a shrug. “I went to every one with my grandparents. You were… family. And then all of a sudden you were here and, I don’t know, it just seemed kind of awkward.” Steve stared at her in silence for a long moment, utterly speechless.

“So, you were looking after Cousin Steve in the big city so the parents don’t worry?” he asked in a teasing tone.
“Dude, you’re like, six years older than me!” Bryn rolled her eyes in exasperation. She let out a huff, her fond smile returning. “Thanks, by the way, for Granddad, if you hadn’t got him out of that Hydra base, well…”

“My pleasure,” Steve nodded, his fingertips straying to the pin on his shirt collar. He swallowed uncomfortably. “I’m going to check on Bucky.”

“Son of a Bitch,” Sam complained, watching him go.

“What?” Bryn asked cautiously, drawing back slightly under the perturbed looks of Sam and Stark.

“All I got him for his birthday are repulsors for his motorcycle.” Tony huffed in irritation.

“Stark, tell me you did not put repulsors on his motorcycle!” Phil demanded. Tony made a face, darting across the deck and ducking out of Coulson’s line of sight as Sam shook his head, giving Bryn a cheeky grin as she blushed. She bit her lip to hide her smile, turning instead to inspect the dessert table the caterers were setting up.

“Oh, hell no!” She choked out, wide eyed. The smile sliding off her face. “Those are Strawberries! Who authorized strawberries on the dessert table?” The pastry chef looked up at her owlishly as her eyes narrowed.

“There’s only one thing the CEO of Stark Industries is allergic to!” She informed.

“Bryn?” The sound of Pepper’s voice brought her up short and she spun on her toes to look up at the older woman with a cringing expression.

“I will deal with this,” Bryn promised apologetically.

“It’s fine,” Pepper assured. “Strawberry short cake is Steve’s favorite. I ordered it myself. I wasn’t planning on touching any of the deserts beyond the birthday cake I should have mentioned it.” Bryn let out a relieved sigh before turning to the pastry chef with a contrite expression.
“Sorry about that,” she winced, but he waved her off with a disinterested expression, his attention already focused on torching the crème brûlée.

“I wanted to thank you personally,” Pepper continued with a warm smile. “It was generous of you to agree to oversee the barbecue for us.”

“It’s all right, I didn’t have plans for today,” Bryn insisted. “And even if I am working, I’m still spending the day with friends.”

“It’s funny you should say that,” Pepper acknowledged, linking her arm with Bryn’s and leading her away. “An upbeat attitude like that is invaluable in this line of work.”

“Tony Stark’s personal party planner?” Bryn asked, her eyes dancing with amusement. Pepper let out a laugh.

“Heavens, no,” Pepper shook her head.

“That’s a relief,” Bryn admitted.

“No, having seen you in action, I’d never let Tony have you,” Pepper stated decisively. “No I was thinking about making you my personal assistant.”

The sunny smile slid off of Bryn’s face and she stared at the older woman with a stunned expression.

“This was a test?” she asked.

“Everything’s a test, dear,” Pepper informed practically, stopping when they’d reached a corner of the roof well out of ear shot. “You were aware that you were up for a promotion.”

“For logistics,” Bryn protested. “Or, I don’t know, I was hoping maybe project supervision for R&D. Anyway, I sat that interview months ago and HR never called me back, I thought…”
“You came highly recommended by your department head,” Pepper stated with a conspiratorial smile. “You have all the necessary qualifications. You were also the only candidate who’d actually defended Stark Industries’ interests at risk to your own safety.”

“But that was just,” Bryn stared up at her wide eyed. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“For one thing, it tells me that you’re extremely unlikely to betray the company,” Pepper replied seriously. “And for another, Tony feels better when he knows my entourage will actively defend me in a crisis situation.”

“No offense, Ms. Potts,” Bryn shook her head. “But I’m pretty sure you don’t need me to protect you.”

“I’d certainly feel better with someone who would never endanger me,” Pepper pointed out. “You’d be coordinating my schedule, handling my personal affairs, accompanying me to business meetings and PR events. I’d also be relying on you to assist in management of the business end of the Initiative.”

“You… want me to keep track of your life and organize the Avengers?” Bryn asked in disbelief.

“Jarvis handles most of the scheduling and administrative tasks,” Pepper explained. “The fact that you already work well with him was certainly a mark in your favor. None of my three secretaries seem comfortable with him. I need someone less managerial and more hands on.”

“I… I don’t know what to say,” Bryn admitted with a hint of breathlessness.

“Of course, it’s not the most relaxing job,” Pepper allowed, her expression turning serious. “You’d be traveling a good deal, the hours are awful.” There was a sharp yelp of surprise and they both looked up to see Clint gliding across the roof deck, doing a handstand on a skateboard.

“The, extended family are a bit problematic,” Pepper added drolly, ignoring the crashing sound a moment later that made Bryn cringe. “However the compensation is nearly 40% over what you’re making now.” Bryn choked.

“Still, I certainly understand that you’ll want to consider it carefully before you decide,” she mused.
“I’d be stupid to turn you down,” Bryn stated dazedly.

“No,” Pepper shook her head. “I want you to listen to what I’m about to say carefully, because I think as a woman you need another, more experienced woman to tell you the truth. No choice you make for your own happiness or well being is stupid. I’m very keen to have you, and make no mistake, I’ll go to great lengths to convince you to agree. But ultimately it is your life to live and if you make your choices based on money or the expectations of others you’ll have missed out on all of the most important things. Truthfully, I think you might enjoy it. You’re already used to the, colorful personalities that come with the job.”

“I’ll… think about it,” Bryn nodded slowly.

“Good,” Pepper agreed, patting her arm. “I’d like an answer by the end of next week.”

“Of course,” She agreed, looking up at the redhead. “Ms. Potts? Thank you.”

“Whatever you decide, I want you to know what an asset you are to us,” Pepper stated firmly. “We’re very lucky to have you in whatever capacity you choose.” Bryn blushed, ducking her head as Pepper slipped away.

“Tony!” She snapped with an authoritative air. “Put that down! Why do you have a blowtorch at a barbecue?” Bryn drew in an unsteady breath, letting it out slowly.

“Jarvis?” she questioned hesitantly.

“Yes?”

“You… You knew all of this, didn’t you?”

“I am privy to information that would not normally be available to most of the rank and file of Stark Industries,” he admitted. She looked back over the roof deck for a moment before turning the handful of paces and slipping down the stairs that led from the deck to the launch balcony.
“We need to talk,” she admitted, stepping out onto the deck, her hands curling gently around the rail.

“You do understand I was not able to divulge,” Jarvis began worriedly.

“This isn’t about that,” Bryn shook her head. “Not entirely. Did you… call in favors to Ms. Potts to get me this job?” Jarvis didn’t answer for a moment.

“Our relationship does not function in that way,” he said finally. “I was still very young when Ms. Potts began her tenure as Mr. Stark’s personal assistant. One could say we learned a great deal from each other. She trusts my judgment and I made no secret of my confidence and admiration in you.” Bryn bit her lip, the faintest smile tugging at her lips.

“I’m really not that qualified,” she confessed.

“What you need to know is not available as a course of study in any university I am aware of,” Jarvis supplied with a hint of amusement. “If you’re unsure of your performance, do not be. I have no doubts you will do well.”

“Are you sure you’re not blinded by bias a little bit?” she asked hesitantly.

“You can hardly blame me if I was biased in favor of a friend and colleague over people I do not know,” he chided. Bryn shook her head in frustration.

“You’re going to make me spell this out, aren’t you?” she demanded with a hint of anger. “Jarvis, did Ms. Potts offer me this job because of the way you feel about me?”

“Of course,” he answered in surprise. “I’m sure our friendship played no small part in Ms. Potts assurance that you would be a trustworthy candidate. And that qualification alone is perhaps the most important.”

“No,” Bryn snapped, her lips pressing together in a hard line as her eyes misted. “Don’t do that. You know, for the longest time I thought it was just me. I thought if you could feel that way you’d say something, because you’ve never had a problem with self expression. But you won’t will you?”
“Bryn, I’m not entirely sure what you mean,” he admitted hesitantly. She brushed at her eyes with a heavy sigh.

“I’m saying I love you, I have for a long time,” she confessed. “And I can’t... pretend any more that all these things you do are because we’re friends. Because friends don’t steal super suits to rescue you off a roof. And they don’t pull out all the stops to get you an executive tier position at a fortune 500 company.”

“I’m not,” His voice trailed off and Bryn couldn’t help but smile sadly, Jarvis flustered was probably the most painful and amusing thing she’d ever seen. “I, I could never be... intimate.”

“I’m asexual,” Bryn interrupted, her brow furrowing.

“Excuse me?” Jarvis prompted hesitantly.

“I’m in my twenties and in the whole time you’ve know me I’ve never had a boyfriend,” Bryn pointed out. “I’ve only been on a handful of dates and most of them involved ice cream with Captain America. I thought you’d ask eventually. I’d have told you if you’d asked. But that’s the one thing you won’t pry into. So I have to wonder why.”

“Bryn, I’m not foolish,” Jarvis declared, hurt in his tone. “I can never hold your hand, or put an arm around you at the end of a bad day. I could never take you out or spend time with your family. I could never even be a topic of discussion among your friends.”

“For being the smartest guy in the world you are such an idiot sometimes!” Bryn said, brushing at the tears that trailed down her cheeks. “Do you honestly think I don’t know any of that? It hasn’t mattered so far.”

“It should,” he insisted. “I’m your friend, I would never want to see you hurt if I could prevent it.”

“Then tell me I’m wrong,” she coaxed gently. “Tell me you don’t feel the same way about me. Tell me that I read too much into our friendship, and I swear to you I will never bring it up again. You’ve done some things that made me want to tear my hair out, but you’re not a liar. So you tell me the truth and I promise it’ll be alright between us.”
She could hear the party up on the roof and she closed her eyes, listening to the wind and the distant sound of traffic on Park avenue. She heard Clint laugh and the DJ spin a blues version of *Star Spangled Man*. She turned her face into the breeze and opened her eyes, watching the sun set between the skyscrapers. Jarvis didn’t answer.

“That’s the real Turing Test,” She declared, turning to where she knew he was watching through the camera. “It’s not about how well you can lie and fake and pretend to be something you’re not. That isn’t what life is, for any of us. It’s about finding something inside to give away to someone else. And it doesn’t matter if you ever admit it to me, you need to know that about yourself. It’s what we feel that makes us alive.” She drew in a long, slow breath, letting it out with a sigh.

“Bryn?” Jarvis began cautiously.

“Don’t tell me,” She let out a huff. “Darcy spiked Betty with tequila again.”

“And Col. Rhodes,” he added apologetically.

“I’m on it,” she frowned, squaring her shoulders and turning toward the stairs.

“We’re not done, you know,” she added, ten steps up.

“I know.”
“Ms. Potts?” Bryn hesitated on the threshold a moment, her fingers wrapped around the office door handle.

“Well I don’t really care,” Pepper admitted into her phone, her eyes darted to the door for only a moment as she motioned Bryn in with one hand, leaning back in her desk chair. “The deadline is October first and we damn well better have product then or they can kiss 10% goodbye.” Bryn scurried into the room and Pepper flashed her a quick smile.

“No I’m not feeling particularly generous,” Pepper admitted firmly. “If they couldn’t make the deadline they shouldn’t have signed the contract. Stark Industries isn’t in the habit of disappointing customers, particularly customers who are kind enough to pre-order. I think I’ve been more than patient with them, and you can tell them that… No… Bradley, I have to go, it’s your job to bust heads together and get results, now go get them… Thank you… First thing Monday morning… All right, you too.” Pepper hung up with a decisive click and a smug smile, looking up at Bryn who drew in a deep breath.

“Ms. Hill has some security issues she thinks might be a valid concern,” Bryn stated. “I sent them on to Steve and Mr. Stark but there’s a copy on your drive.”

“I’ll take a look,” Pepper agreed. “We can’t be too careful.”

“I took a call from Deputy Director May,” Bryn’s eyes bulged slightly in a terrified expression but she shook it off. “She wondered if we’d had any luck. I sent her everything Doctor Banner had so far but it wasn’t much. Are we still pretending we don’t know Phil is sick?”

“Just in front of Phil,” Pepper nodded. “We’re also pretending we don’t know about SHIELD or its operations.”

“Good to know,” Bryn stated. “Steve says that Mr. Stark is out of the lab and he’ll be Ritzy and Rarin’, his words, in an hour.” Pepper bit her lip to stifle her laugh.

“Did he make reservations?” Pepper questioned.
“He asked me not to tell you where,” Bryn admitted.

“As long as they’re made,” Pepper said with a satisfied smile. “Anything else?”

“Jarvis asked me to have you sign these,” Bryn answered hesitantly, holding out the folder she held. “Non-disclosure agreements need your approval.” Pepper took it, uncapping her pen.

“Is this your father?” she asked curiously. Bryn nodded, clearing her throat.

“He, um, Jarvis suggested I should have someone cleared to discuss… things, with,” she offered hesitantly.

“That is going to be an interesting conversation,” Pepper advised in amusement, signing her name with a flourish. “You should have seen the look on my sister’s face when I could finally tell her about my real job.” Bryn ducked her head to hide her grin.

“Ms. Potts,” Jarvis interrupted. “Our friend in need called from Prague.”

“Is he dying?” Pepper asked drily.

“Not yet,” Jarvis answered with a tone that seemed both surprised and perturbed.

“Use your best judgment,” Pepper advised, handing the folder back to Bryn. “It’s date night.”

“I shall endeavor to keep world ending disaster at bay,” Jarvis replied. “Also, Sir would like me to convey to you that he will, in fact, be ready on time.”

“Thank you,” Pepper’s eyes flicked up to the corner of the room with a fond smile. “Would you mind giving Ms. Marshall and I a moment?”

“Of course Ma’am,” He agreed.
“Thank you, Jarvis,” She waited before turning back to Bryn. “So, moving day?”

“Yeah,” Bryn nodded with a crooked smile. “Tomorrow officially, it’s going to be nice not having the long commute.”

“It’ll be a big change for you,” Pepper observed. “But you seem to roll with change fairly effectively. It looks like you’re starting to settle in here, is the initial shock wearing off?”

“A little bit,” Bryn nodded, wrapping her arms around the folder. “I took a call from Colin Powell earlier that was a little too surreal for comfort but mostly I’m okay.” Pepper laughed and Bryn hesitated a moment, shifting on her toes as the older woman seemed to size her up.

“Ma’am?”

“Bryn,” Pepper met her gaze, the professional set of her shoulders relaxing to something more casual. “It will be fine, all of it. Whatever happens, however things turn out, so long as you do the best you can, so long as you hold on to your integrity, everything will be perfectly fine. That’s my promise. I’ve stood where you’re standing, and I can do that.”

“Ye ma’am,” Bryn nodded.

“Go home,” Pepper advised, smiling gently. “Unpack your tooth brush, order pizza, sit in a hot bath. Come back ready to take on the world on Monday.”

“I can do that,” Bryn nodded firmly.

“I’m sure you can,” Pepper agreed. Bryn headed for the door, letting out an unsteady breath. “Oh, Ms. Marshall?”

“Yes ma’am?” she turned back nervously.
“It’s your job to interrupt me,” Pepper said in amusement. “Don’t hover in the doorway, march in like you own the place. If I wanted privacy I’d have Jarvis lock down the security.”

“Yes ma’am,” Bryn nodded, hiding her smile.

“Good luck,” Pepper stated, her lips curling amusement.

“Thank you,” Bryn answered, “I think I’m going to need it.” She closed the door behind her, leaning against it a moment before she let out a breath.

“Ms. Walgate has asked me to notify you of a change in the travel itinerary,” Jarvis announced. Bryn blinked slowly.

“Is she the secretary in Cali or DC?” Bryn asked, rubbing her forehead.


“How many secretaries does a CEO need?!?” Bryn demanded in frustration, heading to her desk. “Can you remind me to look over everything on Monday?”

“Of course,” Jarvis agreed as she fished a fedex envelope from her drawer. “Would you like me to notify the mail room and have it sent out overnight?”

“No,” Bryn sighed, shaking her head as she carefully stuffed the nondisclosure agreement into the envelope. “They can pick it up with the rest of the mail on Monday. Dad’s going to want to talk about it as soon as he gets ahold of it, and I think I need a few days.” She paused as she pulled the tape, sticking it shut.

“That didn’t come out the way I meant,” she stated flatly.

“Perhaps a cocktail is in order,” Jarvis observed in amusement.
“Do not get fresh with me,” Bryn scolded, her eyes narrowing at the security camera in the corner. “If you’re implying that I’ve allowed the stress to affect me… you’d be right. Who am I kidding, I’m toast.” She dropped the envelope in her out box and reached under her desk, hoisting her bag.

“Why did I take this job again?” she asked.

“The climate controlled office,” Jarvis answered blandly. Bryn opened her mouth to reply then seemed to reconsider.

“You know I thought not having you for my boss any more would be somehow different,” she admitted heading for the door.

“I’m still the same disembodied intelligent life form I’ve always been,” Jarvis quipped.

“Snarky, condescending, goading,” Bryn replied, heading down the hall toward the elevator.

“Precisely,” Jarvis agreed in smug satisfaction. Bryn shook her head, hiding her smile as the elevator dinged open. The amused expression fell off her face.

“Mr. Stark,” she acknowledged. Tony Stark was slouched against the back wall of the elevator in shower damp hair and a ratty t-shirt that clung to him as if he had barely dried off before putting it on. His arms were folded over his chest and his bare feet braced against the marble tile floor as he gave a twitch of his head in acknowledgment and she stepped onto the lift, turning to face the doors as they closed.

The floors ticked by in silence and she was conscious of his eyes on the back of her head. Bryn bit her lip, letting the tension out of her shoulders in resignation.

“Is this my shovel speech?” she asked finally.

“Privacy Mode, Stark 318,” Tony uttered, his tone clipped. Almost instantly the elevator halted, the lights winking out on the security camera, Bryn turned slowly, eying him cautiously. Tony opened his mouth to say something but seemed to think better of it. Finally he heaved a sigh, smacking his head against the wall behind him a handful of times.
“Why don’t I just acknowledge that I’m going to owe you a quarterly review after this conversation and get it out of the way?” he stated finally. Bryn ducked her head to hide her smile.

“Why don’t we, just this once, kind of pretend my whole life isn’t in your hands and we try to interact like normal people?” She suggested hesitantly. Tony stared back at her with a blank expression.

“You’ve met me,” he pointed out.

“I’m willing to give it a go,” she shrugged. Tony shook his head, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“What you have to know from the off is that even though I knew theoretically this could happen, I didn’t think it would,” He admitted. “And there are a whole host of sexually harassing questions here that Pepper would definitely slap me for.”

“Why don’t we skip over those and pretend that’s been worked out?” Bryn advised. Tony shook his head rapidly, like a dog throwing off water. He looked up at her, sincerity in his eyes.

“Are you going to be okay?” he asked seriously, Bryn started in surprise. “Because if you are not okay, the way he feels about you, I think it might break him.”

“No one can promise that any relationship is going to work out,” Bryn pointed out.

“That’s not what I’m asking,” Tony stated. Bryn met his gaze for a long moment, giving him a careful look.

“I know exactly what I’m getting into,” She assured firmly. “If it doesn’t work out it will be for the same reasons as everyone else. It won’t be because of what he is.” Tony drew in a deep breath, letting it out in a huff before nodding slowly.

“Can I ask you to stay friends with him?” Tony inquired softly.
“Absolutely,” Bryn nodded. “That’s a promise.” He let out a relieved sigh.

“I never thought there’d be a day when I wasn’t his favorite,” Tony admitted.

“I don’t really think I can replace you,” Bryn observed, shifting a few paces and leaning back against the wall beside him.

“Maybe not,” Tony shrugged, his lips curling up in a bemused smile, drawing his hand through his rumpled hair. “I did not plan for this. We are so far off the original project specs it’s not even funny any more.” Bryn caught his profile out of the corner of her eye, the tight set of his jaw, the furrow of his brow, the lines crinkling the corners of his eyes and the rigidness of his shoulders.

“You never meant for him to be alive did you?” She asked in wonder. Tony gave a tight shake of his head, wincing painfully. “When did you know?”

“I was a dumb kid,” Stark related, looking up at the ceiling. “I was under age and I went to a party and I got drunk. And I came back to my apartment and passed out cold on the floor.” He glanced in her direction just long enough to catch her eye.

“And my science project panicked and called 911,” He gave an amused snort, shaking his head. “I was pretty pissed. I asked him why he’d do something like that and he said he was afraid that I was dying.”

“He didn’t know he wasn’t supposed to be afraid,” Bryn observed. Tony nodded slowly.

“I knew then I couldn’t expose him,” Stark let out a sigh. “I couldn’t let anyone know about him. There’d be no way to protect him. Can you imagine? It was the digital revolution, the internet wasn’t even a thing yet. Most people didn’t even own a computer and I made a life out of circuit boards and caffeine fueled code. That’s why I didn’t think about this ever happening.”

“You did a good job with him,” Bryn stated, a warm smile curling her lips. “He turned out great. He turned out amazing. He’s the most amazing person I’ve ever met.”

“He’s the very best I’ve ever been,” Tony confessed. His shoulders loosened and he leaned forward, punching the override button on the elevator panel.
“Why didn’t you explain to him that you didn’t want him to take the Turing Test because you didn’t want to endanger him?” She asked as the elevator began to move again.

“I didn’t want him to blame himself for me dropping out of school,” Tony answered with a grim smile. “I mean, I was ready to pack it in ages before. It just wasn’t a challenge. But Dad… he was so damn sold on the idea of his son the doctor, I thought what the hell. Once he was gone…”

“Jarvis thinks you dropped out because he couldn’t pass.”

“What?” Tony demanded, turning to her with wide eyes.

“Jarvis thinks you dropped out of MIT because your doctoral thesis was incomplete,” Bryn stated evenly, leveling a firm look at him.

“Son of a bitch,” Tony whispered.

“He really is just like the rest of us,” Bryn observed, toeing awkwardly at the floor. Tony let out a snort of a laugh, shaking his head. The doors opened and Bryn shifted her bag on her shoulder, giving him a nod.

“If you break his heart,” Tony began as she stepped away.

“He’s my best friend, Mr Stark,” Bryn interrupted, pausing in the doorway. “And if I break his heart I have to answer to Captain America and the Black Widow.” Tony gave her a genuine smile then, glancing at his feet.

“Tony,” he corrected reluctantly. “You should call me Tony, probably, because… we’re sort of almost family.”

“Jarvis doesn’t call you Tony,” Bryn pointed out.
“Yeah, I really don’t know what it is with the formality,” Stark admitted, rubbing the back of his neck. “I didn’t program that in.”

“Maybe it’s because he feels a little awkward calling you dad,” Bryn suggested. Tony balked, blinking at her in surprise.

“Goodnight, Ms. Marshall,” he said finally, waving her off with a flick of his wrist.

“Goodnight,” Bryn smiled at him over her shoulder. “Sir.”

She didn’t look back as she headed down the hall, though she was pretty sure she could hear Stark sputter as the doors slid shut. She stopped at the last door on the right, testing the handle that turned easily in her hand.

“Hi, honey I’m home?” she stated awkwardly, peering curiously around the entry as she toed off her shoes.

“Yes, I gathered as much,” Jarvis said in amusement. Bryn dropped her bag on the floor, stretching her arms over her head languidly. “How was your day?”

“You know exactly how my day was,” Bryn huffed, pulling off her earrings and laying them on the hall table. “We work together. I thought we agreed there wasn’t going to be any work here.”

“We did,” Jarvis confirmed. “I am somewhat uncertain about establishing a routine.”

“Yeah, you and me both,” she admitted with a sigh, her eye sweeping out from the entry to the living room and the high floor to ceiling windows beyond. “Are you sure this is okay?”

“Mr. Stark has long insisted that I am welcome to a salary should I ever wish one,” Jarvis assured. “as I have worked for him every day for the last twenty-seven years, I’m sure he feels a single residential suite is hardly compensatory.”

“Okay, fair point,” Bryn agreed, a soft blush coloring her cheeks. “Look, we’ll work it all out. Just,
for right now, let’s just try to be comfortable.”

“I took the liberty of ordering dinner,” Jarvis declared with a hit of shyness. “I thought it might make the evening less problematic.”

“Jarvis, you are a keeper,” Bryn stated, a soft smile tugging at her lips. “I’m going to change.”

“Your suitcase is in the master suite,” Jarvis informed. Bryn trudged out into the living room, stretching her back as she turned the corner past the kitchen and she skidded to a stop, slowly lowering her arms to her sides.

One of Tony Stark’s holographic projections had appeared at the end of the breakfast bar, but not the engine schematics she was used to seeing while he tinkered in the garage. This image was of a young man with dark hair and warm gray eyes, a hesitant smile on his lips.

“Surprise,” the hologram offered nervously with Jarvis’ voice.

“Oh my god,” Bryn let all the air in her lungs out on the words.

“If it makes you uncomfortable I can deactivate it,” the Jarvis Hologram declared quickly. “I was experimenting with some of the new projection technology but if you find it unsettling I could.”

“Don’t you dare!” Bryn interrupted, crossing the room in three strides and stopping just a foot in front of him, her hand reaching out tentatively. “Can I?” The Jarvis hologram reached out, his softly glowing fingers gently closing around her own. Bryn started, staring in wide eyed surprise as he guided her hand to his chest, laying her palm over the spot where a human heart would be.

“The technology still lacks the capabilities to produce realistic texture and resistance,” Jarvis explained. “But the visual nuances are much more subtle. I am unsure if I am projecting a believable human analogue, however.”

“It’s fine,” Bryn stated quickly. “You’re fine. It’s… would it be alright if I hugged you?”
“Yes.”

Bryn tackled him with a squeak, her arms wrapping around his shoulders.

“This is incredible!” She enthused, holding tight to him. “It’s absolutely amazing. The hours you must have put in to program something like this! Mr. Stark must be so proud!”

“I haven’t kept him apprised,” Jarvis admitted.

“What do you mean,” Bryn’s voice trailed off as she pulled away, her eye darting to where her hand was trailing down his arm. The sensation wasn’t of touching a cotton shirtsleeve, more like the static feedback of old electronics, but with less tingle and more illusion of a solid surface, and for a moment she was distracted. She caught a subtle shift in the hologram’s expression and she looked up to find Jarvis smiling at her in amusement.

“Are you telling me he doesn’t know?” She asked finally.

“Sir has often asked if I would like to have a body that would allow me to interact with humans more directly.” Jarvis admitted, the tilt of his head once more awkward. “I have always deferred as it did not seem necessary, but with you; I wanted to give you something that was only yours.”

“Yeah,” Bryn whispered softly, her hand still absentely stroking his arm. “Okay.” She leaned forward, letting her head rest against his chest.

“I’m afraid the technology still lacks any real tactile capabilities.” Jarvis added, his hand settling between her shoulders.

“I can live with that,” she nodded against his chest, drawing in a deep breath so that she could feel the resistance of his holographic arm around her shoulders. She faltered a moment, closing her eyes. “If you don’t like it, if it feels constricting or uncomfortable or anything like that, or even if you decide it’s not you, that’s fine. Okay? It’s not something I have to have, it’s… I’d still want you anyway.”

“You’ve been my friend when I most needed one,” Jarvis declared. “Even in my worst moments. When I’ve faltered badly. How could I not want to give you anything that would offer even the
smallest comfort when you have always been that for me?”

“Jarvis,” Bryn sighed, pulling back just enough to meet his gaze.

“Why do you think I fell in love with you?” he asked softly. The scolding look slid off her face, replaced by one of fond exasperation and she twined her arms around his shoulders once more.

“I love you too.”

End Notes

Anxious for an update? I accept bribes in the form of over-emotional responses, accusations of emotional torture, and pizza.

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