So No One Told You

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Summary

Between them there're three apartments, a disgruntled downstairs neighbor, and a coffee shop with a barista who threatens them with tasers. Which, as a whole, that description sounds way more simple than it actually is.

Notes

First part of my shiny new Avengers Friends!AU project which will be updated sporadically. Based loosely on the TV show Friends.
The One Where There's Exposition

Between them there are three apartments, a disgruntled downstairs neighbor, and a coffee shop with a barista who threatens them with tasers. Which, as a whole, that description sounds way more simple than it actually is.

It’s a lot more like this.

Thor is there first. He has the sad little excuse for an apartment (Number nineteen to be exact) that used to be atrociously decorated with lawn chairs rather than an actual sofa and the world’s shittiest TV in the middle of the room.

Steve is there second. He moves in across the hall (In number twenty) which he can afford by himself for a year simply because his grandmother had left it to him. After that year, however, and his increasing failings to maintain a job, he needed a way to keep up the rent. And since it was New York, what better way to do that than to get a roommate?

Thus, Clint is third. Steve likes him because they can talk about sports together, sometimes take disgustingly early morning jogs together, and more than either of those things, Clint knows how to use a coaster for his drinks without being told five million times. Tony.

But Clint is like the first drop of water leaking out of the dam, because after him there’s everybody. Thor wants a roommate and Tony shows up. And, seriously, thank god for Tony because then Steve never has to set eyes on those terrible lawn chairs ever again because Tony has style. Tony also has money. What is Tony’s job, anyways? Following Tony came Extremely Angry Guy across the street, who the four of them press against the window of Steve’s apartment to watch during his insane fits of rage and take bets on which items would be smashed this time. And then, hello, it turns out extremely angry guy has a friend, an extremely attractive female friend that makes Clint dive for cover behind the arm chair the first time she shows up to calm Extremely Angry Guy down.

It’s after a little mishap which ends in Extremely Angry Guy accidentally braining himself and Steve doing the good Samaritan thing by calling 911 that Extremely Angry Guy and Extremely Attractive Female Friend become from then on known as Bruce and Natasha.

And who the fuck even knows when Loki showed up, except that he’s Thor’s brother and could have, for all any of them knew, been there the entire time and they just might not have noticed. Thor’s place only has two bedrooms, and Loki doesn’t actually live there as much as he just happens to be there 99% of the time. No one knows where Natasha lives, and when they ask her she just smirks in that way that made Clint look like a deer caught in the headlights and Tony look around for some inevitably useless means of defense.

So between them they have three apartments, which is more often a lot more like two because Steve wakes up more mornings than not to find Natasha and Bruce in his kitchen, in pajamas, making breakfast. And Loki, who doesn’t really live there but kind of does, would be sleeping in Tony’s bed because Tony doesn’t believe in sleep schedules, or in Thor’s bed (With Thor) when Tony actually does sleep.

They also have a downstairs neighbor, Nick Fury, who bangs on the ceiling, AKA their floor, with various items and tells them to, “Shut the fuck up,” and threatens them with death. Steve respects him because he’s a war hero, Tony calls him a pirate, and Nick leaves slightly worrying letters under their door listing all the ways he can kill them if they don’t keep quiet. Natasha hordes these lists and Clint claims she keeps a scrapbook full of them titled “Good Ideas” under her pillow. No one thinks twice.
about checking to see if this is true as they just automatically believe it.

To top it all off they have their coffee shop. Which, okay, it isn’t theirs. It belongs to Phil Coulson who glares at them when they don’t put a dollar in the tip jar (Especially Tony who is loaded) and who makes them go sit at the “Time Out Chair,” if one of them pisses off another customer. Thor and Tony are kings of the Time Out Chair, and even Steve has been made to sit in it a few times. Somehow, Loki miraculously remains the only person who had never been forced to the confinement of the Time Out Chair. The reason to which is a mystery as even Steve periodically thinks Loki is obnoxious.

As people they work like this.

Steve is a former soldier who served his country proud. He keeps things so clean in his apartment that you can see your face in every overly polished surface, and also if you don’t use a coaster he will come after you like a serial killer who has no actual intention of killing you so much as staring you down until you profess your deepest apologies. Steve is an aspiring artist who can never find the right gig but keeps trying because he’s stubborn as hell. He exercises, he makes sure to eat from every food group, and then he spends more time than he should on the couch with Tony and Thor and Clint watching sports.

Tony doesn’t watch sports. Tony works on his iPad that is suspiciously high tech even for an iPad and, to Clint’s annoyance, doesn’t have Angry Birds on it. No one knows the specifics of Tony’s job and Tony doesn’t bother to tell them what it is. He drinks more than he eats and he eats more than he sleeps, which is the reason Steve is constantly busting into Thor’s apartment with various food items to make him eat and then make him sleep. But Tony is hardly going to change just because one absurdly pretty blond dude across the hall insists on keeping him alive and functioning. If he drinks a little less after having moved in, he doesn’t need to let anyone know.

Thor is … Thor. He doesn’t actually need a roommate because his father pays for the place but Thor had decided to get one anyways just because. Which is actually simply because Steve had gotten one and he wanted one too. Somehow, Thor seems to have missed this crucial part of growing up wherein people become semi-normal. Technology is a constant source of frustration and confusion to him, he doesn’t understand why the players don’t beat each other with the bats in a game of baseball, and he once walked into a pet store demanding to be sold a horse. Tony doesn’t think Thor realizes he’s living in New York City. Steve is fairly certain Thor came from sort of ritzy high class family that only associated with other high class families. Clint thinks he’s an alien.

Clint is a former professional archer. Which, yes, that is a sport. Tony insists it isn’t but it is. He’d sustained a minor injury that was just major enough to mean that he couldn’t play with the big boys anymore, and had moved in with the first guy who would take him, which had happened to be Steve. Currently, he works in the coffee shop downstairs with Coulson and spends more time whipping the rest of them with the ties of his alarmingly bright pink apron than actually serving them coffee.

Bruce, formerly known as Extremely Angry Guy, is actually a lot less angry than they’d all assumed prior to making friends with him. He tends to keep to himself but he can often be found talking in some sort of science jargon with Tony or sleeping in Clint’s bed, which no one feels like questioning because they have started to get to the point where everyone’s bed is everyone’s bed. Except Steve’s. Steve’s bed is Steve’s bed and he will throw you out the window if he finds you in it. Actually, he’ll probably just glare at you. He’ll throw you out the window if you don’t make the bed, though. Bruce is also friends with Natasha, and that is the biggest mystery of them all since every time anyone tried to ask about it they all got different answers, so they just stopped asking.
Natasha is gorgeous. Natasha is scary. Natasha is also often found in Clint’s bed, sometimes with Bruce, sometimes with Clint, sometimes with both of them and what the fuck. Whatever, they don’t have rules about beds anymore. Mi bed su bed and all that. Natasha is some sort of mob boss, or assassin, or international spy, or one of those people from Inception, or something. And Natasha will whoop your ass if you take a piece of Steve’s homemade pie before she does. Natasha also seems to know Clint from somewhere, which isn’t going to be a discussed topic anytime soon because Clint is constantly pretending he’s deaf when they try to ask.

Loki is Thor’s brother, which is basically the jist of it. He comes and goes through both apartments, never gets in trouble with Coulson at the coffee shop, doesn’t have job (A paper route is not a job), and is known best for his random, surprise attacks which consist of everything from a pillow to the face to eggs in your favorite shoes. Tony claims to hate his guts, but Tony is full of shit because everyone knows that he lets Loki sleep in his bed when he isn’t using it himself. It should also be noted that just a week ago Loki had asked whether or not chicks made good pets. They have yet to find out the outcome of that sudden curiosity.

All in all, they have three apartments, one scary neighbor, one nanny of a barista, and one coffee shop where they spend more time than they do anywhere else. Somehow, it works.
The One With The Blackout

Chapter Summary

New York falls victim to a summer blackout, Steve gets trapped in an ATM vestibule, Tony initiates an eating contest, Loki takes a bath, and Bruce and Natasha ignore everyone.

It’s a hot summer night when the lights go out. Tony has his iPad and since he’s sitting in his room in the dark anyways he doesn’t even notice the power’s out until ten minutes later when Loki bursts into his room and smashes his face with a pillow. “Power’s out! Party at Steve’s!” Loki shrieks and dashes out again.

Tony doesn’t follow until nearly an hour later when his iPad runs out of juice and his cell phone gives up the ghost and sputters out too. When he wanders across the hall Thor, Natasha, Clint, Bruce, and Loki are all pow-wowed around one pathetic little candle in the middle of the carpet, the coffee table having been shoved aside.

“What a great party,” he intones from the doorway and Natasha turns a glare to him before holding up a half empty box of pizza. That’s more like it. He’s halfway through his second slice of pizza before he realizes something’s off.

“Where’s Steve?”

Bruce, who’s laying on his stomach with a pillow under his chin and a Gameboy DS in his hands, thumbs dancing over the buttons, doesn’t even spare him a glance when he replies, “Who knows.”

“Wow, you guys are such great friends,” Tony says with a roll of his eyes.

Natasha tosses him her phone, “If you’re so worried then call him. He’s probably fine.”

Tony sticks out his tongue at her but does as directed, finding Steve’s number in her contacts and pressing the call button. As usual, it rings for an ungodly length of time, signaling that Steve forgot which pocket he’d left it in again and was now enacting what Tony calls, “The Great Phone Fumble.” When Steve finally does manage to answer Tony tries not to sigh in relief. “We seem to be missing you in this little blackout campfire session,” he says.

Steve chuckles on the other end and Tony grins. “Well I seem to be stuck in an ATM vestibule so you guys are going to have to deal with it.”

“Oh, geeze,” Tony swipes a hand across his face in a brief flash of sympathy. “With the automatic door thingies? Couldn’t you just pry them apart?”

“I’d rather not break something I can’t buy, Tony,” Steve mutters and Tony snorts. “Can’t buy,” isn’t a term that’s in his personal dictionary. “And anyways, it’s not so bad. There’s a pretty dame - I mean girl - also trapped so -”

Tony whips around to face the rest of the group who are, unsurprisingly, not so subtly listening in. “Steve’s trapped in one of those ATM places with a chick!” he crows. Clint whoops in approval and high fives Tony when Tony lifts a hand. Loki hums something indiscernible in the wake of this, and
Natasha just raises an incredulous eyebrow. Bruce doesn’t seem to have heard at all.

“I do not understand why being trapped with poultry is something to celebrate,” Thor says aloud and Tony just gives him his usual, “Are you even human,” side-eye before turning his attention back to the phone and Steve.

“Well, what are you waiting for, big boy? Make a move. Blackouts are the perfect time for some hanky-panky!”

“You’re disgusting,” Steve whispers, but his tone is more amused than annoyed. “I don’t even know her, Tony, that would be inappropriate.”

Tony groans, “Right, sorry, I forgot you’re the sort who has a five date minimum for that kind of thing.”

“Three,” Steve corrects and Tony can just feel him smirking through the phone. That dickwad. Except not really because Tony uses such terms around Steve with no real malice in them, as the worst thing Steve could ever accurately be described as is “That really annoyingly loyal Labrador who doesn’t even hump your leg or chew on your stuff but still manages to look sheepish about everything.”

“Whatever, you’re a spoilsport,” Tony gripes in return. “At least go talk to her, Jesus. I’m getting blue balls just thinking about all your wasted opportunities.”

Steve makes a strange, choked little noise before hissing, “I didn’t need to know that, thanks. And I was planning on it anyways because, contrary to popular belief, I’m not that dumb, Tony.”

“Debatable.”

“See you when the lights come back on.”

Tony huffs, “I better not! If you know what’s good for you you’ll hit a home run tonight! Don’t come back!” He hangs up and flops down onto the sofa, dropping the phone onto the floor next to Natasha.

Natasha picks it up and dusts it off, even though there was nothing on it (She’s probably dusting off Tony’s invisible charisma, Tony thinks), and pockets it. “So are you just going to sulk now because blackouts cut me off from technology, which is my lifeblood.”

“No. I’m going to sulk because blackouts cut me off from technology, which is my lifeblood.”

“Whatsoever you say.”

“If you’re just using it for sulking can I have the couch then?” Bruce asks from the floor, “My elbows are going to get rug burn if I stay here.”

Tony rolls off the couch and lets Bruce have it. He scrubs at his face and wanders over to the fridge, nose wrinkling at the broken fridge smell that’s already wafting from it. “Oh, ew. Okay, Thor, come over here. We’re going to play a game.”

“I do like games,” Thor says and Loki raises an eyebrow in a way there clearly declares, “I’m not participating in your shenanigans.” Thor gropes his way over to the fridge and Tony pulls it open so they can both peer inside, leaning a ways back to avoid the moist wave of cooling, stale air.

“This is the Eat Everything Before It Goes Bad game,” Tony instructs seriously. “The rule is that
you have to eat anything that can go bad within the next twelve hours. Bonus points if you can assemble the foods into tasty arrangements, like sandwiches and tacos and stuff.”

Thor nods, also seriously, and begins eyeing the contents of the fridge with a critical gaze. Clint stands up from where he’d been slumped against the media center and vaults over the sofa to join them. “Count me in,” he chirps, “I’m not letting Thor eat the last of Steve’s pie.”

“Of course you aren’t,” Tony scolds, “Because I’m eating the last of Steve’s pie.”

Natasha shoves her way in between them to swipe said piece of pie off the top shelf, “How about whoever eats the most gets the last piece of pie?” she decides and carries it back over to where she and Loki are still sitting by the candle.

“Challenge accepted,” Tony calls after her, and begins digging through the fridge, Clint and Thor close beside him.

Two hours later finds Tony clutching at the countertop next to the sink, Clint with his head down on the table, and Thor rummaging through the fridge for his fifth round of their ill advised game.

“I don’t want the pie anymore,” Tony groans, his nose nearly touching the bottom of the sink as he tries to keep the contents of his stomach inside his body.

“I don’t want to live anymore,” Clint whines from the table, “I feel like a balloon.”

Thor makes his way back to the table with half a chicken, some grated cheese, and a carton of milk. Clint gags and the sight and retreats, scrambling back until he hits the couch and falls. “Have you forfeited this mighty battle?” Thor booms and Clint nods, afraid that if he opens his mouth he’s going to lose it.

From his position by the sink Tony raises a hand, “I’m also out. You can have the pie. I never want to see pie, or any other food, ever again.” Thor laughs and takes a large bite out of his chicken.

“If there had been even the slightest possibility of any other outcome but this one I would have taken bets,” Loki speaks up from across the room. Clint pokes his head up from over the back of the couch and flips him off. “But, as the rest of us knew, it was quite a folly to even think about competing against Thor in an eating contest.”

“Steve might have been able to do it,” Bruce says absently from where he’s laying on his back across the whole of the couch. Clint narrows his eyes.

“Traitor.”

“I’m nothing of the sort if I simply state who would be the best suited competitor in this situation when it clearly isn’t you.” Bruce tilts his head to the side, away from Clint who’s still pointedly glaring at him. “Candle’s about to go out. I think there’s another in the bathroom?”

“I like the dark,” Loki whispers.

Tony lifts his head from the sink and casts Loki an odd look before relenting, “Well obviously none of you are going to do anything about it, and I’m going to need to get acquainted with the bathroom at this rate anyways.” He drags himself away from the sink and towards said room, going inside and chucking a candle out behind him before closing the door. Natasha catches the projectile without even looking up from where she’s painting her nails and sets it down next to the uneaten piece of pie.

The first candle is already sputtering its last dying breathes but Loki doesn’t light it until it flickers out
completely. He fixes his gaze on the fading glow of the wick in the old candle and tilts it around until some of the still hot wax drips out onto his fingers.

“You’re so weird,” Clint mutters from where he’s been hanging over the back of the couch for the last few minutes.


“Creep.” Clint mutters, too quietly to be heard, and climbs over the back of the couch. Bruce instinctively lifts his DS over his head so that when Clint rolls on top of him his game playing isn’t disrupted. “Whatcha playing?” Clint asks against Bruce’s collar bone.

“The new Legend Of Zelda. And so help me god, if you mess me up I’m going to kill you. Literally.”

“You’re such a great friend,” Clint says with a roll of his eyes.

“Yes I am.”

For a few minutes it’s quiet, Thor munching away at his sixth helping of food, Natasha still painting her nails, and Loki staring at the candle as if it will tell him all the secrets of the universe. Or at least it’s quiet until Tony decides to try and hold a conversation through the bathroom door.

“We should go to the coffee shop!” Tony yells.

Natasha purses her lips, “The power’s out there too, idiot.”

“Oh yeah.”

Clint presses his face into the crook of Bruce’s elbow and groans. “Get out of the bathroom, jerk! I think I’m going to hurl!” Bruce promptly dumps Clint on the floor at this declaration and rolls over onto his side away from him, thumbs still rapidly ticking away at the buttons of his DS.

OoOoOoOoOoO

When Tony finally returns he steals Natasha’s phone and calls Steve again only to get the message machine. He takes that as a good sign. By this time everyone has migrated around again. Clint is still where Bruce left him, laying face down on the floor next to the sofa and occasionally saying things like, “I think there’s a dead cat under here,” or “I can’t tell if that’s a bug, or one of the dust bunnies from Big Comfy Couch,” and Tony wonders whether Clint has passed into some sort of really weird conscious food coma, or if he’s gotten high from breathing in the fumes of all the stuff they’ve hidden under the couch over the years when Steve told them to clean. Natasha is sitting on one end of the couch with a book, Bruce’s head in her lap as he continues to play his game. Tony would ask her how she could read in the dark, but he knows she’ll just smile and that’s as bad as not knowing, so there’s no point. The pie has disappeared and Tony is too full to care anymore who ate it. Thor is, surprisingly, doing dishes. Or specifically he’s doing the dishes that were dirtied in their eating competition. Loki has taken up drying duty. Tony decides to wander over towards them, even if he has no intention of helping.

“Are you finally done in the bathroom?” Loki asks when Tony moves to hover over his shoulder.

“For now. I didn’t throw up though, just so everyone knows.”

Loki pauses and looks back at him, eyebrows raised. “Oh? So what were you doing this whole time, then?”
“Nooooooooo,” Clint moans into the carpet somewhere behind them, “Stop talking. Don’t even imply it. I don’t want to know. Gross.”

Tony grins. “Actually, I just hugged the toilet like a pathetic loser. But thanks, guys, for thinking of me that way. It’s flattering.”

“I hate you,” Clint mutters and Tony turns to flash him a peace sign he knows Clint won’t even bother to look up and see. It’s the thought that counts. Off to his left, Thor finishes the last dish and hands it to Loki, who dries it hastily and then promptly whips Tony with the damp dishtowel. Tony yelps and Loki snickers.

“Well if you’re done with the bathroom, I’m going to go take a bath, as there’s nothing else to do.” He whaps Tony across the back of his neck with the towel again as he passes, calling out a, “You’re welcome to join me, Stark,” over his shoulder that makes Clint scream into the carpet.

“Not tonight, dear!” Tony snipes back in good humor. Thor proceeds to give him the stink eye anyways, like he’d actually expected Tony to accept that offer and was going to throw him off the balcony at any second.

Speaking of the balcony though, with the way Thor is glaring at him Tony decides to retreat out there anyways because he’s starting to get slightly afraid that if he doesn’t, Thor would make good his silent threat. Brother complex much? Jesus.

The balcony is okay, actually. More than okay considering that the air conditioning has been off inside for nearly three hours so it’s a wonder they all haven’t been roasted alive yet. The night air outside is nice, though, and it picks up around the higher floors and drifts over Tony in a way that makes him hum with contentment. “I couldn’t have invented a better fan,” he says to himself and leans back over the railing.

“That’s because mother nature is always going to outdo your technology,” a voice says just before a hand tangles in his hair and arches his neck back, giving him a clear view of the polluted sky around the speaker’s palm.

“Ow, ow! I’m going to pull something if you keep that up, Steve! When did you get back anyways?” Tony twists in Steve’s unrelenting grip until he wriggles out from under the hand and stands shoulder to shoulder with him instead, their elbows on the railing as they stare out over the oddly quiet city.

Steve smiles in the darkness, “Just now, actually. Some firefighters came and forced the door open so we could get out. Apparently lots of people were trapped like we were, mostly elevators and revolving doors.”

“Better you than me though,” Tony admits, “Small enclosed spaces? I’d be clawing at the walls trying to get out within the first five minutes. And then I’d convince myself I needed to pee simply because there’d be no accessible restroom and spend the rest of the time thinking about how much I needed to pee.” Steve laughs softly and Tony continues. “But enough about me, what happened with your girl? Did you kiss at least? A little seven minutes in heaven times twenty-five? Please tell me you remembered to get her number.”

Steve shakes his head, “We just talked, Tony. That’s what normal people do.”

“Are you calling me abnormal?”

“Yes.”
“I accept that.”

“I also was married.”

Tony makes a horrified, rather disgusted face. “Eurgh. Well then I don’t blame you. Even the word marriage sends shudders through me.” He demonstrates one such shudder and Steve snorts. “Commitment is disgusting.”

“For you, maybe,” Steve reminds, “But not for everyone. Some of us wouldn’t mind settling down.” For a heartbeat, Tony freezes where he stands. “Not right now, though, right?”

“Does it look like I have a dame and a ring anywhere nearby?” Steve asks lightheartedly and Tony stiffly shakes his head. “Then no, Tony, not right now. Give it a few years though and who knows?”

“Sure.”

“And you can be my best man,” Steve adds, eyes bright, and Tony feigns an easy smile.

“You bet. As long as I can hire strippers for your bachelor party.”

“No.”
The One With The Chick And Duck

Chapter Summary

A chick, a duck, a broken arm, and an idiot.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It starts with a TV show. Tony blames the whole thing on the fact that somehow Thor and Loki had missed the invention of television wherever the fuck they’d come from, which meant that in their apartment the thing was always on. More than that, it was always on something incredibly boring or stupid. When it was Thor’s turn to have control of the remote he switched between the Weather Channel and one of those cable movie channels because Clint had convinced him that all movies were actually documentaries. No one had yet had the heart to correct Thor’s misconception of this. When it was Loki’s turn to hog the remote the TV flashed between Cartoon Network, Nickelodeon (with, in Tony’s opinion, an obnoxious amount of iCarly marathons that Loki would watch for hours), and Animal Planet. It was the later of this list that was to blame for all of these events, Tony decides.

Animal Planet is an evil demon. An evil demon that airs three programs in a row about chicks. And, haha, not Tony’s kind of chicks either, because he would have actually sat through that with mild interest. They’re programs about chicks as in baby chickens, and there are three of them. One explains the formation and hatching of the chick, the second explains the care that a newborn chick needs, and a third details the life of a chick as it matures into a chicken. It’s at the end of the final one that Loki, who has been hanging upside-down off one of the recliners for the past hour and a half, falls onto the floor and declares, “I know everything that I need to know!” before he promptly runs out of the apartment.

Tony watches him go and shrugs his shoulders because, really, it’s none of his business what Loki gets up to.

Except that it kind of is when Loki returns an hour later with a box with holes in it. Which, okay, Tony isn’t stupid. Tony is so far from stupid he’s in another universe that consists of only smart people. He knows what a box with holes means, he’s watched more TV than Loki ever will, and as soon as he sees it he scrambles up onto the arm of the recliner as if that will somehow save him from the box’s contents. “No,” he yells, halting Loki where he stands in the doorway. “No. Do not bring that, whatever it is, in here. No animals!”

“The contract says animals are allowed. Mr. Fury downstairs has a cat,” Loki states matter-of-factly. Tony feels the hairs on the back of his neck stand up as Loki starts to make his way into the apartment again.

“I didn’t agree to any animals!” Tony practically shrieks. He’s already as high as he can get without climbing onto the bar or the media center, one of which is between him and Loki and the other is not properly nailed into the wall, so it’s a deathtrap waiting to happen.

“You don’t have to agree,” Loki hums and now he’s just a mere five feet away from Tony, still holding that thing in the box.
“My name is on the contract! Yours . . . Isn’t?” and here Tony has to pause because he didn’t actually read the contract, and Loki claims he has a place of his own, but he does sleep here six nights out of seven most weeks so . . .

Loki smirks and Tony blanches because* fuck*. “Yes it is.” And oh, Tony knew it. How did that even happen? There’s only two bedrooms for God’s sake! Not that he uses his much, *but still!*

Tony then stops contemplating matters of apartments, occupants, and bedrooms because Loki is opening the box. He would scream in terror if he could actually move, except he’s frozen in place with his fear. Knowing Loki, it could be anything from a cat to a snake. Oh god, not a snake. Or, good lord, it could be a tarantula. Tony’s skin crawls as an image of a giant hairy spider creeping onto his face while he sleeps pops into his head. He squeezes his eyes shut and prays for the foul creature to take him now and be done with it.

There’s a peep.

Tony cracks one eye open and then snaps both wide as he leans over the back of the recliner to peer into the box. It’s a chick, just like the ones on TV that morning. It peeps again, fluffing its yellow, downy feathers, and Tony melts. “Oh, it’s a baby chick,” he coos and Loki grins. Immediately, Tony straightens, “Um, I mean, that thing is going to poop everywhere. You can’t house train birds. You have to get rid of it.”

Loki’s smile falters and crumbles, reshaping into a dark frown. “No. I want it, it’s mine. You can’t make me.” And with that he’s stomped off into Tony’s room and slammed the door behind him.

Tony stares after him for approximately thirty seconds before he realizes it. “Hey! That’s my room! Get the bird out of my room!”

“No! I do what I want!”

OoOoOoOoOoO

When Steve gets home Tony’s laying on the kitchen table with a laptop balanced on his chest and a pair of sunglasses perched on the end of his nose. Steve has no idea how that can even be remotely comfortable, but Tony is so out of it he doesn’t even notice Steve has entered until the blond promptly drops a bag of groceries on his stomach. Tony lets out a startled huff and Steve smirks in return.

“Who let you in?” Steve asks, closing the laptop and leaning over Tony. Tony grins.

“I have a key, moron.”

“I didn’t give you one.”

“I don’t need your permission to get one. Clint lives here too.”

Steve raises an eyebrow, “I’m pretty sure Clint wouldn’t give you a key either.”

Tony sticks out his tongue, “Rude. Clint and I are great pals.”

“You hung his boxers from the flagpole on the west side of the building last week,” Steve reminds. He retrieves his bag of groceries and begins sorting through them, stacking cans in the cupboard and organizing the fridge to fit in a few new blocks of cheese and a TV dinner. Tony eyes this later item with confusion.
“I never took you to be the microwave meal sort of guy,” Tony says before he jumps off the table, laptop tucked under one arm, to peer at the box of frozen food around Steve’s frame. “You always . . . Cook.”

Steve rolls his eyes, “Don’t say ‘Cook’ as if it’s some form of torture.”

Making a face, Tony snipes back, “Considering I could build a robot faster, more efficiently, and with better results than I can make an omelet, it might as well be. Ask Pepper.”

“I’ve already heard all about your misadventures in dating,” Steve replies and Tony stiffens in surprise. Steve doesn’t even need to turn around to gauge his response, and he shakes his head. “Pepper and I do text, you know.”

“Oh, God.”

Steve closes the fridge and moves to scoop up a rather large stack of sketchbooks and pencils from the end table and Tony follows, curious. “So what’s the TV dinner for anyways? And you’ve taken all your arty stuff out, too.”

At this, Steve turns and his face instantly lights up to ten times his usual boy scout brightness. “I got an interview!”

Considering Steve’s track record with actual jobs, this is actually quite a surprise. Steve’s held six jobs in the past two years, all of them falling through for various reasons. A couple times it was because Steve didn’t like a certain company policy, or wouldn’t draw what had been asked of him because he had some sort of objection. While there’s no guarantee this will be The Job for him, the news is still refreshing all the same, if only because Tony knows Steve’s been getting a little disgruntled with his lack of work lately. Tony beams. “That’s great! What for?”

“Designing graphic T-shirts.” Steve’s practically jumping up and down as he speaks, excited at just the possibility of such a job. “I’m not going to have enough time to make dinner tonight because I’ll be so busy getting my portfolio ready, which is why I got the TV dinner. The interview is at seven.” Tony gives congratulatory pat on the shoulder, which prompts Steve to ask, “Again, though, why are you here.”

Tony’s smile crumples into a frown. “Birds,” he says, and that’s as good as Steve’s going to get as Tony whirls to stomp back across the hall to confront the problem, leaving Steve to stare after him in bemusement.

OoOoOoOoO

When Tony stomps back across the hall, Thor has returned from . . . Wherever Thor goes some days. Tony guesses he probably wanders around the city, gets lost, and eventually and miraculously ends up back in front of the coffee shop at the end of the day. That, or he goes down to the park to throw bread at ducks.

Tony narrows his eyes as the thought of ducks leads him to the thought of birds and the thought of birds connects to the memory of Loki bringing home a freaking chicken. “Thor,” he says as loudly as possible in an attempt to make what he was about to say sound important, “You have to tell your brother to get rid of his new pet.”

Thor looks up from where he’s sitting on the floor with the TV remote in hand. And, oh yeah, this whole thing is the TV’s fault. Tony hasn’t forgotten that. “What pet?” Thor asks mildly and Tony balks. “If you’re speaking of the great Sleipnir or the mighty Fenrir, they are hardly new.”
Tony waves a hand at this, “No, no, no. Or at least I hope not. I have no idea what those are but they
don’t sound good. Anyways, no, I’m talking about the chicken.”

Thor stares at him.

“The, you know, the little yellow fluff ball? You -” Tony pauses and fixes his eyes on his bedroom
door which is still closed and grits his teeth. “Are you kidding me? He’s been in my room with that
thing this whole time?” Squaring his shoulders, Tony marches over to the closed door and pounds on
it, “You little jerk, I told you to get out of there!”

Slowly, the door cracks open to reveal a sliver of Loki’s face. “And I told you that I can do as I wish,
Stark.” He sticks out his tongue and Tony throws his hands in the air if only on principal. “I’m not
getting rid of the chick, so you’re just going to have to live with it.”

“I can’t even do that now because you’ve been holed up in my room all day!”

Thor, who has been standing behind Tony with mild interest throughout this little conversation
pushes past the shorter man and shoves a hand into the little sliver of open door Loki has allowed,
forcing it open. “Loki,” his tone is low, almost dangerous but spiked with more fondness than deadly
warning. “You can not invade my friend’s space without his permission.”

Loki glares. “You have no right to tell me what I can and can’t do,” he snaps in return. Thor just
raises an amused eyebrow.

“I’m not. I am simply pointing out what is the proper thing to do versus what you are currently
doing.” Thor holds out a broad hand and Loki narrows his eyes, “Let me see the animal.” Loki
stands there, defiance bright in his eyes, but Thor doesn’t relent. “Loki,” he says, a bit sharper, and
Loki bites his lip and promptly produces one, fat yellow chick from seemingly nowhere to transfer
into Thor’s waiting hand.

Tony jumps ten steps back when Thor lifts the little thing up to eye level. “Why, hello, small one,”
Thor booms. The sound alone should have, logically, flattened the poor chick, but the bird only lets
out a surprisingly loud peep as if to combat Thor’s mighty voice. Thor tilts his head back and laughs.
“A fine warrior!” he hands it back to Loki and leans over his brother, now empty hand falling onto
Loki’s shoulder, “We will be taking him back in the morning,” he states.

Loki’s face scrunches up and Tony, for just a second, thinks he’s going to cry. Instead he just shoots
Tony a glare around Thor that makes Tony wilt with a shock of guilt. But it’s not enough guilt to
make him change his mind. The bird has to go. Loki looks away then, and doesn’t glance Tony’s
way again as he stomps out of the apartment, chick in hand, and slams the door behind him.

Thor gives Tony an apologetic glance before he follows and Tony’s left standing there and feeling
like more of a jerk than he’s sure is right for the situation.

OoOoOoOoOoO

Thor and Loki still aren’t back at the end of the hour, and Tony goes to sulk take a long shower in an
obviously useless effort to wash away the guilt that’s still building up in him. He sulk broods
contemplates this sudden, extremely annoying feeling until the water starts to run cold and he’s
forced to, quite literally, jump out of the shower to avoid a spray of icy water.

Which, in hindsight, was really not a good idea. Jumping anywhere before looking first is not a good
idea. Except that’s exactly what Tony does because Tony is an idiot. He jumps, throwing the curtain
aside, and lands with one foot on the bathroom rug and one on the tile. The foot on the tile slips, still
wet, and the rug decides to follow as the movement of the foot on the tile collides with it and jerks it out from Tony’s other foot. What probably takes less than a second in actual time happens in that horrifying, “Shit I’m about to die,” sort of slow motion for Tony as the world seems to slide out from under him. Tony knows the rim of the tub is directly behind him, at the perfect angle to snap his neck in two if he doesn’t move. So he does.

Tony twists to the left as he falls and squeezes his eyes shut as his the lower part of his left arm crunches against the porcelain side of the bathtub. It hurts, and Tony gasps with the pain as he slides all the way down to the ground, but at least it’s not his head or neck. After struggling to regain his breath around the pain, which isn’t too successful of a task, he shouts.

“Thor!”

There’s no answer.

“Loki!”

This time he didn’t actually expect an answer. He tries Thor again, but there’s no sound of movement or, really, any other sound at all, on the other side of the door. Tony groans and puts his still functioning arm over his eyes.

“Steve!”

Tony has about ten seconds to push himself into a sitting position and pull his legs up to his chest before Steve busts the door down. And, yes, sometimes Tony forgets that Steve was once in the military around that shy smile and pair of bright blue eyes, but this is definitely not one of those times.

“Tony, what-” Steve whaps a hand to his eyes as he actually takes in the scene. “W-what happened?”

“First, toss me a towel,” Tony orders, legs still tucked carefully against his chest to maintain what little dignity he has left. Steve does so, groping for the one on the towel rack with one hand still covering his eyes. “Second,” Tony says once he’s wrapped the towel around his waist, “Help me up. I think I’ve broken something.”

Steve hesitantly uncovers his eyes and springs into action once he notices Tony’s not completely naked anymore. Technically. He hauls Tony up with one hand under his right arm and studies him, immediately spotting the bruising that’s already forming just under Tony’s left elbow. “You need a hospital,” he states and Tony blanches.

“No, nope, no. Thanks anyways but I can deal with this myself. Probably. I just need-”

Steve’s gaze hardens and Tony clams up instantly. “Hospital, Tony,” Steve repeats forcefully. “Now.”

Tony stares at him for a long moment before reluctantly nodding. “Right. Well then you’re going to have to help me get some pants on.” He’s never seen Steve’s face turn so red so fast before in his life.

OoOoOoOoOoO

Thor finds Loki outside the coffee shop. It’s not a surprise, really, since Thor knows he wouldn’t have risked going much further with a still baby bird in hand. Loki’s sitting underneath the large display window, the top of his head just touching the glass and his back against the bricks. The chick
is nestled into the scarf he’s wearing around his neck, asleep, and Loki is simply staring at the sidewalk between his feet.

“I know-” Thor starts.

“You don’t know,” Loki whispers, and Thor stops to look at him for a long moment. Carefully, he moves to sit down next to his brother under the window, keeping a good foot between them, a wall of space built on experience with the situation.

“I know,” Thor tries again, “That you miss home.” Loki snorts, but Thor ignores him. “But I also know you’re too stubborn to go back,” he continues. “The more you refuse to go home the more you long to. You miss it.”

“I don’t miss it at all,” Loki mutters. “I don’t miss the constant tension in the air. I don’t miss the fighting. I don’t miss . . .” He pauses and digs his fingers into the knees of his jeans. “I don’t miss being looked at as a disappointment.”

Thor’s eyebrows furrow together, but he doesn’t comment. “You miss your animals,” he says instead.

“I miss my friends,” Loki corrects. He lifts a hand and strokes the little chick’s back with a single finger.

“I know.”

OoOoOoOoOoO

Tony hates hospitals. He hates the weird, eerie whiteness of them, sheets and tiles and walls. He hates the smell, of disinfectant and death and tears all rolled up together, stinging, suffering, salt. He hates the machines that they use to determine if and where he’s broken his arm, the alien warmth of some of them and the biting chill of others. He hates that he could have done all of this himself if he’d really wanted to, but knows that in the end he wouldn’t have and that Steve was right to take him here because, knowing Tony, he probably would have carried on with a shattered ulna until it became infected and killed him.

He hates the unfamiliar smell of a drying fiberglass cast.

“Does it hurt?” Steve asks. He’s sitting on the edge of a stool in the little room they’ve left Tony in until the cast has set, a worried look on his face. Tony grins.

“Hey, Steve,” he mock whispers, “They have these things called painkillers now, you know?”

Steve glowers. “It’s not funny, Tony. You could have really been hurt.”

Tony’s smile falters. “I’m fine, Steve. It’s not a big deal. I wouldn’t have even come to the hospital if you hadn’t forced me.”

Frustration flashes clear in Steve’s eyes and Tony almost flinches back from it. Steve stands, “Right, yeah, you would have just stayed home, wouldn’t you? You would have grimmled and bore it because you’re an idiot and then, oh, that’s right, you would have kept that up until it killed you because you’re so damn stubborn that you’d rather die than admit that you need help.”

Tony stiffens, “I asked you for help, didn’t I? And you helped! You got me off the floor! That was all the help I needed!”
Steve lets out a choked off, furious little sound and runs his hands harshly through his hair before he turns his back on Tony. “If that’s the way you see it, maybe I should have just left you on the floor. Sorry, then, for trying to keep you alive.” He fists his hands at his sides and his whole frame heaves, like he’s taking large gulps of air just to keep himself from punching Tony right then and there. It must work, however, because a deafening silence settles over the room when he stills, and Tony waits for the inevitable storm after the lapse of calm that sinks in between them.

The storm doesn’t come. Or, at least, it doesn’t come with any thunder to it. Steve turns and gives Tony a look that speaks whole books and tomes and volumes about disappointment and lulling, but lingering anger, and then he simply leaves the room without a word.

Tony stares after him until the doctor comes in and tells him he’s free to leave.

He has to ask if he can borrow a phone to call a cab once he realizes that Steve actually left him there.

OoOoOoOoOoO

Tony wakes up to the sound of quacking.

He prepares ten speeches in his head stating all the ways he’s going to kill the cause of said quacking noise, but forgets all of them when he wanders out into the living room to find Thor sitting in one of the recliners with a large, white duck on his lap. Tony has to stop for a second and process this image before he can even breathe, torn between laughing and crying. Possibly doing both at the same time. Thor is sitting there with an oddly composed look on his face and Tony decides he looks a bit like an evil mastermind, only with a duck instead of a cat and minus the typical monocle or eye patch.

“That’s a duck,” Tony says, quite obviously, and Thor raises an eyebrow.

“Yes.”

“Why is there a duck here? I could have sworn that chicks grew up into chickens. And the chick that was here before was supposed to be taken back this morning . . .” He draws off with a sudden knowing look. “Oh my god, you didn’t.”

Thor at least has the gall to look a little bit ashamed. Not much, mind you, but a little all the same. “We went to the pound, as the company Loki bought the chick from would not allow us to return it. But when we got there the woman at the desk informed us that animals that were not adopted within a few weeks were . . . Put to sleep.” Thor grimaces and even Tony knows that’s not the thing one wants to hear when leaving a pet behind. “And then she . . .” He looks ashamed again, in that kicked puppy way, and Tony sighs.

“She showed you guys a duck that was due to be put down that day, didn’t she.”

“Ah, yes.” Thor ducks his head and Tony lets out a groan. Thor’s head promptly snaps back up. “Tony, my friend, please don’t-”

“I’m pretty sure I’m outvoted,” Tony relents, “So what I want no longer matters.”

Thor blinks, “No, I will still take your dislike into consideration, by all means. But I do ask that you hear me out.” He gestures to the other recliner and Tony grudgingly sits, his left arm cradled against his chest. “Loki is . . .” Thor hesitates, “Loki is hard to explain.” Tony purses his lips and Thor clears his throat and continues. “Back home he had many animals, most of them far too large to be able to live healthily here in the city. He cared for them a great deal, treated them like a mother would treat her child. When he left the house, he had to leave them too.” Thor runs a hand through the duck’s
feathers absentmindedly as he speaks. “He’s been having a hard time adjusting. He’s surrounded by more people now than pets, and it unsettles him, though he would never state so aloud. People remind him of uncomfortable parties and high expectations. Animals only expect one thing from you, and that is simply love. Loki finds a small comfort in that fact.”

Tony huffs, “Simply love?” That’s the biggest oxymoron I’ve ever heard in my life.” He waves a hand when Thor opens his mouth as if to protest. “But, okay. I get it. Believe me. I understand. The birds can stay.” Thor beams and Tony points a finger at him, “But not in my room!”

“That I can agree to,” Loki says. Tony looks up to find the younger of the brothers standing in the bathroom doorway, dressed in only a large, loose t-shirt and pajama bottoms with a towel wrapped around his head. The chick sits nestled among the towel’s damp folds, its feathers fluffed and slowly drying.

Tony smiles, “I’m serious, though. If I find one in my bed I’m tossing it out the window.”

“They’re birds, Stark,” Loki states.

OoOoOoOoOoO

Steve’s chopping up carrots with the enthusiasm of a serial killer when Tony enters the apartment across the hall. The speed at which the knife is moving along the cutting board and the perfect, evenly sliced bits of carrot at the end of it are almost enough to send Tony running right there and then. Steve doesn’t even cast him a glance when he comes in, though, and Tony knows that he can’t just leave it like this. Although he’s not getting within ten feet of the blond until Steve puts the knife down.

He wanders around the kitchen, peeking into the long cooled coffee mug on the table, reading the notes taped to the cabinet door, and opening the fridge and poking around in the contents. Tony stops when he uncovers a TV dinner underneath a bag of fresh vegetables. Straightening, he catches sight of a carefully labeled and organized binder sitting, forgotten, on the end table next to the phone.

The realization hits him like a bulldozer, leaving him standing there, gripping the fridge door with one hand and fisting the other into his t-shirt with his cast flush against his chest. “Oh, god,” he whispers and Steve stops chopping up carrots.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Tony whispers. “Wait, no. No I’m not, I’m not okay.” Steve sets down the knife and turns towards Tony, waiting for an explanation or at least a little more detail. “Steve, you-” Tony tries, stops, can’t find the right words. “You missed your interview,” he forces out finally, eyes downcast.

Steve blinks and appears strangely surprised to have this pointed out to him. “Well, yeah, of course I did. I was at the hospital with you.”

“But you didn’t-” Tony cuts himself off and waves his plastered arm in front of him, “You were so excited about that job! You shouldn’t have taken me at all, let alone stayed and-”

“How would I have known if you were okay if I’d left you there?” Steve interrupts. Tony stares. “By the time you were getting your cast on and the doctors had informed me there was no serious damage, I was already over an hour late.” Tony flinches almost unnoticeably, but Steve doesn’t miss it. “I don’t mind, you know,” he says softly, “It’s fine. Even if I’d been offered a million dollars I wouldn’t have just left you there, hurt as you were. Or ever.” He smiles and Tony stumbles to find
the right words to reply.

“T’m sorry,” is what he blurts out, “I’m sorry I’m such a dick.”

Steve nods, “You were a dick, but not for getting hurt and needing help.” Tony freezes where he stands, “But for refusing the help when it was willingly given.”

Tony rubs at his cast and looks away, “I just . . . Don’t like having to depend on people.”

“I’m not people,” Steve says, and Tony looks up again in confusion, “I’m your friend. It’s alright to depend on friends, Tony.”

“But-“

“And, forewarning, if you ever do what you did last night again, I’m going to punch you.”

“Noted.”

Steve grins then, and moves to rummage around in a little plastic cup full of pencils and pens by the microwave. After a second or two, he holds up a bright red marker. “Come here,” he motions, and Tony edges closer. Steve holds out a hand, “Arm, please.” Tony lifts his broken arm.

It takes a few minutes, Steve dutifully and purposefully working on writing something on Tony’s cast. The tip of his tongue pokes out between his lips while he concentrates, and Tony keeps his gaze fixed on the picture slowly blossoming across the bleach white of his cast. When Steve straightens up to admire his work, Tony twists his arm so he can read it properly.

It’s a little picture of a bird with a broken, patched up wing. Underneath Steve had written “Birdbrain” in bold letters. Tony frowned.

“I really hate birds,” he states and Steve grins knowingly.

Later, when Clint wanders across the hall to play videogames with Thor he finds Tony sprawled out on his back on the carpet with Loki splayed on his stomach beside him. Tony has his broken arm situated over his head and Loki seems to have pilfered Steve’s red marker, as the cast is now littered with little doodles of various feathered creatures. Loki waves at Clint with the hand not holding the marker as he walks in and Clint takes a moment to notice that, not only is Tony fast asleep, but there’s also what appears to be a chick and a duck nestled on his stomach.

“Do not wake him,” Thor says in a whisper that is not really a whisper at all from across the room. Clint nods and scoots around Tony and Loki to grab the free controller next to Thor.

“Dare I ask?”

Thor tilts his head, “We have named the young ones Chick and Duck appropriately.”

Clint smacks a hand to his face. “Out of the dozen or so questions I had meant, that was definitely not one of them.”

Chapter End Notes

Character development! Dun dun duuuuuunnn . . .
The One With The Claw

Chapter Summary

Otherwise known as the one where Bruce destroys everything, and Clint and Bruce eat soap.

It is unanimously decided that there should be a rule about letting Steve reminisce on old times, that are not actually that old, in Tony’s general vicinity. Because when Steve starts getting dewy eyed about things he misses, Tony starts getting stupid, life ruining ideas into his head.

Stupid ideas like buying Steve an arcade version of Ms. Pacman. No, seriously, this was the worst idea ever born. First of all it took the combined efforts of all of them, including Thor, to even drag that thing up four flights of stairs and into Steve’s living room. And then they all sort of gave up trying to move it any further because Jesus Christ what was that thing made of? Solid iron? Even Thor’s hands were shaking a bit from the effort of lugging it all the way up there, and that was saying something.

But, anyways, last week Steve had been ranting about how he didn’t understand any of Clint’s “Newfangled” video games. And yes, he had used that exact word to describe Halo 3. He’d then proceeded to talk about how there used to be an old arcade he and his childhood friend Bucky would go to, and how they’d spend hours playing Ms. Pacman. (This had been the point where Natasha raised an eyebrow because she was certain Bucky had said it was just Pacman when she’d been told the same story from his point of view.) Steve had gone on and on about how much he’d loved that game and how he and Bucky had racked up all the high scores on it and kept them until the arcade was torn down. After the end of the story he’d lapsed into that weird, sullen, quiet mood he often took up when he was remembering something hard enough for it to hurt, and Tony had snuck off to god knows where and wasn’t seen again for a week.

“I practically had to rebuild this piece of crap.” Tony was saying now, fondly patting said piece of crap Ms. Pacman machine as he spoke. “You know how hard these are to get a hold of? I mean, yeah, you can ask for a new one from the company but that’s not the same. Steve liked the old ones, so I got him an old one. And then, you know, tinkered with it a bit so it would actually work...” He draws off and moves to peer at the screen with a small frown. The rest of them jump back.

“Are you sure you didn’t accidentally turn it into a bomb?” Clint asks. For most people this wouldn’t have to be something you had to legitimately ask. But since the machine had been messed with by Tony Stark...

“Or an evil robot?” Bruce adds, grimacing as he remembers what had happened to his coffee machine.

“Oh the next Skynet?” Natasha chimes in. She’s fiddling with her phone when she says this, and actually doesn’t look too alarmed by the idea, and that is disturbing all on its own.

“That was a fine film about the bravery of humanity in the face of a great evil,” Thor speaks up, Loki nodding at his side. Clint proceeds to stare at them with his typical “What even are you” face he put on whenever Thor and/or Loki said something particularly odd. Which was all the time.
Tony laughs and taps his palm against the side of the game again, “Nah. Nothing like that. But I did wipe the drive so that it’s fresh for playing and has the default high scores programmed in rather than those of a bunch of kids from the nineties.”

“I suddenly feel old,” Bruce declares.

“Same,” Clint agrees.

They’re all promptly bustled out of the room so that Tony can present his gift alone because, to quote, “You guys are mood killers.”

Clint considers seriously questioning what mood there is to kill until Natasha gives him the eye and he promptly, and wisely, closes his mouth.

OoOoOoOoO

One might say, upon looking at Steve Rogers, that he was a tough, very manly man and that such things like girly squeals and/or screams of delight were beyond him. If one did say such things, one would have found themselves proven wrong.

When Steve gets back from his shift at the coffee shop (Coulson had been glad to give him the job when Steve realized he couldn’t live as a starving artist much longer, and also he drew in customers, mainly women, like he was the honey to their flies), and sees what Tony had salvaged and practically rebuilt for him, the noise he makes could compete with that of twenty excited girl scouts. Across the hall, Clint and Bruce have to hold Thor back from trying to, “Save the fair maiden in trouble,” because, obviously, and despite that performance, Steve is not a fair maiden.

“Tony,” Steve gapes as he circles the game, hands already dancing across every surface of it he can touch, “You have to take this back.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Tony huffs with a wave of his hand, “It was trashed when I found it, it only looks so nice and shiny now because I buffed it up with awesome. It’s a gift.” He stares at his feet while he talks and almost misses Steve’s blinding smile.

“You shouldn’t have gone to so much trouble,” Steve whispers. His fingers are hovering over joystick and his eyes are bright with awe.

Tony covers his face with a hand as nonchalantly as possible in an attempt to hide the blush he knows is forming. “Don’t be stupid, it wasn’t any trouble. Besides, it was important to you so . . . It was important . . .” He draws off and looks away, leaving the words “To me, too,” left hanging in the air, unsaid.

Before anyone can say anything else, Steve bounds across the room and bundles Tony up in a bone crushing hug that leaves Tony gasping for air even after Steve lets go. “Thank you,” Steve breathes, nearly nose to nose with Tony, “Really. Thank you.” And then he’s off again, plugging the machine in and letting out a whoop of excitement as he begins to play.

Tony stumbles across the hall a few minutes later and collapses onto his bed, nearly falling right on top of Loki, who proclaims, loudly, “Ah, the madness of young lo-” and is cut off when Tony slaps a hand over his mouth and mumbles something incoherently into his pillow.

OoOoOoOoO

Nobody knows what Natasha does or a living. Correction, nobody wants to know what Natasha does for a living. They all have their own unique suspicions but they try not to voice them aloud in
case one of them is right and Natasha has to kill them for knowing too much.

Tony personally suspects that she’s some sort of government agent working under the highest of orders.

Bruce thinks, almost knows that her work is more international. He does live with her after all.

Steve insists it’s none of their business. But he does have a vague idea that whatever she does, it involves a lot of hand to hand combat as it is common knowledge that she’s the only person who can not only beat Steve into the ground, but also sneak up on him. Thor and Steve have been known to be pretty evenly matched when they’ve sparred at the gym, but Natasha is the only one who can take them both down. And also the sneaking up thing. The only time Steve screamed louder than when Tony had given him the Ms. Pacman game was when Natasha had surprised him in the hallway once. No one talks about that time, seeing Steve had just about passed out. He had every right to though, really.

Thor has decided that Natasha is a mighty warrior from a foreign land. But Thor’s ideas are a bit off as a general rule.

Loki, surprisingly, doesn’t give a shit what Natasha does for a living. All he cares about is that Natasha is the only one who can kick his butt at poker, even when he cheats, and he vows that one day he will find a way to get back at her for it. That day is not any time soon.

Clint is, quite possibly, the only one who knows what Natasha’s work involves. Though if he does, he never tells anyone.

Anyways, Natasha does whatever Natasha does and then comes over to apartment exactly three days after the arrival of the Ms. Pacman game. She was thinking she might make a little dinner using Steve’s superior kitchen appliances and then maybe take a bath in Steve’s Steve sized bathtub (Which could hold two or three normal sized people in it without a problem). Instead, her arrival at the apartment is to a scene of chaos.

In this instance, chaos was defined as Clint Barton seated on a wooden stool in front of the Ms. Pacman game, surrounded by old half eaten boxes of Chinese take-out, and screaming obscenities at the screen.

He spots Natasha as soon as she enters and waves her in with the hand that isn’t wrapped around the joystick of the machine. “Come here, come here!” he exclaims, waving hysterically. “Look, look!”

Natasha moves to peer over his shoulder as he pulled up the stats screen of high scores. “I beat all of the ones Steve did yesterday!” he says proudly.

“You stayed up all night, didn’t you,” Natasha scolds but Clint ignores her.

“And I made all the names dirty words,” He gestures at the screen with a flourish, clearly proud of his actions, and Natasha frowns.

“That one’s not a dirty word,” She points to the sixth name down.

Clint follows her finger to the one she’s pointing to, “Well, there’s only so many bad words that have three or four letters so,” He moves her hand down to the seventh high score down, “combine it with this one.”

“I see,” Natasha says with narrowed eyes. “You do know that Steve’s going to be home at eight, right? He’s going to flip when he sees what you’ve done to his game.”
“So?”

Natasha shakes her head and puts a hand to her forehead in exasperation. “Really, Clint? You don’t remember the time he threatened to make you eat soap for saying words like this?” Clint blanches and Natasha can’t help but smirk. “So I’d get rid of those score names as soon as possible if I were you.”

“That soap tasted like the pits of hell,” Clint mutters as he hunches over the game again, “How can something that smells like a strawberry taste so evil?”

A half hour later, Clint has replaced only one of distastefully named high scores. “You’re going too slow,” Natasha chides.

“Oh shut up, that’s still one down,” He holds up a hand, “Now high five me. I need the boost in self esteem to get this done in the next three hours.”

Natasha stares at his raised hand, “Uh . . .”

Clint follows her gaze, confused at her hesitation, and promptly shouts, “What the hell is wrong with my hand?!”

The hand that had just moments ago been gripping the joystick of the game appears as if it is still doing just that, the fingers curled as if the joystick is still between them, and wrist bent at an odd, probably uncomfortable angle. Natasha raises an eyebrow and Clint screeches in alarm, using his other hand to try and pry his fingers apart and put them in their proper high-five positions. It’s a futile effort that ends in Clint flailing about and falling off the kitchen stool, and Natasha reaching for her phone with a muttered, “This calls for an expert.”

It turns out that said expert is Bruce, who arrives in a few minutes. By this time, Clint is sitting on the couch with his hand cradled to his chest, and when Bruce asks to see he complies with little complaint and lets Bruce examine his hand.

“It’s The Claw,” Bruce says in a foreboding tone and Clint whimpers.

“I’m I going to die, doc?”

“Yes. I’d advise you to start writing your will, but since you have The Claw this would be impossible,” Bruce explains seriously. He tries not to smile when Clint moans and slumps over on the sofa.

“Dramatic,” Natasha says from where she’s standing next to the game.

Bruce shrugs, “It’ll shut him up for awhile. It’s his own fault, anyways, he shouldn’t have played videogames all night.” He moves past her to perch on the stool set up in front of the machine and begins cracking his knuckles. “Right, so we’ve got nine scores to go, right? Let’s do this.”

OoOoOoOoOoO

“You know, I’m starting to worry about the weird shouting coming from across the hall.”

Tony glances up from his laptop when Loki says this, narrowing his eyes at the duck that’s strutting across the other man’s chest where he’s laying in the middle of the living room. “It’s probably just Clint being a moron again,” he mutters, turning back to his work. It takes less than ten seconds for him to whip his head back around to Loki, who’s grinning like a Cheshire cat at him in return.

“Where’s the chick, Loki?” Tony growls, suspicion rising in him with every word.
“I have no idea,” Loki hums innocently.

Tony grimaces, “It’s in my room, isn’t it.”

“Maybe.”

Leaving his laptop on the recliner, Tony stomps off to his room and throws the door open with a loud, “I hate you! If that bird pooped on my pillow again you’re dead!”

Loki smirks.

OoOoOoOoOoO

“Nine out of ten, nine out of ten, nine out of ten,” Bruce chants as he practically falls off his stool. He tilts his body from side to side as he moves Ms. Pacman across the screen, leaning forward so far that his nose is almost touching the glass. “Steve’s not making you eat soap today!” he shouts and Clint pokes his head up over the side of the couch.

“I love you!”

Bruce snorts and Natasha makes a face. Clint notices both reactions and laughs, “I love you too, Nat.”

“Then buy me a box of chocolate,” Natasha says with a flippant wave of her hand, and Bruce raises the hand not holding onto the joystick like his life depends on it for a high-five.

Clint lets out a disappointed whine from the other side of the room, “I want a high-five too! No fair.” He glares at his hand which is still misshapen into “The Claw” and curses under his breath.

“Quit that,” Natasha chides, crossing the room for the sole purpose to smacking him upside the head. “Words like that were what got you into this mess in the first place.” They turn their attention to Bruce then as he lets out a whoop.

“It seems, however, that the gods of Ms. Pacman had other ideas. The moment could have been counted down to, and it still wouldn’t have been less horrifying to those who witnessed it. It was the basic textbook definition of Dramatic Irony. One second, Bruce is shouting, “Go, go, go!” at the screen and the click of a key in the lock can be heard, and the next he jumps backwards off the stool and throws his hands in the air with a cry of, “Nooooooo!” that could rival every dramatic “No!” ever captured on film. The door opens.

So it was that the high score list of dirty words paled in comparison to the stream of curses that Bruce issued forth at that moment, right as Steve walked into the apartment. Clint would have previously sworn that there were only half that many profanities in the world before Bruce opened his mouth. You learn something new every day, he supposes as he puts his hands over his head and waits for the inevitable blow up. Natasha covers her eyes with the same basic idea in mind.

Steve’s present from Tony lasts approximately four days as a single, functioning piece. It lasts for a good dozen years as a bag of completely destroyed shards and wires after Bruce is done with it. A wrecking ball would have been awed by Bruce’s skill at utterly annihilating the Ms. Pacman machine.
“Well that was a waste,” Tony sulks as he helps Steve sweep up the pile of dust that was once the Ms. Pacman game.

Steve dips his head and smiles, “No. It wasn’t. A few days with a gift like that is better than nothing at all.”

From the couch, Bruce mumbles something that might be, “I’m sorry,” around the pink bar of soap he has in his mouth, and Clint mutters something that might be, “Get a room,” around an identical bar. Natasha, who has been put on guard duty and is sitting between them, smacks them both. Clint whines and holds up his hand that’s still twisted into “The Claw,” as if he expects some sort of sympathy for his predicament. Natasha swats at him again.
The One Where Old Yeller Dies

Chapter Summary

Tony plans a movie marathon, Natasha is evil, and everyone completely loses their shit.

Tony’s at the point where he’s seriously considered making a calendar with the sole purpose of keeping track of the days where everything goes to hell. Except, he knows quite well, that if he did every day would be marked as a day where everything goes to hell. What was the saying again? Oh yeah. “There’s always something.” In Tony’s opinion, it was a perfectly correct statement because there always was something. Whether that something be a chicken and a duck purchased on a whim, a broken arm, or a now completely destroyed Ms. Pacman game, something always happened, and it happened in a way that didn’t seem to happen to normal people.

So Tony takes it upon himself to break free of this curse of shit always happening with very set, unbreakable plans of his own. Nothing stupid, self harming, or destructive is happening this weekend. Not on his watch.

“Classic movie marathon weekend!” Tony proclaims loudly in the middle of the coffee shop.

The silence that settles in the room is a clear indicator that Tony doesn’t know how to control his volume when he gets exited about something, and he promptly turns around on the “World’s Ugliest Sofa” (Clint’s words) and says, “Ugh, not you people. I don’t even know you. Get back to drinking your disgusting coffee.”

The shop’s noise level returns to a general contented hum, and Tony slouches back down on his couch cushion.

“Wow, could you be any louder?” Clint says as he bustles past with a tray of pastries, whipping Tony in the arm with one of the undone ties of his bright pink apron. Tony scowls.

“And I thought you loved the coffee here,” Steve adds as he brings Tony another cup of previously mentioned “Disgusting coffee.”

Tony takes the cup and gives it a careful sip, trying his best not to make a face. “I come here for the people, not the services,” he states.

From somewhere behind the counter, a croissant is hurled and smacks Tony in the side of the face before it wings back around to where it had come from. Tony whirls around and glares, trying to find Coulson, who no doubt had thrown the bread-turned-projectile. “What the hell was that for? And how on earth did you get a croissant to act like a freaking boomerang?”

“Magic!” Clint chirps as he rushes past again, a plate balanced on his head and two trays in his hands. Natasha nods in confirmation from where she sits on the other end of the sofa, and Tony narrows his eyes at her.

“I should point out,” Tony says darkly, “That the fact that you are so accepting of Coulson’s mysterious croissant skills alarms me greatly.”

Natasha just smiles.
Steve’s still hovering over them, fiddling with the pockets on his apron and looking out of place. “So, um,” he starts and Tony’s attention is immediately focused on him again, “You said something about a movie night?”

“Movie marathon weekend,” Tony corrects. “And yes, I think we all need a little break from the insanity that is our lives.” The blank look Steve gives him makes Tony stop. “Um, I mean, you guys have noticed that our lives would send most people to the nuthouse . . . Right?” Everyone shakes their heads, including Clint who blazes past with not two, but three completely full trays of coffee and pastries, and Tony eyes him and begins to seriously wonder if he’s some sort of escaped circus freak.

“We’re pretty normal,” Steve says, and Tony lets out an exasperated sigh.

“Whatever, that’s not the point. Movie weekend, yes or no?”

“Will there be feats of bravery and loyalty?” Thor asks. He has a large cinnamon roll in his mouth and Loki, who’s perched on the arm of the large, cushy armchair Thor is taking up puts a hand over his face to shield himself from the spray of crumbs Thor exhales when he speaks.

Tony purses his lips, “On the screen, yes.”

“Can we each bring our own movies?” Steve questions. Immediately, Tony knows this is a bad idea seeing as last time they’d attempted a movie marathon Bruce had brought over a bunch of really weird foreign films, and Loki’s choices had been nothing but cartoons. But the puppy-eyed look Steve is giving him, hopeful and excited, makes Tony’s resolve to say no crumble immediately.

“Fine. But all movies have to be cleared with Natasha first,” he concedes. Last time Tony had been allowed to choose all the films, Natasha had scolded him on picking flicks that everyone could enjoy (after he’d chosen Basic Instinct with the sole purpose of seeing how red Steve’s face could get). He trusted her to weed out any of Bruce’s weird shit and Loki’s kiddy movies.

In hindsight, this wasn’t the best idea he’s ever had.

OoOoOoOoOoO

Twenty-four hours later finds them all crowded around Steve and Clint’s TV in Steve’s apartment, three huge bowls of popcorn between them all and a massive fort of pillows and blankets already in the process of being built (By Loki and, surprisingly, Clint). It should be a night of laughter and light-hearted bad movie mocking. It’s not.

The first movie Natasha pulls out of her hand picked pile of suggestions is Old Yeller, and Tony feels his stomach drop into his shoes with dread. “Oh, I like that one,” Steve says excitedly, “That’s the one with the kid and the dog, right?” Tony’s stomach promptly descends straight into the pits of hell.

“Um, yes?” he squeaks out and sends Natasha a glare that speaks a thousand words and she, of course, ignores him completely.

“I like the part where he saves everyone from the wolf,” Steve goes on and Tony can just feel his eyes bugging out of his head, knows he’s staring at Steve like the blond is some kind of lunatic, because something about this situation is screaming, “Wrong, wrong, wrong!” at him. Steve notices Tony’s gaze on him and smiles, “Something wrong?”

Tony sinks lower in his seat, “Nope. Nothing.”
“This movie has dogs in it? I like dogs,” Loki says from somewhere inside the blanket fort where he hand Clint have huddled up.

Thor’s busy trying to make more room inside of said fort, manhandling Bruce out of the way and onto the sofa on Steve’s other side so that he can expand the fort across most of the floor. “I am also found of dogs!” He booms as he manages to wiggle into the fort, causing Clint to yelp from somewhere inside and Loki to shout some sort of curse in a language Tony isn’t familiar with. Tony hunches even lower in his seat. What the hell? Had no one seen this whole movie except him?

“This isn’t going to end well,” Bruce whispers softly from Steve’s other side, too engrossed in his Nintendo DS to really care. Tony whines in agreement and waits for the inevitable blow up. He’s going to murder Natasha when this is all over.

Steve blabbers on during the first half of the movie, talking about how he and Bucky used to watch it all the time and blah blah blah, Tony stops listening at some point because he’s distracted by Loki throwing popcorn at him from inside the blanket fort.

It all goes downhill from there.

“I do not understand what this ‘Rabies’ they keep mentioning is,” Thor says loudly sometime in the last half hour of the film.

Loki is half in and half out of the fort by this time, his chin resting on a pillow he’s commandeered and he mutters something like, “S a really bad thing,” that makes Thor shut up and Steve tense.

“But Yeller never gets it,” Steve cuts in shortly after Loki’s really poor explanation, “He saves everyone from the wolf. See, right here!” He points and they all fall silent, watching the scene. Tony covers his eyes with his hands and waits. Five, four, three, two . . . “And that’s the end,” Steve proclaims, then pauses because, clearly, saving the family from the rabid wolf is not the end. Tony can practically hear the childhood innocence glass shattering. “But . . . Bucky always shut the movie off at that part. There’s more? Why is there more?” He sounds so confused and worried that Tony forces himself to uncover his eyes just in time to hear, and see, Loki flip the fuck out.

“What’s he doing with that gun?! What is he going to do?!” The blanket fort collapses on top of its inhabitants as Loki flails a bit, and Clint shouts in annoyance. Beside Tony, Steve has pulled his feet up onto the couch, his knees to his chest. After a second of struggle, Thor manages to free himself from the tangle of blankets and pillows, Loki at his side, just in time to see the gun go off.

Three out of seven people in the room completely lose it.

In total, the reactions go something like this.

Loki screams like a banshee, Thor lets out a horrified shout, Steve buries his face between his chest and his knees, Bruce covers his ears, Tony groans and covers his eyes again, Natasha does absolutely fricken nothing, and Clint is apparently dead under the wreckage of the blanket fort.

All in all, Tony wishes he’d never asked for a movie marathon.

Eventually, Loki stops screaming and everything more or less calms down. Thor has to bodily haul Loki up from the mess of demolished blanket fort and drag him out onto the balcony “For some air.” After they’re gone, Bruce sets to work digging Clint out from previously mentioned blanket fort mess and drags him out into the open before returning to his videogame. Tony starts to wonder if they actually need to call an ambulance for him considering that he’s pretty sure Thor sat on Clint at some point during the whole freak out. But when he reaches for a phone to do just that, Clint rolls
over onto his face and moans pathetically into the carpet. Tony figures he’s alright after that. Natasha, and yes, Tony is still plotting her demise, is sitting on one of the armchairs looking smug as hell for no specified reason. Seriously, Tony is going to kill her in her sleep. Or something.

Steve whimpers at that point, however, and Tony foregoes plots of murder in order to deal with the more immediate crisis. “Hey, hey, okay, look, you haven’t even watched the end yet, Steve. It’s not that bad. Look, there’s a puppy! Steve, Steve, Steeeeevveee,” He shakes Steve by the shoulders, urging him to look up because the little ball Steve’s attempting to curl himself into is ripping Tony’s heart out. “Come on, Steve, it’s not that bad!”

Steve looks up and there, nope, that’s it, Tony’s heart may as well have just flung itself out of his chest and out the fourth story window because Jesus. Steve’s eyes are full of those half forming tears, the sort that refuse to actually become real tears and spill over, and they’re gone just as fast as they appear when Tony immediately, and without thinking, raises his hands to wipe them away before they can fall. “Why would Bucky lie to me?” he sniffles and Tony wilts.

It takes him a moment to find the right words, to find something to say that would do Bucky’s carefully laid lies justice. “Because you have a big heart,” he rushes out after a moment. “He knows you get upset over things like this and he didn’t . . . Want to see you upset.” Tony thinks that’s probably the reason, hell he might have done the same in Bucky’s position. No one wants to deal with a weepy Steve.

“I can handle it,” Steve mutters into his knees and Tony tries not to laugh.

“Apparently, you can’t. I mean, you watched this when you were kids, right? I can just imagine how inconsolable you would have been if you’d seen the ending when you were eight years old.” Tony does chuckle then, can’t help himself, really. “I mean, oh god, remember when Bruce got you to read all the Harry Potter books? And you found out that Sirius died?” Steve mumbles something incoherent and Tony smiles. “You locked yourself in your room and you wouldn’t even come out to eat. It was ridiculous.”

“You should have seen Clint,” Bruce says from the other side of the sofa, “Steve’s reaction has nothing on Clint’s.”

“Shut up!” Clint yells, still facedown on the carpet.

Surprisingly, this brings out the smallest laugh from Steve, and Tony instantly brightens. “I know,” Tony starts, “That it’s sad. I get it, the dog dies, it’s a sad movie. But then you have to remember that it’s not real, okay? And that there are probably at least a hundred dogs out there, alive, today, named Old Yeller because the one in the movie was a freaking hero. That’s something, right?” Tony knows he’s babbling, knows he’s not making any sense, but he’s not like Steve, he doesn’t mourn for images on a screen and words on the page that have never even breathed the air of real life. He barely mourned the living, either. He swallows that last thought down and buries it away somewhere in his heart.

Of course, though, the one thing Steve latches on to out of everything Tony said was the part about living dogs, and thus the first words out of his mouth are, “Can we get a dog?”

Tony has two immediate thoughts. One, hell no, and two, we. “No way in hell,” he says aloud, and tries not to feel bad when Steve sends him his pleading puppy-eyes look. “I already have to deal with Loki’s stupid birds, I can’t handle a dog as well. Besides, you work all day five days out of seven. Who would walk it and make sure it didn’t poop in the apartment? Not me.”

“Not me either,” Clint speaks up from the carpet, “I work too!”
Tony nods, “Exactly. So no dogs.”

“But, Tony-”

“Nope.”

“Plea-”

“Not a chance.”

Eventually, through massive amounts of begging and a slight amount of caving on Tony’s part, this becomes the story of how Tony gets Steve a Tamagatchi that he, no this is not a joke, carries around on his belt for a month before it falls off somewhere and becomes just another lost item on the streets of New York. Though Steve mourns the little virtual pet for a week, it’s an event which everyone is thankful for, especially Clint, who was only days away from killing the thing when it beeped for food at three in the morning.

What no one but Loki knows is that it didn’t get lost so much as stolen, and hidden somewhere in Natasha’s room to beep until its batteries ran out as one last final revenge for the disastrous movie marathon.
The One Where Bruce And Clint Take A Bath

Chapter Summary

Tony gets a serious talking to, Clint and Bruce take a bath, and some boundaries are set.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Whatever Tony’s job is (It has something to do with machines and technology and other hoo-ha no one cares about), his work includes one Pepper Potts. The fact that Tony does not understand about his job, however, is that not all jobs come with a Pepper Potts. Or at least that’s how it used to be.

It used to be a lot like this.

Tony worked, and worked, and did nothing but work. When he wasn’t working, Tony would drink. And when Tony didn’t get up in the mornings and nearly missed his meetings, Pepper would haul him out of bed and throw him into the boardroom, pajamas and all.

Pepper is tall, Pepper is suave, Pepper is classy (and sassy), Pepper cares, and Tony knows he doesn’t deserve her, even as a friend. He’s trying to make up for it, though, he really is. Tony tries because he knows he owes her his life, and he hasn’t forgotten her birthday in two years, which is pretty impressive for Tony Stark’s track record. He keeps an actual paper calendar on his wall and makes sure the day, and the month, are circled in big red pen with a little note of, “No strawberries,” jotted somewhere in the margins.

Tony owes Pepper for a thousand and one things, but these are just a few of them.

1.) For making sure he didn’t get kicked out of his own company when Obie tried to undermine him.

2.) For jabbing her finger into his chest (ow) and telling him, “You have a heart, and you can use it,” when he almost drank himself to death after discovering the destruction his weapons were causing.

3.) For dragging him up off the floor (quite literally) when he couldn’t find it in himself to care about anything anymore.

4.) For being the first person to smack some sense in him.

5.) For forcing him to “Grow the fuck up.”

Tony loves Pepper for a thousand and two reasons, but he could never list more than four or five at a time.

1.) He loves her because she’s not afraid to tell him when he’s fucked up, and then she doesn’t leave him to fix things by himself.

2.) He loves her because she’s some sort of magical sun magnet. The sun, even when it’s cloudy out, always manages to hit her just right. He keeps the memories of chasing rays of sunlight over her skin with the tips of his fingers, and how her laughter was the pitch he’d long imagined light would sound like, if it made a sound.
3.) He loves her because she didn’t leave him, even after everything fell apart between them.

4.) He loves her because she can look down on him, condescending, knowing, caring, somehow she can stare down her nose at him even though he’s sure he’s taller.

5.) He loves her because she dropped him on his ass in the middle of New York and said, “You need to go and be a real boy, Tony.”

Number five on the list of reasons Tony Stark loves Pepper Potts is the exact reason he is where he is now. For a whole month, Pepper cut him off, from his money, his tech, his job, his drink, everything. He’d ended up sitting in Coulson’s coffee shop with the world’s nastiest cup of coffee, talking to a guy who acted, and was built like, a god. Said god had needed a roommate, if only because his friend had recently acquired one and he wished to follow the trend that had been set.

Today, Tony still drinks crappy cups of coffee at Coulson’s coffee shop, rooms with a man who’s not so much a god as really weird (and his brother), and lives across the hall from an ex-archer and an ex-soldier, the latter of which needs to stop smiling like that, and across the street from some sort of international secret spy and one really angry nerd.

Basically, Tony owes a hell of a lot to Pepper Potts.

So, why he finds himself sitting in Coulson’s coffee shop and fidgeting with nervousness in his seat, he has no idea. Coulson himself brings him his coffee (and a donut, bless him), and pauses to pat Tony awkwardly on the shoulder and mutter, “You’re so busted,” before he wanders off again.

“That really doesn’t help at all!” Tony calls after him.

Here’s the thing. Usually, Tony is completely aware of the reason he’s in trouble with Pepper. It’s been everything from forgetting to properly monitor company stocks to the fact that she’s just plain tired of being company president and she’s trying to give the title back to him (again). But usually when things like that happen, Pepper just tends to show up at his door and forcibly drag him out of bed.

This time is a bit different. This time, Pepper actually set up a date and time for them to meet with the words, “We need to have a serious talk.” Quite obviously, this had given Tony more than enough time to try and make a break for it, hell, he didn’t even have to show up here today. But the simple fact that she had called him to set this up, knowing full well she was giving him an easy out, made him come anyways. Tony spent most of the past two days gearing himself up for the worst kind of news and/or lecture rather than running.

He’s starting to wish he’d gone with running.

When Pepper enters the coffee shop Tony tries, and fails, not to instinctively sink lower into his chair. Which prompts the first words out of Pepper’s mouth to be, “Stop slouching, you look like a creep.”

She sits down across from him, and Tony straightens up, just a little, because he knows she won’t start the actual discussion until he complies. He sips at his coffee and tries not to be worried. Worrying is for people who have a heart enough to care. Tony Stark is fairly well known not to be one of those people.

“We need to talk,” Pepper starts, and Tony tries not to wilt again. “Natasha has informed me that you’re having a bit of a problem,” She continues, and Tony puts on the appropriate mock offended expression, even though he has no freaking idea whatsoever what she’s talking about. Also, damn it,
Natasha, quit blabbing. “This is about you,” Pepper says slowly and Tony bites his lip, ready for the impending disaster, “And Steve.”

Tony runs for the door.

Apparently, however, Coulson was informed prior to this meeting that Tony would try and bolt, and Tony curses as he finds the one and only door he knows of to be locked. Pepper sits calmly where he left her as he dives over the counter and grabs Coulson by the shoulders. “Please, please, please show me where the back door is,” Tony pleads, “She’s trying to make me talk about feelings!” Coulson just stares at him. “I’ll pay you!” he adds, desperate.

This time, Coulson smiles, just a little bit, “Ms. Potts has already done that.”

Tony lets out a rather pathetic whine, and lets himself be herded back to the table where Pepper is waiting ever so patiently. He sinks into his chair and doesn’t even bother to right himself when Pepper comments. This, he decides, is how Tony Stark dies.

“You’re not going to die because I’m making you talk about things like a real human being,” Pepper says, taking a long sip of the coffee Coulson brings her. “Now quit complaining and sit up, or you’re going to be here all day.”

Tony does not sit up.

OoOoOoOoO

It’s common knowledge that Steve’s apartment is basically everyone’s apartment. The only off-limit area is Steve’s bedroom. Surprisingly, the most used room in the place is the bathroom. Specifically, the most used item in said room is the bathtub. Loki will use it to sulk in, Natasha uses it for extended baths that may or may not involve the testing of underwater weapons.

Darcy uses it for bubble baths.

“Your fancy-ass soaps stink up the place!” Clint yells as soon as he walks in the door. It’s true, for the most part, seeing as he could smell lavender when he was still in the hallway.

Darcy pokes her head out of the bathroom and sticks out her tongue, “You’re just jealous because you can’t take a nice bath without being labeled as a sissy.”

Clint’s mouth drops open, “That is entirely false, I’ll let you know. Everything I do is manly as hell. Even baths.” He pauses and points an accusatory finger at her, “Also, who let you in here?”

“Me.” From the couch, Bruce raises his hand and Clint scowls.

“And who let you in?”

Bruce narrows his eyes, “I have a key, you know.”

Clint throws his hands up in the air and stalks off towards his room. “Fine, whatever, everyone can just have free reign of my space and my bathroom whenever they want. Great.”

“You’re just jealous!” Darcy calls after him before disappearing into the bathroom again.

“Not!” Clint yells in return.

Bruce rolls his eyes.
Eventually, Tony sits up. But only because Pepper has been glaring at him for the past half hour and not saying anything, which is creeping him out. He’s still pretty sure he’s outlasted most people in that area, though, because he knows if Steve were in his place Steve would have broken down long ago. And probably would have cried. Or at least that’s what Tony tells himself because the longer Pepper glares at him the more he feels like he’s going to cry. Steve probably doesn’t cry. Ever.

Oh yeah . . . Steve. Pepper had said this was about Steve. It takes all of Tony’s willpower not to sink back down in his chair again once he remembers that.

“If you’re ready to stop acting like a five year old, we can continue this discussion,” Pepper says slowly. Tony refrains from sticking his tongue out merely out of spite. Barely. “Natasha tells me that you have some sort of blatantly obvious -”

“No,” Tony interrupts, trying to cut her off before she can say anything else. Pepper ignores him.

“- crush or -” She tries to continue.

“Nope.”

“- puppy love -”

“Oh my god.”

“- thing going on here,” she finishes finally, taking a sip of her coffee and giving Tony enough time to slam his head down on the table between them. “Don’t give me that,” She chides, though it’s clear she expected that sort of reaction by the way she barely even raises an eyebrow at him. “This is serious, Tony. We both know how you are with relationships.”

Tony whines against the hardwood. “Right in the feelings. Jesus, Pep. You could be a little more gentle about it.”

She folds her hands on the table and sighs, “Being gentle about things sent you into the worst pout I’ve ever seen from a grown man,” she stated. “You didn’t come out of your room for months after we broke up, Tony, and that was pretty gentle as far as breakups go.” He whines again, and she ignores him. “So this time, Happy suggested I go with the straightforward approach.”

“Oh, well if Happy suggested it.” Tony can’t help himself, and immediately regrets the bite in his words as soon as they slip out. He genuinely likes Happy, he’s a good guy, and at the end of the day Tony’s just a petty one. Pepper does raise an eyebrow this time, and Tony winces appropriately.

“Sorry, I know you love him and all, I just . . . Can we not talk about Happy while you’re trying to tear me into little pieces? It’s like killing a bird with two stones.”

Pepper lets out a soft, amused chuckle, “That’s killing two birds with one stone, Tony.”

“That makes no sense,” Tony mutters, and lifts his head off the table so he can properly look her in the eye. “Alright, fine, say what you want to say so I can get on with my day then, will you?” He waves what he hopes is a dismissive hand at her, and she catches it and holds it between two of her own. Tony almost stops breathing in his surprise. Almost.

“Listen to me,” Pepper says, and Tony shuts up. “Whatever this thing with Steve is, you do know it’s probably just you being clingy, right?” He balks at this, and Pepper goes on. “You make friends and you get attached, it’s just what you do. Normally I wouldn’t say anything, Tony, really. I’d been hoping you’d fall for someone just . . . Not like this. Not with Steve.” He opens his mouth to protest,
to ask what’s wrong with Steve because a sudden, unexpected bubble of defense is rising in him. What the hell. Pepper doesn’t give him the chance to say anything though. “Steve’s old fashioned, Tony,” she says, and Tony can feel the whiplash of reality before it even hits him, “While he’s obviously supportive of . . . That sort of thing, you’ve heard him talk. I know you have. He talks about white picket fences and a wife who bakes pies better than he can.” Oh, there it is, the sting as it hits him right where it hurts.

“You think I don’t already know that?” Tony whispers.

“He wants kids, Tony,” she keeps going, and Tony retracts his hand from hers. Pepper lets him. “He doesn’t talk about them just because, either. He says those things because that’s what he wants. Steve’s the guy who grew up with a future already in mind.”

Tony looks away, “Thank you, for outlining every reason I’ve already listed in my head for why I haven’t actually done anything.” He stands up, refusing to meet her eyes again. “I’m not stupid, Pep.”

Pepper steeples her fingers together under her chin, “Oh? Because Natasha told me you bought and practically rebuilt an arcade game for him, Tony.”

“Because we’re friends,” Tony tries, but the words come out wobbly, broken, and he knows that wasn’t the reason. Pepper knows it too.

OoOoOoOoOoO

When Bruce actually puts down his DS for awhile, he finds that Darcy has left and that Clint is not in his room where he’d been the last time Bruce had bothered to look. The bathroom door, however, is standing ajar, and while Bruce is definitely not a cat, they say curiosity . . .

He finds Clint crouched in front of the bathtub staring at a dozen or so jars of bath salts and bubble mixes Darcy left behind. “What are you doing?”

Clint nearly hit’s the ceiling with how high he jumps, and Bruce covers his mouth with a hand to keep from laughing. “N-Nothing!” Clint snaps, “Darcy just told me how taking a bubble bath is soothing and helps relieve stress. I’m not actually going to do it!”

“Sure . . .” Bruce says slowly. He steps around Clint, who is standing with his arms defensively folded over his chest, and picks up a couple of the jars. “She left you some pretty good stuff, though. This one has eucalyptus in it. I bet it was expensive.” He picks up another jar, “Oh, and it would go great with this green tea bubble bath.” Bruce smirks as Clint’s stance shifts from defensive but interested. “I think I remember a collection of toy battleships under your bed . . .” He draws off and moves to start the water, as Clint has already dashed off to get aforementioned boats.

OoOoOoOoOoO

“We’re friends,” Tony repeats, and he means it. They are friends, him and Steve. It’s the one thing that he’s been holding in front of himself, a barrier between them because he’s so afraid that if he does something, anything, that he’ll mess up and then they won’t even be friends anymore.

Pepper nods, and Tony tries not to wilt under the sympathy in her eyes. “I know you are,” she says softly, knowingly, and Tony swallows. “But I’m worried about you, Tony. Nothing good comes from bottled up feelings.”

He sighs and forces a smile, “Feelings? What feelings?” He straightens and holds his arms out, a resolute grin in place. “There, feelings gone. It was just a stupid, what’s the word again . . .”
“Crush?” she supplies, and he points at her.

“That. Yeah. One of those. It’s over, done with. Don’t worry about me.” Tony holds out a hand and she takes it, humoring him, “Now, tell me about you and Happy. You’re going on, what, two years?”

“Three,” she corrects and Tony whistles, impressed.

“We lasted, what, a year?”

Pepper rolls her eyes, “Eleven months. But, seeing as that was your longest relationship ever, that’s still a feat all its own.”

Mayday, mayday, mayday, we’re going down!” Clint shouts as he starts tipping one of the battleships down into the suds and foam floating across the top of the water.

Bruce laughs and splashes him, “I think ships use SOS, not mayday. That’s airplanes.”

Clint shushes him with a free hand to Bruce’s mouth. “Quiet. You’re supposed to come to my boat’s rescue, jerk. Now go. Get on with the rescuing.”

Shaking his head, Bruce dutifully glides his boat through the water, closely followed by a submarine that he and Clint had fought over (He’d won, but only because he’d threatened to let Clint take the bath on his own like Darcy). “We have received a distress call,” he announced, “Are there enough lifeboats?”

“This is the Titanic!” Clint declares, though clearly the boat in question didn’t even slightly resemble the Titanic, “Of course there aren’t enough lifeboats! Mayday!” He makes a gurgling sound and sinks his ship a little deeper into the bubbles, “We’re sinking, Jack! We’re sinking! Mayday!”

“What the hell are you guys doing?”

Immediately, Clint and Bruce freeze. Clint stills his persistently sinking his ship while Bruce pauses in the middle of moving his submarine under the sinking craft to keep it from finishing its watery death. Natasha is standing in the doorway with the world’s biggest grin on her face, and both of them swallow at the sight of her.

“Um, Darcy left some bubble baths and-” Bruce tries.

“. . . This is really way manlier than it looks. See, we have battleships,” Clint finishes for him, lifting up his “Titanic” for her to see. “So . . . You can go now,” he adds, rather pathetically, and Natasha leers. Clint wonders, briefly, what they’ll write on his obituary. “Man dies of embarrassment after being caught playing in the tub like a five-year-old child,” or “Man perishes after friend/probably secret assassin laughs at him until he dies of shame,” seem like the most likely options.

Natasha stares at them for a long moment, a smirk still pasted across her face, before she turns away with a short, “You’re running out of bubbles. Put some more in and I’ll go across the street and get my boats. I have one with a working motor.”

Bruce throws his hands up in the air with a whoop and Clint scrambles for the already half empty bottle of bubble mix.

OoOoOoOoOoO
“Actually, uh,” Tony’s eyes widen at Pepper’s hesitation to continue her sentence, and he takes half a step back, wary. “Tony, Happy . . .” She raises her left hand and lowers her gaze. Tony gapes.

“Are you for real? Jesus, look at that rock,” he lifts her hand to eyelevel and examines the ring around her left ring finger. “It’s not very big. Happy’s got some shallow pockets, huh.”

“Tony!” She gasps, but it comes out as more of a laugh than a scolding, and Tony grins. “Rude!” He tilts his head to the side and gives her a cheeky smile, “Did you expect anything less? Do I get an invitation, or are exes not allowed.”

Pepper shakes her head and takes her hand back, “Don’t be silly, of course you get to come. We’re thinking next summer, so it’s going to be awhile yet before you get an official invite.”

Tony nods and gives her a mocking bow, “Well then, since you probably haven’t picked the exact time or place, let me at least have a little say.” He shushes her as she opens her mouth to protest, “The options I’m putting on the table are Vegas, or Vegas.”

“Well, how about not Vegas,” Pepper laughs. “Happy was thinking London, you know? So the guests could do some sightseeing. Everyone hates flying cross country to weddings because there’s nothing interesting here, so why not another country?”

“Can I pay?” Tony asks, and Pepper frowns at the sincerity in his tone.

“Tony . . .”

“Who else is gonna do it, Pep? You? Isn’t it the bride or the groom’s parents’ job to pay for the expenses? As I recall neither of you have any of those left, no offense, neither do I.” He pauses and his gaze turns serious, “I’m not joking, Pepper. Please, let me pay for your stupid London wedding. It’ll make me feel like less of an ass for being the world’s worst boyfriend to you.”

Pepper smiles, “I’ve had worse, Tony, honestly. High school boyfriends could outdo you in the stupidity category any day.”

“Ouchy.”

“But,” she continues, and Tony straightens, waiting, “If that’s what you want, who am I to turn down a wedding I don’t have to pay for?”

“That was way too easy. Why do I have the feeling I’ve just been had?” Tony asks. Pepper laughs.

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

Steve’s sitting in the hallway when Tony finally gets back from the coffee shop, and he jumps to his feet as soon as Tony walks into his line of sight. “Oh, thank god you’re back,” he practically whispers, and Tony’s eyebrows climb into his hairline, “I didn’t want to go back in there. I think Natasha came over and now there are some sort of shenanigans happening in the bathroom. I smelled bath salts.”

As if on cue, there’s a shriek (whose is a mystery) from inside Steve’s apartment followed by a loud round of laughter and some splashing. Steve goes pink from ears to neck, and Tony rolls his eyes.

“So, uh, can I come over? For a bit? I don’t want to, uh, interrupt,” Steve says nervously and Tony opens his mouth to reply with something along the lines of “Of fricken course,” before he stops himself.
Tony closes his mouth again, and shakes his head slowly. Steve’s eyes visibly widen in surprise. “Sorry, big guy,” Tony grits out, the words tasting like salt on his tongue, stinging with every syllable, “Not tonight. Thor’s out and I have a lot of work to do.”

“Tony-”

Tony skirts past Steve before he can finish, opening the door to his apartment and closing it behind him as quick as he can. He can feel Steve’s startled flinch without seeing it, and he leans against the doorframe for a long minute before he slumps towards his bedroom.

“The birds had better not be in here,” he snaps when he notices Loki sitting on his bed, slamming the bedroom door closed behind him.

Loki raises an eyebrow, “No, they’re sleeping in Thor’s bed. Did you have a little row with your blond idol?”

Tony glares and clenches his fingers into his palms, nails digging into skin. "Steve is not my anything, Loki. And that’s none of your business anyways.”

“Isn’t it?” Loki looks amused and he leans back on Tony’s mattress, hands behind him to support his weight. “I heard Natasha telling Pepper some things, you know, over the phone. She says that someone like you, so volatile and rash, would break someone like Steve, who’s wrapped up in his own little world of boy scout ideals and the belief that there’s good in everyone.”

Tony blanches and tightens his fists against his sides. Trust Natasha to be so blunt and right to the point. “She’s right,” he mutters after a long, tension filled silence. “If I made a move on Steve, I’d just mess everything up. That’s why I haven’t even-” He cuts himself off and stares at the floor, “But I was trying, you know? I drank a little less, tried a little harder, stopped sleeping around because I knew he hated that, even if it was none of his business.”

“And how did that go?” Loki asks, “Was it worth it, in the end, now that you’re standing here again with the realization that all that all that effort was for naught?”

“You’re a real asshole, you know that?” Tony snaps. Loki smiles, a small, dangerous smile. “Oh, I’m well aware. But that’s hardly the point.” He holds up a hand, palm upwards, and Tony’s eyes narrow again. “The real question is, are you going to keep trying for something you can’t have, or would you rather start having a bit of fun again?”

Tony’s eyebrows furrow together, and he stares at the offered hand, “What are you asking me?”

Loki smirks and lets the hand fall, his whole body following it as he lists to the side and rolls over onto his back across the bed, stretching like a cat on the sheets. “Depends on what you want, Stark. But you should know I come with no strings attached.”

Chapter End Notes

I set out writing this chapter with two plot ideas in mind, and then Loki whispered things in my ear and I said, "Yes, good," and realized that there was some things that needed to get a whole lot worse before they got better.
Darcy cooks, Thor is fascinated by washing machines, Loki sulks, Tony can’t make boxed stuffing, and Steve thinks that everything is all his fault.

“Quit moping.”

Steve immediately straightens up from where he was leaning against the cash register and finds himself staring straight at Coulson, who has one eyebrow raised and an oddly amused look on his face. “Sorry, sir, it’s just a bit of a slow afternoon,” he mumbles and rubs at the back of his neck, ashamed to realize he’d been slacking off.

“Well, we’re just about done for the day,” Coulson says easily, and Steve frowns and glances at the clock. It’s just past three, far from their usual closing time at Shield Coffee.

Somewhere behind him, Clint pokes his head out of the back room and gleefully yells, “Yes!” Coulson rolls his eyes.

“It’s the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, Steve,” Coulson explains as he moves around the already empty shop, picking up mugs and cups left on tables as he goes, “Everyone is out getting turkeys because they forgot what day it was, or they’re traveling so they can be with their family for the holiday.” He smiles and Steve hesitantly gives him a small smile in return. “You and Clint can leave as soon as you clean up. Go home, start stuffing the bird and mashing the potatoes.”

“Sweet potatoes are better!” Clint calls from the back room.

“Only if you’re a heathen,” Coulson replies calmly, which makes Clint round the corner with an utterly aghast expression on his face.

“But,” Clint whines, “but the marshmallows and-”

Coulson grimaces, “Are disgusting, Barton. Now finish the dishes before you’re stuck here all night.” Clint scurries off again and Steve does a poor job off stifling a laugh behind his hand.

Steve turns a wavering grin (caused by pent up laughter) to Coulson. “What are you doing for the holiday, sir?”

“Visiting family,” He shrugs. “I’m sure you’ll be doing something similar, Rogers?”

Steve fidgets and looks away, “Um, no. Not really. I don’t have much of anything left in the way of family anymore, and Bucky’s out on another tour of duty for a few months yet.”

Coulson maneuvers around the counter to drop the collected mugs and cups into the sink Clint’s standing over before he returns to Steve’s side. “Friends can be family too, you know. I thought Thor was throwing a huge feast.”

Rubbing at the back of his neck, Steve mutters a quiet, “Yeah.” Coulson raises an eyebrow, and Steve sighs. “Things have been . . . Really weird lately. Strained, I guess, but no one else seems to
have noticed it but me.” He glances at Coulson and purses his lips, “Somehow, I feel like it’s my fault, seeing as no one else sees that anything is wrong.”

Coulson sniffs as if the idea of Steve being at fault for anything is impossible. “It’s probably Stark’s fault.”

OoOoOoOoO

Actually, it kind of was.

Tony holds his iPad high over his head as he works, the fingers of one hand dancing over the screen as he tapped out new calculations and blueprints for various things. The curtains of the bedroom’s one single window have been drawn shut, but a sliver of late afternoon sunlight still pierces through them. The sheets rumple around Tony’s waist from where he lays on the bed are the only things standing between the duck staring him down on the dresser and full frontal nudity. Tony sticks his tongue out at the duck and goes back to working, rolling over onto his stomach in case the thing decided to make a kamikaze dive for the goods. Which, by the way, had happened twice in the last week and a half. It’s like the duck knows Tony hates it and is carrying out painful retribution, usually while Tony was too asleep to defend himself. He should probably bother putting on pants more, or going outside away from where the duck can get him, but both of those involve actually facing certain people he’s currently hiding from and also getting a lot less sex. So he’ll take the evil duck and the nakedness, risks an all, thank you very much.

His bedroom door opens and closes. Tony doesn’t even look up from where his nose is nearly pressed against the iPad screen, his mind tangled up in his work for the first time in a long time.

“Quit being boring,” Loki says, running his fingers through the duck’s white feathers before falling onto the bed at Tony’s side.

“I’m working,” Tony replies.

“Which is boring.” Loki hums and walks his fingers down Tony’s bare back, smirking when Tony shivers. “We should go somewhere,” he says suddenly, and Tony blinks, stops, and looks up with thinly veiled surprise.

“Where?”

“Anywhere.”

Tony raises a suspicious eyebrow, “This is about Thor wanting to make an actual Thanksgiving dinner, isn’t it.”

Loki scowls, “You don’t like the idea any more than I do.”

“No, but seeing as I have nowhere else to be-”

“Then I’ll go alone,” Loki blurts out, eyes narrowed, and Tony pinches the bridge of his nose.

“For someone who claims to have no strings attached, you sure do come with a lot of baggage, don’t you.” He sets his iPad aside and complies when Loki pushes at his shoulder, forcing him to roll onto his back as Loki straddles him. “It’s not going to kill you, you know, if you go to Thor’s dinner. But if you don’t go I don’t want to be around to deal with Thor’s massive tantrum.”

Loki rolls his eyes. “Thor has more important things to worry about than my attendance. Besides, why would you have any desire to go in the first place? I was under the impression you were in the
Tony snorts, “Steve spends Thanksgiving with Bucky every year, doing the whole do-goody crap by serving meals to the homeless and the elderly or something like that. Orphans and puppies and single mothers, that sort of thing.” He waves a hand in the air as if waving away his poor attempts at remembering what Steve does at Thanksgiving. “So, seeing as I have nothing else to do tomorrow, I might as well go hang out with Thor and watch him mutilate a turkey.”

“I’m so pleased,” Loki says slowly, sourly, “That I have been labeled as ‘Nothing else.’”

“I felt it was inappropriate to use obscure pie and whipped cream innuendos at this time,” Tony grins.

Loki frowns, “I was unaware that the word Inappropriate was even in your dictionary.”

“It’s not, I just couldn’t think of any really witty innuendos.”

OoOoOoOoOoO

Tony needs to start keeping a calendar, or a list, or sticky notes, or something that reminds him of when and where Steve is going to be if Tony’s going to keep avoiding him as he’s been trying so very hard to do this past month. One of the sticky notes should say, “Bucky is on tour again,” and should be pasted to his forehead post haste.

He stares at Steve as Thor shuts the door behind him and ushers him inside the apartment, and knows it’s far too late to make a run for it without thoroughly embarrassing himself and making it quite clear that he has in fact been avoiding Steve like the plague rather than working, as he’s been claiming for the past three weeks.

From the sofa, Loki sips at a glass of whine and sneers in a silent, “I told you so,” that makes Tony’s stomach wrench. This is going to be the Thanksgiving from hell.

As it is, it’s already sort of a Thanksgiving from hell right off the bat, considering the circumstances. The thing is that Thor only wanted to host this feast because his girlfriend wanted company for the holiday since she couldn’t afford to fly home for the week.

Tony hasn’t actually met Jane yet, seeing as he has sort of been holed up in his room with Loki for most of the month since Thor met her, but he’s met Darcy, Jane’s roommate, and he likes Darcy. It’s Darcy who’s currently doing most of the actual cooking, and Thor and Jane are just sort of standing there. It’s a reasonably normal reaction to anything culinary in Tony’s opinion, especially because if it wasn’t for Loki he and Thor would eat pizza every single night. Jane’s confusion at the mystery that is cooking isn’t too unexpected either, and Tony chocks it up to the fact that cooking is very, very different from science, despite what most people might say.

And Tony knows this, he’s tried making omelets. He doesn’t like to think about the omelets.

Anyways, though Tony hasn’t officially met Jane he knows quite a lot about her without precursory introduction. Which is mostly due to the fact that Thor has been going on and on about, “The lovely lady Jane,” for the better part of a month now. Jane’s a scientist, astronomer of some sort Tony thinks. Space and junk isn’t really his forte, so he honestly doesn’t care. If she wants to talk robotics then, please, get him a front row seat. He knows that Thor met her while simply walking down the street (and, okay, who else but Thor just meets people that way? Seriously?), and asking her out for coffee. It should be noted that Thor and coffee are probably not the best combination, but Jane probably knows that from experience by now. It’s actually a wonder they lasted past that first coffee
date, Tony thinks, but maybe she’s just really good at handling guys who sometimes forget proper coffee etiquette and throw mugs on the ground with a shout of “Another!” Seriously, though, one of these days he has to ask Thor and Loki what planet they’re from. It’s not really a topic that just comes up while playing videogames, arguing over whether or not the birds were touching him, eating takeout, or in Loki’s case, sex.

Tony purses his lips to keep a snort from escaping him as he imagines bringing that up while he has Loki pinned to the mattress. “Oh, excuse me, I've always wanted to ask, are you actually human? Because you and your brother are weird as hell.”

Darcy bustles past him then, snapping him back to reality with a sharp, “Are you just going to be a loser and stand in the doorway all day or are you going to sit down and stay awhile?”

“Actually, I was hoping I could lend a hand, seeing as your roommate and her Tarzan of a man seem to be completely useless.” Tony says, surprising himself. From the couch, both Steve and Loki raise an eyebrow. It’s really quite clear his offer is an excuse not to sit on the foreign sofa with the guy he’s sleeping with and the one he wants to be sleeping with, but Darcy doesn’t comment on it as she shoves a box of ready-make stuffing into his hands.

“I knew I liked you for a reason, I assume you can follow directions on a box, right?” She grins and Tony chuckles nervously. She turns to where Thor and Jane are still standing around like a couple of weirdos and waves them off, “Go, shoo, you’re nothing but trouble. Give the other guys a tour of the apartment or something, Jane.”

Really, there’s not much of the apartment to see, since just by standing in the kitchen/living room Tony can tell there’s only about four other rooms. But Jane seems happy to not be required to cook anything, and immediately drags Thor over to the couch to convince Loki and Steve that a tour is in their best interests. Loki looks like he’s about to piss knives, the way he’s staring her down. Tony rolls his eyes.

“You gonna help or not?” Darcy asks as she drops a rather heavy pot into his hand not holding the stuffing box.

Tony puts the pot on the stove and begins reading the directions on the back of the box, hoping that something with a total of three steps will be impossible to fuck up.

As it turns out, Tony would probably be able to burn water if he tried hard enough. “No, no, no,” Darcy chides as he just about dumps the packet of little vegetable/flavoring/ramen powder/whatevers into the pot before the stuffing is done being uhh . . . Fluffed? Tony doesn’t know cooking terms, it’s soaking up the water and gravy while slowly expanding and drying. He doesn’t know what that’s called and he doesn’t care. At all. “Did you read the box at all?” Darcy asks him and Tony nods, because he really had. Okay it was more like he skimmed it, but considering that skimming textbooks and reading cliff notes got him through college, he thought that would work with cooking, too. Apparently not.

Darcy side-eyes him and snatches the flavor-whatever packet out of his hands before he can mess something else up. “You’re a real mess, but at least you’re trying to be helpful.” She relents when Tony starts to pout about having his stuffing duties revoked. “Can you at least chop vegetables by yourself? Or are you going to cut a finger off.”

“I can tell the difference between a finger and a carrot,” Tony sulks, and she hands him a plate of freshly washed vegetables, a knife, and a cutting board.

Tony likes Darcy, no, really. Darcy is smart and witty and carries a taser that could knock out a
horse. Plus she’s one of the only people who can look Thor in the eye after he says something completely ridiculous and embarrassing, and then make him apologize. She’s a scary woman, and Tony respects the crap out of her (for his own sake), and admires her spunk just a little bit (but that’s a secret). Above all of that, Darcy is insanely intuitive. Which is why the next thing she says is, “What happened with you and Steve?”

Tony’s brain goes into shut down mode and he stares at her, astounded, before he properly reboots enough to reply with a stunned, “What?”

“He gave you the world’s worst pair of puppy eyes when you walked in, and you totally ignored him.” She waves a spoon dripping with gravy at him and Tony scowls as a blob of the stuff hits him right under the eye. “I mean, granted, I haven’t known you guys for long, but I’m not blind.”

“It’s nothing,” he mutters before he goes back to chopping vegetables. Darcy promptly turns and whacks him in the head with her hand, ah la karate chop, and Tony yelps. “What the hell?!”

“There’s a saying about knocking sense into people,” Darcy shrugs, “It was worth a shot. But I think you have to have some sense to begin with for it to work.” She turns her attention to the stuff again and Tony stares at her, rubbing the bump forming on his head with a scowl.

OoOoOoOoO

Clint, Natasha, and Bruce show up a half hour later with nearly six pies in tow. It takes three and a half seconds for Natasha and Bruce to replace Darcy at the stove and another two seconds for Clint and Darcy to retreat to the sofa together to whisper. Yes, whisper. Tony thinks, as he tries to arrange the chopped vegetables on the plate so that the little mangled ones won’t be so obvious, that there’s some sort of back story between Clint and Darcy that he’s missed. That, or they’re just a couple of gossips.

It’s only a few minutes later when Jane leads her little tour group out of one of the far rooms (finally) and Tony wonders what exactly is in there that was interesting enough to amuse them for forty-five minutes.

“Thor is fascinated by the washing machines that have the window on the door,” Steve says as he sits at the table to Tony’s right, and Tony nearly falls out of his chair.

“Oh?” Tony tries for nonchalant but fails as the word definitely comes out as more of a nervous squeak than any sort of word at all.

“He had to show us how it’s such amazing technology, and then proceeded to stare at the socks whirl around behind the glass for a half hour,” Steve goes on. “It was actually pretty funny to watch, and it kept Loki quiet for almost twenty minutes so that’s saying something.” He folds his hands on the table and Tony swallows, realizing that this is the most they’ve said to each other in weeks. The thought stabs him right in the gut, and he looks away to break the odd tension of the moment.

Steve, however, seems to want to up the ante of the conversation immediately, and says, “Can we talk?” with a short gesture towards the door leading out to the terrace.

“I’d rather not,” Tony whispers, honestly, but when Steve ignores him and gets up, making his way to the terrace anyways, Tony follows.

Tony skirts around Steve when he holds the door open for him and moves to the far side of the terrace. Steve stays near the door, watching him, and Tony keeps his gaze on the street far below where the streets have been cleared for the Macy’s parade. “I really hate this holiday, you know,”
Tony starts. He’s looking for something, anything to say to avoid the topic at hand. He’ll talk about shitty childhoods if he has to, goddamnit. “We used to have a really big dinner at my house and my dad would invite all the company board members and their families. I threw up on the director’s shoes one year because I ate too much cranberries.”

Steve cracks the smallest of smiles, “You’ve told me that story before.”

“Yeah.” Tony flounders for something else to say, grasps at straws that aren’t there, and falls silent.

“What happened?” Steve asks, so quietly Tony barely hears him, and Tony tries not to wince at the way the words waver, hurt and unsure.

“What do you mean?”

Steve frowns, “You know what I mean. I haven’t seen you in over a week, Tony, and you’ve barely said a word to me in nearly a month.” He sighs and runs his fingers through his hair. “Is this about Pepper and Happy?”

“Oh, god no,” Tony blurts out because, seriously, he’s glad about that. Happy makes Pepper . . . Uh, happy? And that’s all Tony ever wanted for her.

“Then what is it?” Steve’s hand is still in his hair, sliding slowly down to the back of his neck and staying there as he stares at the ground between his feet. “Did I . . . Did I do something to make you mad?”

And, oh god, that is not the sort of look Tony ever wanted to see on Steve’s face, certainly not one he was the cause of. His willpower shatters at the sight, and he moves to stand in front of Steve, lets his hands grip the blonde’s upper arms, fingers digging in as if he’s trying to keep himself from falling. Too bad it’s a bit too late for that. “No. Oh, Jesus, no. This is my problem, Steve, not yours. It’s not—” he swallows when Steve raises his eyes to meet his, deep blues freezing him in place. “It’s not your fault, alright? This is my thing to deal with.”

Steve’s eyebrows furrow together, “But . . . I could help you, whatever it is. We’re friends, Tony.”

Tony forces himself to look away. Friends was what got him into this in the first place. “Yeah, I know. This isn’t something you can fix though, Steve.”

“Tony—”

“Please, can we not? I really, really don’t want to talk about this.” Tony inhales, fights for breath. He’s trying not to break down, trying not to tear down the wall he’s been trying to build for almost a month. “Can you just . . . Let me try and work this out on my own? I promise it has nothing to do with you.” Lies. “It’s my problem, and I’ll figure out how to fix it.”

“Tony there’s a giant dog flying by,” Steve says, and completely ruins the moment.

Actually a huge Underdog parade balloon ruins the moment, but that’s just the little details. Tony takes a good six steps back from Steve as everyone inside barrels out onto the terrace to watch the balloon float past while a bunch of people down below scream about it getting loose.

“A mighty steed!” Thor booms.

“You can’t ride dogs,” Jane tells Thor calmly, and it was probably about time someone mentioned that to him.
“I could probably ride a dog,” Darcy says, “I’m pretty light. Like if it was one of those dogs with the barrels around their neck or a Great Dane or something.”

Clint looks aghast, “Don’t even try it. Remember the-”

“Hush, no talking about that. You swore,” she says, smacking a hand over his mouth. And, oh, there is definitely some weird back story there.

“That new Underdog movie was the worst,” Bruce mutters, leaning against Clint’s back with what seems to be the intent to send him over the railing. “Actually the cartoon wasn’t so great either.” Loki appears mortally offended by this comment, and Tony snickers.

“I think the turkey is burning,” Natasha says calmly, “And, also, Thor locked us out.”

This is the story of how Thanksgiving was ruined by an Underdog balloon, and how Clint and Darcy teach everyone how to make a mean grilled cheese sandwich. It’s also, sort of, the story of how Tony started to realize how much of a dick he was being, and how they all found out that Loki’s usual level of “I’m trying to make you spontaneously combust with my eyeballs” glare had nothing on the ones he could direct at Jane’s back, but neither of those were the point.

The point was that Natasha found the one lock she couldn’t pick and they were stuck out on the terrace for an hour while their dinner got ruined.
Chapter Summary

The second of December takes a little courage, a bit more friendship, a dash of feeling, a couple of smiles, and a new but familiar face. Meanwhile, Natasha, Bruce, and Clint have a couch to get up six flights of stairs.

The alarm goes off at 6:15 A.M. Tony throws it on the ground at 6:16 A.M.

“Why is that thing even in here?” Loki whines into the pillow, not even bothering to raise his head to see what time it is. “Why aren’t we sleeping until noon? We seriously just went to bed and-” He hums and falls silent as Tony runs a hand through his hair, letting out a content, tired sigh.

“I have something to do today,” Tony says.

Loki lifts his head at that, clearly surprised seeing as Tony usually prefers to work from home, when he actually works at all. “What day is it?”

Tony’s pulling on his t-shirt, tossed aside during the night, and he glances over his shoulder at Loki with a short, solemn, “The Second,” before he goes back to getting dressed.

There’s a long pause before Loki speaks again, his cheek still resting on the pillow and his eyes narrowed in concern. “It’s not your job, you know. With the situation as it is I’d have thought you’d let someone else-”

“It is my job,” Tony snaps. Loki blinks in reply, not startled in the least by this response. “He . . . I don’t care if we haven’t been on good terms lately. That’s my fault, not his. And I’m not going to punish him for it, not today.” Loki mutters something about poor life decisions and Tony chuckles. “It probably is, but I’m not going to leave him in the dust.” He runs his fingers through Loki’s hair again when Loki grumbles in protest. “I’ll be back later.”

“It’s not like I’m just going to wait here for you or anything,” Loki calls after him when Tony wanders out of the room a moment later.

“Liar,” Tony laughs.

Loki sticks out his tongue at no one, because Tony’s already gone.

OoOoOoOoOoO

“Steve, wake up. It’s The Second.”

A hand is on his shoulder, gently dragging him out of dreams and back to a reality where the words, “The Second,” send a sharp pang of grief through him. Steve buries his face into his pillow and drags the covers up over his head. Maybe if he stays asleep, The Second will pass him by. It’s a nice thought, but one he knows he doesn’t have the heart to go through with, and when the hand pries the covers out of his fingers and away from him he doesn’t protest.

“Tony,” he whispers, surprised. It’s been almost two weeks since Thanksgiving, and though Steve
would say their situation has improved (if one could call moving from ignoring to brief small talk in
the hallway an improvement), he’s still fairly surprised to see Tony there. When he opens his eyes all
the way he notices Clint hovering in the doorway, Natasha hanging off his side. Steve raises a
questioning eyebrow at them and Natasha shakes her head, confirming to him that Tony came here
of his own free will.

That fact makes the day just a little bit brighter. Clint nods at him and he and Natasha disappear from
the doorway, leaving Steve and Tony alone in the curtained sunrise of the day to come. “You going
to get up?” Tony asks in the same tone he’s been asking that question for the last three years. The
words are said softly, just loud enough for those inside the room to hear, and Steve can just make out
the lingering fond, understanding air behind them. That’s the thing about Tony, really. He doesn’t
say these things with pity, or even what most people would classify as sympathy. Steve rolls and
catches the hand Tony still has on his shoulder, gripping it tight in his own.

“Give me a minute,” he says, and Tony nods.

A minute really means nearly a half hour, but Tony doesn’t protest, doesn’t scold, doesn’t move from
where he’s crouched next to Steve’s bed as he waits with a startling amount of patience considering
that he’s Tony Stark. When Steve finally drags himself out of bed, lets Tony bustle him into the
bathroom with orders to wash up, it should be noted that a half hour is a new record.

The first year, when there had only been Bucky to haul Steve out of bed, they didn’t leave the
apartment until nearly three in the afternoon. The year following, when Bucky had been away, the
duty had somehow fallen to Tony, who had created a miracle in managing to drag Steve out of the
apartment by noon. Last year, they’d left by ten in the morning.

Tony thinks that this might be a sign of healing, or whatever. He’s not prepared to write a thesis on it
yet though.

“That took less time than expected,” Clint says as he wanders out into the kitchen where Tony is
tapping away on his phone. It’s just past seven, and the sun is can finally be fully seen between the
buildings as it rises. “I’m surprised,” Clint goes on and Tony pauses, waits for the reprimand that he
knows is coming, “that you showed up. Natasha and I were prepared to do it this year.”

“I’m not that much of a dick,” Tony hisses.

“Debatable,” Clint says in return and Tony scowls.

Steve wanders out of the bathroom and across the apartment back to his bedroom in nothing but a
towel a few minutes later while Tony is making toast. Tony keeps his eyes on the toaster and Clint
looks flabbergasted, going so far as to ask Natasha if Tony keeping his eyes to himself is one of the
signs of the apocalypse. Natasha says they should probably leave just in case it is. Tony is glad when
they do.

“Navy or Black?” He asks, holding up a suit in each hand for Steve to pick from awhile later. Steve
stares at him, halfway through buttoning up his freshly ironed white shirt.

“Which one did I wear last year?”

“Black.”

“Then I should probably . . .” Steve’s hand hovers over the black suit and slowly shifts to the navy
blue, uncertain. Tony can see the confliction in his eyes, the question of “Should I remain the
same?” clear in his unsteady hand.
“You’ve worn the black one the last three years,” Tony says softly, and moves said suit out of the way so Steve doesn’t have a choice. “Why not switch things up a bit?”

Steve’s eyebrows furrow together. “But black is for mourning,” he says so softly it makes Tony’s heart break.

“And blue is for life,” Tony states. It’s total bullshit, and he knows Steve knows that as well as he does, but he says it all the same. In a way, he thinks, he’s not wrong. Blue is the color of crayon drawings of oceans, of water, of the one thing no one in the world could live without. He’s grasping at straws, but he looks Steve straight in the eye when he says, “I don’t think she’d be very pleased to see you in the same black suit again. She’ll wonder if you even own any other clothes.”

Steve laughs, actually laughs, and Tony is absolutely astonished. For the first time in the three years he’s been doing this he’s never heard Steve laugh on The Second. Not once. He smiles and loops the hanger of the navy blue suit over Steve’s wrist. “Get dressed then, places to be and people to see.”

By eight, Tony has six ties laid out on Steve’s bed. “It’s not that hard of a decision,” he chides when Steve starts to get flustered again, “Just choose whichever you like best.”

“But stripes aren’t really appropriate-”

“Then don’t pick one of the striped ones.”

After what seems like forever, Steve chooses the plain black tie, and of course Tony saw that coming, which is why he hands Steve the light blue one instead. “Brings out your eyes,” he mutters as he tosses the rest back into a drawer. When he looks back up Steve is still holding the tie and staring at it with a confused look on his face and Tony sighs with false annoyance. Steve at least pretends to look apologetic, but the smile making itself known in the corners of his mouth give him away.

“Still can’t tie a tie to save your life, Rogers?” Tony groans.

Steve breaks into a full-on smile and Tony stumbles a bit. “I thought that’s what I had you for.”

“Oh yes, Tony Stark, Official Tie Tie-er. It’s on my business card.” He takes the tie from Steve and loops it over the taller man’s neck.

It’s odd, he thinks, how easily they fall back into this routine because of a date on the calendar. Alarming, too, considering how hard Tony’s been trying to break away from it. “I’m starting to think you just refuse to learn because you’re lazy,” Tony says and Steve chuckles. “You’re like the little kid who needs other people to tie his shoes. The really big little kid.” He tightens the tie and straightens it against Steve’s chest before making sure the suit coat isn’t wrinkled, smoothing out navy blue planes under his hands. “Except worse, you know, you’re worse than a kid. Kids get up early on their own.”

Steve lets out a little amused huff and when Tony starts to step back to admire his handiwork, he finds himself nearly nose to nose with the other man. “Thank you,” Steve breathes and Tony freezes, eyes wide.

“No problem?”

Steve laughs again, and makes his way out of the room, leaving Tony standing there, more or less hyperventilating in the bedroom.

OoOoOoOoOoOo
Breakfast is short and simple, and by nine Tony is handing Steve the keys to his car with a reminder of, “Don’t stay out past midnight, for the love of god don’t get drunk, and don’t make me come look for you like I did two years ago.”

Steve shakes his head at this but Tony knows he understands, knows he remembers how bad this day can get, if he lets it. Bucky set up the no drinking rule after the first year when he’d discovered that the amount of alcohol it takes to actually get Steve drunk is the same as the amount that causes extreme alcohol poisoning. Tony is glad he wasn’t around for that. The rest were created by Tony himself after the second year when Steve had failed to come home, and Tony had spent over twelve hours looking for him. He’d found him in a playground sometime around the afternoon of the next day. “Try not to get the suit dirty unless you want it dry-cleaned,” Tony adds and pointedly flicks a microscopic fuzz off the sleeve. He catches Steve’s wrist as he does so and shoves a couple of bills into his hand, “And this is forty for flowers.”

“Tony-” Steve starts, the usual protests dying as soon as they start when he catches sight of Tony’s narrowed eyes.


Steve dips his head, a faint flush spreading across his cheeks and he smiles again. Tony grins at the sight of it. What is that, three now? Four? Either way that’s three or four more smiles than he’s seen in three whole years of The Second. “I’ll take you to meet her one day,” Steve says suddenly and Tony blinks in faint surprise. “She’d like you, I think.”

“Wow, um . . .” Words fail Tony as he tries to come up with an appropriate response, “That’d be . . .” He can’t say great because that somehow sounds wrong. A privilege? Maybe. Pleasure? Probably not in the right sense of the word. Privilege is definitely the closes thing he can think of, but he lets himself fall silent, hoping Steve understands his fumble for expression.

He does. “Maybe next year?” he asks and Tony nods.

“Yeah, maybe.”

Tony wonders, as he watches Steve leave in his bright red sports car, if this is some sort of landmark he should be checking off on the calendar. The thought makes him start and take a mental step back. He’s supposed to be staying away, keeping his feelings to himself. He’s supposed to be building up a wall, and yet he’s tearing down the bricks as fast as he stacks them. The wall metaphor isn’t really the best description, the more he thinks about it, palms rubbing against his closed eyes as if he can wipe away the last few hours. It’s a lot more like holding a hand over a wound. You can try and stop the bleeding, but the blood is going to seep out anyways, between your fingers, dripping out for all the world to see. It’s harder to stop the blood than it is to drown in it, Tony thinks.

Drowning is easy, and at this point he’s just barely keeping his head above the surface.

OoOoOoOoO

“Why don’t you have a couch?” Clint whines from the floor.

Natasha, who is sitting on one of the two barstools in her and Bruce’s apartment raises an eyebrow. “A large floor area is required for practice.” Clint mumbles something incoherent into the rug, but doesn’t bother to ask the obvious, “Practice what?” because, quite frankly, he doesn’t want to know.

“And,” Bruce pipes up from where he’s putting Poptarts into the toaster, “There’s enough room for yoga mats.” Clint snorts and Bruce’s eyebrows furrow together.
“No, no,” Clint says quickly, recognizing the warning signs when he sees them. He doesn’t want a Bruce meltdown on his hands at the moment, “Yoga is cool. Very relaxing and . . . Stuff.”

“It’s also great for blanket forts,” Natasha adds and, at this, Clint rolls over and stares at her. “Big blanket forts,” she goes on. “You know, like the one from last week when we-”

“No, I remember. I’m just wondering why that’s an actual valid reason for not having a couch,” Clint cuts in.

Bruce turns to look at him again, catching the Poptarts as they jump out of the toaster. “Considering what happened last week, I’m pretty sure that is an extremely valid reason.”

Clint sits up and throws his hands in the air, “But what about when we watch movies? I hate sitting on the floor for that. And if I want a nap I don’t really want to sleep in either of your beds-”

“Which makes zero sense considering-”

Clint turns a glare on Bruce before he can finish that sentence, and Bruce wisely shuts up. It’s better, in this sort of situation, to let Clint rant. “Why do you guys even have two beds anyways?”

“Why do you even live across the street?” Natasha shoots back without hesitation and Clint frowns.

“I like my space.”

“I’d prefer to have my boys in one house,” She states.

Bruce chokes on his Poptart, “Oh my god, you make us sound like a harem. Or, uh, whatever the man equivalent of that is.”

There’s a rather long pause as they all try and think of what the exact word for that would be, each coming up with nothing before Natasha says, very matter-of-factly, “It doesn’t matter, you’re one short of a harem anyways.”

“I think I sold my soul to the devil,” Bruce whispers, scooting away from her and closer to where Clint is sitting in the middle of the living room.

“I still want a sofa,” Clint whispers back.

Steve gets lilies.

He spends a half hour choosing what kind of flower to get with the money Tony gave him, debating on whether color or shape mattered most. Flowers weren’t his thing, he couldn’t even name a third of them the street vendor had been selling. Steve thinks, when he buys him, that lilies will work okay.

He realizes twenty minutes later, as he’s walking between the rows of graves, that he never got the chance to ask what her favorite flower was. The thought freezes him in place, sends an ice-cold wash of grief through him, as fresh as it had been four years ago, and he forces himself to shake it off. He has a ways to go yet.

In movies, graveyards are depicted as quiet, shadowed, eerie places. The movies are, ultimately, wrong. The grass under his feet has long browned in the December air, but the trees still hold branches teeming with noisy birds cheeping and singing loud enough for every passerby to hear. In the summer, when the grass is green, squirrels and sometimes even small rabbits can be found sitting
in the stone-cast shade. On Memorial Day children run between the rows of graves, eager to place poppies on the resting places of fallen soldiers, grandfathers and grandmothers, mothers and fathers. In films, graveyards are symbols of death and a dying world. Ironically, Steve has found them to be full of life.

Graveyards are where the dead sleep, and the living walk above them as proof that life goes on.

Seven rows down, four graves in, Steve stops.

“I brought you flowers,” he says quietly, “I didn’t know what kind you liked, so I just got lilies.” Steve kneels in front of the grave as he puts the flowers at the base of the headstone, arranging them so the morning sun hits the petals just right and turns them from white to a soft gold. “I know I should visit more often, and I tried to the first year, remember? But Bucky . . . Bucky says that lingering with the dead just means you haven’t found the strength to keep living yet. So . . .” He draws off and sucks in a long, slow breath. “Tony picked out my tie and my suit. He said I should switch things up. I’ve told you about Tony, right? A couple years ago he actually came looking for me when I went off on my own after visiting you. He’s . . . Surprising,” Steve says, and fiddles with his tie as he speaks. “I told him he should come with me next year. That would be okay, right, Peggy?”

Carefully, Steve traces the engraving of Margaret Carter across the surface of the headstone.

OoOoOoOoO

Natasha “acquires” a couch by half past noon. How she does it, Clint really doesn’t want to know, nor does he care, but either way it’s a brand-spanking-new sofa.

“Awesome!” Clint declares and immediately flops down onto the couch once it has been delivered and deposited in the front lobby of Natasha and Bruce’s apartment building. Natasha gives him a good thirty seconds of rolling around on the new cushions before she kicks him off.

“Come on, we need to get this thing up the stairs,” she orders and grabs one end with Clint while Bruce takes the other.

“I lied,” Clint says when they’re only four steps (not flights, steps) up, “I don’t want you guys to have a sofa. It’s not worth it.”

“Six flights to go, Mr. Whiney,” Bruce says. “Now, pivot around this corner up ahead.”

Clint groans.

OoOoOoOoO

He never says, “I miss you,” because that much is obvious. It doesn’t hurt as much as it had a year ago, two, three, four, but it’s still there all the same. Steve misses Peggy, and the feeling sits as a cold stone in his gut whenever he thinks about her. The stone has grown less heavy over time, though, and though he loathes to admit it he thinks that maybe that’s what healing is supposed to feel like.

“Healing doesn’t mean forgetting,” Bucky had told him once, and Steve holds that thought in mind when he feels guilty about it. There shouldn’t be any guilt in living. Survivors guilt, however, is something that’s a bit harder to get over. Steve tells himself that it was a war, that people died, that hundreds of good soldiers had died long before Peggy and hundreds more would die after her. Bullets aren’t picky about targets, and he knows that the one that hit him in the shoulder just as easily could have been the one that hit Peggy in the heart. He never says, aloud, that he wishes it had been.
“Maybe I’ll come on Memorial Day this year,” he tells the grave. “At least then I’d know the right sort of flowers to get.” He small laugh bubbles up in his throat, and he startles himself at the sound of it. In the four years since she died, Steve Rogers has never once laughed at her graveside.

“It’s okay to laugh, you know,” A voice says and Steve starts, struggles to get to his feet that have fallen asleep with how long he’s been kneeling in the grass. “She’d probably like to hear you laugh.”

On the other side of the grave a young woman stands with a bouquet of flowers in her hands. Steve takes a second to do a double-take, blinking at the familiarity of the firm way she stands, the confidence in her eyes, and the general air around her. More than that, he’s startled by the her features. Her hair is a few shades lighter, a few inches longer, and her eyes are off from what he remembers. If it weren’t for these small details, Steve would have said she was a ghost.

The woman holds out a hand to him and he shakes himself out of his surprise, taking it without hesitation. “Sharon Carter,” She says, “You must be a friend of Aunt Peggy’s from the war, am I right?”

“Steve Rogers,” he greets in return.

OoOoOoOoO

“Pivot! Pivot! Pivot!”

Clint slumps and falls onto the stairs. They’re halfway up the second flight, and after four corners of Bruce shouting, “Pivot!” whenever they had to make a turn, he decides he either needs to die right here and now, or go to jail for the homicide he’s about to commit. Natasha doesn’t seem to be faring much better, which is saying something seeing as Natasha can poker-face through just about anything.

“Leave me here to die,” Clint says dramatically, throwing an arm over his eyes like the damsel in distress he’s pretending to be. Natasha promptly kicks him in the stomach.

OoOoOoOoOoO

“So you met in the war?”

They’re sitting on a bench under one of the leafless trees, and Steve’s pretty sure this couldn’t be more awkward even if it was intentional. He fiddles nervously with his tie for a moment before he speaks. “Um, yes. We were in the same team. And squad. And platoon.” They might have been in the same company too, but Steve can’t remember. The most important one had been the team, himself, Bucky, and Peggy.

Sharon smiles, “I thought so. You’re that Steve. She didn’t mention your last name, but I didn’t think she knew too many Steves so . . .” She laughs at his confused look, and pats his arm, “Don’t look so surprised. She wrote about you a couple of times in her letters home, that’s all.”

“Oh,” Steve flushes. “What did she say?”

“This and that,” Sharon says enigmatically, chuckling when Steve raises an eyebrow in response. “I’ll show them to you sometime, if you want.”

Steve bites his lip, “That’s not necessary. They were letters to family, personal things, I’d feel like I was intruding on something private if I did.”

Sharon sighs, a loud, overly-dramatic sound that makes Steve stare. “You know,” she says slowly,
“When someone says they’d like to do something with you sometime, that’s usually just a not-so-subtle cover for a date.” Steve’s eyes widen. “But apparently for you, that was way too subtle. So let’s start with coffee. Want to go get some coffee?”

“Is that a date?” Steve asks, honestly bemused.

“Coffee is coffee,” Sharon smiles.

Steve’s 90% sure that means yes.

OoOoOoOoO

“Pivot! Pivot! Clint, Nat, I told you to pivot!”

Clint glares over the length of the couch at Bruce. “I swear to god, Bruce, I love you, but-”

“-If you say ‘Pivot’ one more time, I’m going to kill you,” Natasha finishes.

“Exactly,” Clint confirms.

Bruce snorts, clearly in disbelief, and they start lugging the sofa up the next flight of stairs. For a few minutes there’s nothing but silence as they trip and stumble with the couch up the stairs. Or at least it’s quiet until they get to a corner and get stuck.

“Pivot,” Bruce whispers.

“Shut up!” Clint screeches, and launches himself over the sofa to get at the other man. Natasha doesn’t lift a finger to stop him.

OoOoOoOoO

Steve takes her to Shield Coffee. He likes the familiarity of it, the easy atmosphere and the comfort of having people he knows nearby after an emotionally exhausting day. Sharon orders her coffee dark, and Steve orders his with as much whipped cream on it as possible. He’s never actually been too fond of coffee, and finds the almost gritty taste a little too strong for his liking. But considering that his closest friends come here all the time he’s at least grown fond of adding as much sugar as possible to it, even if Clint gives him crap about how only girls drink froofy whipped cream coffees. He has the urge to call Clint to the coffee shop right now just to prove him wrong.

“You like it plain?” Steve asks Sharon, surprised.

“I like it black,” She corrects, and, really, Steve should know this. He’s been working at Coulson’s coffee shop for a couple of months now. “So,” she prompts as they sit down at a table near the window, “Tell me about Aunt Peggy.”

It’s not a question, so Steve can’t really find it in himself to tell her that some things are hard to talk about, to tell her no. And she’s smiling so brightly at him, waiting, that he doesn’t have the heart to deny her. In the right light Sharon’s smile looks almost exactly like Peggy’s, though hers is more frequent, unstrained by war. When he sees it Steve feels his heart flutter a little in his chest.

“Talking about it helps,” Bucky had told him the first year. Steve hadn’t said a word then.

This time, the words come out as easy as breathing, and he starts with the simple, most truthful ones. “I loved her,” he says softly, and Sharon’s eyes glow with wonder.

OoOoOoOoO
“I’m dying,” Bruce moans from the couch, which is now situated rather lopsidedly in his and Natasha’s living room.

“I’m already dead,” Clint mumbles beside him.

“I’m going to kill both of you for real if you don’t shut up,” Natasha snaps from the other side of the couch. When Clint lifts his head to confirm her seriousness, she jabs him in the ribs with a finger.

Clint groans and flops over onto Bruce’s lap. Bruce doesn’t protest. “Good thing we have this couch now,” he says after a moment or two, “Otherwise, where would we sit when we were moaning and groaning about dragging it up six flights of stairs.”

The following death-glare from Natasha would have made most lions pass out in fear. Bruce just laughs, and Clint grumbles incoherently into his leg and ignores her.
The One With Bruce's Sandwich

Chapter Summary

It's Take Your Child To Work Day! Clint, Tony, and Loki have the maturity level of children, so that counts, right?

The little known fact is (Okay it isn’t little known so much as *no one cares*) that Bruce is a professor at the local university. He teaches chemistry. Or maybe it’s physics. Biology? Whatever, the point is that it is little known in the sense that no one actually gives a crap, since Bruce’s job can’t get the rest of them anything for free, and that it isn’t fun except for on one very special day a year.

That day is today.

“Made you a sandwich with the last of the turkey,” Natasha says when Bruce bustles past her, fumbling with his tie as he grabs a packet of Poptarts from the cupboard.

“From the second Thanksgiving turkey, or the one that caught fire?” he asks jokingly. Natasha elbows him in the side and he huffs out a laugh. “Thank you. Did Clint actually show up this year, or am I going to have to go drag him out of bed again?”

Natasha purses her lips, “What do you think.”

“In bed?”

“Most likely.”

Bruce sighs. “Right, I should have known better.” He leans over and kisses her cheek before snatching the sandwich out of her hands and tossing both it, and his second Poptart into a paper bag. He stuffs the first Poptart in his mouth and makes a beeline for the door. “Sure you don’t want to come?” he calls over his shoulder because it never hurts to double check (Or triple check, or quadruple check).

Natasha’s eyes narrow, “No. I have absolutely no desire to attend the university’s Take Your Child To Work Day. Besides, I’m not a child.” Bruce nods in agreement and Natasha shoos him with a hand.

“I assume that you’re implying that Clint is a child then?” he chuckles.

“Yes.”

OoOoOoOoO

As usual, it takes more work than it should to actually, *physically* drag Clint out of bed. After ten minutes of trying and failing to extract Clint from his blanket cocoon, Bruce gets more than a little pissed and, really, Clint should have known better.

“I don’t wanna go! It’s not even freaking dawn yet, Bruce! Take Tony or something!” Clint yelps when Bruce jumps on him.
“I will, but first you have to get out of bed!” Bruce crawls over Clint and to the far side of the bed where it’s tucked close to the wall. He wiggles his way in between the wall and the bed frame, grabs the mattress, and lifts.

Really, Clint should have known better. There’s a shriek of surprise as Clint, still rolled like an burrito in his blankets, slips right off the mattress and crashes to the floor just before Bruce flips the entire thing, pillows and all, on top of him. Clint groans into the floor and Bruce exits the room with more stomping than necessary.

“You suck!” Clint shouts after him.

Bruce comes back in and jumps on the overturned mattress and its victim trapped beneath.

When Clint finally drags himself out of the bedroom, a little worse for the wear, he finds Bruce in the doorway of the apartment talking with none other than Nick Fury, the downstairs neighbor who files regular complaint notices against them. Clint freezes and tries to backtrack, but it’s too late. Fury’s single eye is already fixed on him.

“So,” Fury says darkly, continuing the conversation he’d been having with Bruce before Clint walked in, “If you all could keep the noise level down that would be greatly appreciated. Especially the sort of stomping and crashing that just went on, that needs to be toned down.”

“We’re usually pretty quiet,” Clint pipes up from where he’s hovering between running back into the bedroom and going to Bruce’s defense.

Fury snorts, clearly not amused by this blatant lie, and Bruce casts Clint a glare that screams “Shut the fuck up.” Clint slinks over to the kitchen and roots around for some cereal as quietly as possible.

“I’d appreciate it if the renter of this room could be informed?” Fury prompts, raising an eyebrow at Bruce as if he expects Bruce to somehow be an upholder of noisy neighbor justice, or something.

“I’ll have a talk with the tenants here about the noise,” Bruce promises, shutting the door before Fury can object. Clint grins around the spoon hanging out of his mouth and throws his hands in the air. Pointing a finger at him, Bruce snaps, “And you, finish up eating or I’ll make more noise by tossing you off the balcony.”

Clint rolls his eyes, “Right. Seriously, though, why is that Fury guy living in New York for anyways? Everything here is noisy.” Bruce gives a noncommittal shrug and moves to peer out of the peephole to see if said neighbor has left yet. “By the way, did you mean it when you said Tony was coming too?”

“Tony expressed an interest in my work, so I invited him last night, yes,” Bruce says, and opens the door (Fury having apparently vacated the hallway), to knock on Thor and Tony’s door across the way.

To the surprise of all when Bruce knocks, Tony answers. “But it’s seven in the morning!” Clint shouts, surprised, and gets a shushing noise from Bruce in turn. They don’t need Fury to come back up here and yell at them again.

“Astute observation, Barton,” Tony deadpans. “I’m sure you’ll get an A for Take Your Child To Work Day.” Clint narrows his eyes and goes back to eating his cereal. Tony smirks. “Anyways, I’ve been meaning to ask, why are we going again?”

“Because my coworkers spend half the day messing around and not getting work done because their kids are there,” Bruce explains. “I should get to mess around too, kids or not. Besides, you guys have
the mental age of small, immature children, so it’s practically the same thing.”

“Thanks . . .” Tony says slowly, failing to find a proper comeback for that remark. “Speaking of, Loki wants to come too, apparently?” He opens the apartment door a little wider to reveal said man leaning on the bar in the kitchen and looking expectant. When Bruce’s eyes widen Tony leans forward and whispers, “Thor’s bringing Jane over today, so it’s either take him with us or risk having to cover up a homicide tonight.”

Bruce frowns, “Then he should probably come along.”

“Exactly what I was thinking.”

OoOoOoOoOoO

It should be noted that there’s an actual rule about how many of them can ride on the subway at once. It’s not printed anywhere (where the public can see), but it has been enforced on a frequent and not to be ignored basis since New Years Eve two years ago, in which they’d all gotten horrendously drunk and disturbed too many passengers, wrecked some seats and sissy grips (or those little handles hanging from the top of the subway car. Tony’s the one who coined the sissy grips term), and nearly gotten themselves killed when Tony decided to see if he could hack the system that held the doors shut until the train reached a station. Basically, there had been a lot of damages, a bunch of hangovers, and some very pissed off subway riders and personnel. They (meaning the group consisting of Thor, Loki, Natasha, Bruce, Steve, Tony, and Clint) were no longer allowed on public transportation in groups larger than four.

Luckily, there are just four of them at the moment as they sat utterly still in a subway car that was speeding towards the station where Bruce got off for work. Unluckily, a security guard had followed them onto the train and was seated across from, just to make sure they didn’t destroy anything.

“It’s a bit unfair, you know,” Tony says lightly. “I’m sure lots of other people have caused damage to these cars, and yet we’re the ones who get our butts busted because of it.”

“Tony you threw a plastic seat out of the doors you hacked open and onto the tracks, delaying any subway activity for over an hour,” Bruce says. Tony refrains from punching him in the arm for not siding with him, but only because he doesn’t have a death wish.

“I was drunk out of my mind!” Tony argues.

“Wasn’t that the night before Steve took every single bottle of alcohol you had and trashed it?” Clint asks. Tony throws his wadded up subway ticket at him.

Loki slumps low in his seat and says, offhandedly, “I actually wasn’t drunk.”

It takes a second for the horrified comprehension to ripple through them, and one by one Bruce, Tony, and Clint turn to look at Loki with their jaws collectively dropped. “But you-” Tony starts.

“-were the one who-” Clint goes on.

“-started yelling about how cookies are not a sometimes food-” Bruce continues.

“-and that Cookie Monster should eat cookies all the time, before chasing an old lady and her grandkids off the car,” Tony finishes.

Loki grins and the other three scoot a little further away from him along the seats.
Bruce drops his sandwich off in the science faculty lounge fridge before herding his designated “children” into his morning classroom.

The students who have already begun filing in barely spare them a glance while Bruce sits Clint, Tony, and Loki at the desks closest to the front. He learned the previous year that putting Clint in the back of the room only leads to disaster.

As soon as they’re seated, Tony says, “When’s lunch?”

Bruce just stares at him, “We literally just got here, Tony. Lunch isn’t for awhile. It’s not even ten in the morning yet.”

“Can it be lunch now?” Tony asks.

Bruce narrows his eyes and Tony slouches in his seat, knowing when to shut up. The classroom starts to fill up and Bruce goes about pulling down the screen and staring up the projector. Clint instantly zones out and turns to where Tony and Loki have started whispering over, dear lord, an entire fleet of paper planes. How did they even fold those so fast?

“Planning an air raid?” he whispers. Loki nods and proceeds to procure some paperclips out of literally nowhere to attach to the noses of the paper planes. “I have to ask,” Clint goes on, waiting until Tony glances at him to prove that he’s actually paying attention, “why did you guys come?”

Tony frowns, “I already told you, homicide prevention.”

Clint points a finger at Loki, who precedes to stick his tongue out in return, “That’s his reason. Assuming you didn’t actually come to watch Bruce work, seeing as you seem so interested in his lecture right now, what’s your excuse, Tony.”

“I’m awesome?”

“You just came so you could avoid running in to Steve, don’t lie.”

Tony looks aghast for a moment before he whirls on Loki with a hissed, “What have you been telling people?”

Loki sneers, “Contrary to popular opinion, I’m not actually that much of an asshole, Stark. I know when to keep quiet about things.”

Clint raises an eyebrow, “Did you somehow think that you were being secretive about your whole ‘Avoid Steve Game,’ or something? Because you really weren’t.” Clint laughs when Tony gives him a rather offended, flabbergasted expression. “Seriously, you all but ran out of the coffee shop yesterday when you walked in on the rest of us talking to Steve and his new girl.”

Tony sniffs, “I did not. I was never there. I was working all day yesterday.”

Trying his best to stifle another laugh at this obvious lie, Clint says, “Bullshit. So tell me, is this a jealousy thing?”

“Hardly,” Loki hums absently, still absorbed in building paper planes. “It would be rather odd to be jealous of someone’s new relationship when you’ve been trying to purposely push that someone away for over a month.”
“Loki!” Tony snaps, horrified.

“I never said I wasn’t an asshole,” Loki smirks in return, “I just said I wasn’t enough of one to go about telling your secrets to people. Seeing as Clint only has half of the picture though, I found that it was my duty to enlighten him of the rest.” Tony groans and lets his head fall onto the desk, an action ignored by everyone.

At the head of the classroom Bruce, who has just begun his lecture, pretends that they don’t exist.

“You’ve been avoiding Steve to push him away?” Clint whispers, stunned, “Why didn’t I notice this? And also, why are you doing that in the first place?”

“Because you’re an idiot,” Loki says in answer to the first question.

“Because he deserves better than me,” Tony whines into the desk to answer the second. Loki pokes him with an unfolded paperclip and gets a similar whine in return.

Clint blinks in confusion for a moment before he blurs, “But Steve adores you!” and more or less silences the entire classroom.

Bruce, who has somehow managed to get from the front of the projector to Clint’s desk in a third of a second, whaps the desktop with a yardstick and smirks when Clint shrieks in surprise. “Try to gossip a little quieter if you’d please, children,” he says, and walks away to continue his lecture.

Tony turns his head to the side, eyes mere slits as he focuses on Clint. “Don’t be stupid, Barton. It’s not the same thing.”

“Yes it is.”

“No,” Tony insists, “It isn’t. He’s my best friend and I couldn’t live with myself if I fucked things up with him just because of a little crush.” He sighs and looks away again. “So I’m just going to put some space between us until I get over it.”

Clint chuckles, “Little crush? I’m sorry, I wasn’t aware that hundred foot tall glaring neon signs were little. My mistake.”

A paper airplane hits Clint in the face as a response, and Tony high-fives Loki for his spectacular aim.

OoOoOoOoOoO

After the second lecture class and a particularly horrendous conversation, Bruce brings them coloring books.

Said conversation went something like this.

“Can we have class outside?”

“No, Tony.”

“But I’m bored.”

“You’ve been sitting there for an hour and a half, making paper airplanes and gossiping like a bunch of cheerleaders. You can’t be that bored.”

“I have ADH . . . Can we have class outside?”
Anyway, now they had coloring books. Loki had chosen to painstakingly go about coloring in the pages, whereas Clint and Tony had decided to use only a red crayon in their handiwork. Handiwork in this case meaning adding mangled stick figures to all the pictures along with excessive amounts of blood.

“My tiger is eating a bunch off zombies,” Clint declares.

“My elephant is crushing an entire village,” Tony combats. “It’s got gamma radiation in it.”

Clint studies Tony’s work with a hand on his chin, stroking an imaginary goatee. “Is it angry?” he asks and Tony bites his lip as he thinks about it. “If it’s an angry gamma radiation elephant than you should call it Bruce.”

Tony immediately goes about writing BRUCE in huge letters across the top of the page with a green crayon.

Bruce smacks both of them with the yardstick. Loki positively leers at their pain, and gets a smack of his own when he laughs.

OoOoOoOoO

“Can gamma radiation- whatever even make giant angry elephants?” Tony asks. He’s long grown bored of coloring, and is designing something that suspiciously resembles a motorcycle with blue crayon in the margins.

“Dunno,” Clint says.

“No one should try to find out though,” Loki mutters as he continues coloring, “Because that’s animal cruelty.”

“All of you would know the answer if you would actually listen to the lecture,” Bruce whispers icily from where he’s suddenly standing over them, startling Tony into falling out of his chair.

Clint and Loki scream.

OoOoOoOoO

Tony rolls a crayon across the desk as he says, “I’m not jealous, you know.” Loki nods in understanding and Clint raises a disbelieving eyebrow. “I mean, I haven’t really talked to the girl. Sharon, or Shannon or whatever.”

“Sharon,” Loki confirms.

“Whatever. I’m not jealous of her, that would be stupid.” Tony flicks the crayon off the edge of the desk and grabs another one from the box they’ve already pretty much decimated. “Why would I be jealous of someone that makes Steve happy?” He smiles slightly, one of those just barely there little smiles, and says softly, “I mean, did you see the way he was looking at her? I’ve never seen his eyes look that bright. The whole point of me taking a step back was for his benefit, not mine.” Loki grumbles something unintelligible and continues coloring. Tony ignores him. “If I was jealous I’d only be proving to myself that . . . That what ever I felt for him was built on selfishness.”

Oh, and that’s an odd word to try out on his tongue. Felt. Tony winces at the taste of it, the finality and past tense sting of it against his teeth and over his lips. It tastes like a lie, and the way Clint shakes his head at him, the understanding but disbelieving smile, he knows that that much was obvious. Maybe if he gives it more time it will fade into truth.
For some reason that thought makes his stomach clench, and for a moment he forgets how to breathe.

Loki’s hand finds his shoulder just before he sucks in a shuddering breath. “Healing doesn’t mean forgetting,” Loki whispers and Tony knows he’s heard those words before, but can’t remember where.

“Hey, there’s a tic-tac-toe page in the back of this coloring book!” Clint exclaims, succeeding in distracting them all once again.

By the time Bruce actually lets them go for lunch Tony has long stopped asking if they could have lunch yet. Clint’s pretty sure that was the plan, but he doesn’t comment. Bruce leads them to the science lounge at 1:30 and tries his best to keep them from wandering off.

“What’s down that hallway?”

“Lab experiments gone wrong.”

“Really!?”

“No, Tony.”

“Can we get McDonalds?”

“You can get McDonalds if you want, Clint. Natasha packed me a sandwich, so I’m set.”

Halfway there, Loki gets distracted by some pictures of horses on a bulletin board and Bruce doesn’t notice until he’s suddenly minus one “child.” Backtracking to find Loki staring at said bulletin board is more trouble than it’s worth, mostly because Tony starts to complain about how they were almost there and Loki can take care of himself.

“I should invest in some child leashes,” Bruce says when he grabs Loki by the collar of the shirt and starts to drag him back to where Tony and Clint are trying to break into a vending machine. “At least then I’d be able to keep you guys in one place.”

“You do remember that we’re not actually children, right?” Tony asks hesitantly.

Bruce scowls at him, “Start acting like adults and I might believe you.”

“I’m an adult!” Clint says, hand raised as if this is an affair to be voted on. The looks both Bruce and Tony give him shoot that idea down instantly.

A unanimous decision is made to get the rest of them McDonalds while Bruce goes into the lounge and starts rooting around in the fridge for his sandwich. Loki’s in the middle of explaining why he’s still young enough for a kids meal when it happens.

In this case, it being the incident where Bruce flips the entire fridge over without warning.

Loki skitters to the other end of the room and Tony freezes where he stands while Clint yells, “Whoa there!” and takes a couple steps back. The professor nonchalantly reading a book on the other side of the room, however, looks more alarmed than the three of them combined, as well as possesses noticeably less sense than them in his failure to run when Bruce charges at him.

“Sandwich,” Bruce grits out between his teeth as he looms over the unsuspecting professor. “What
happened to the paper bag with the sandwich in it?"

The nameless professor’s mouth drops open, “Th-the turkey sandwich?”

“Yes,” Bruce snaps.

“I didn’t know it was yours-” the professor starts, words ending in a terrified squeak when Bruce hauls him up out of his seat by the front of his suit coat.

“Really?” Bruce hisses, “You didn’t know the sandwich that you did not bring to work that clearly had a pink sticky note on it reading ‘Bruce Banner’ on it wasn’t yours? May I ask how you ever acquired a degree, let alone graduated elementary school?”

The poor professor lets out a dismayed squeak and Bruce makes a noise that sounds a little too close to a growl for anyone’s liking. Before things can get any more out of hand, Clint scrambles over a table and a couple of tossed aside chairs to Bruce’s side. “Okay, okay, he’s learned his lesson. You can put him down now,” he pleads.

Bruce glares at him.

Clint huffs in faint amusement, “What, you think you’re going to scare me off with your anger issues? Nice try. Now put the poor guy down before you do something you regret.”

Slowly, and rather reluctantly, Bruce puts the professor back in his chair. The gentleness with which he does it turns out to be a bit useless, however, since the professor promptly faints and falls off the chair anyways. No one bothers to right or rouse him. Clint grins in triumph, “Perfect. Now, come on, let’s all have lunch at Mickey-D’s.”

“That was the last of the turkey,” Bruce grumbles.

They’re halfway out of the room when the professor wakes up and says, “I didn’t even eat it all, it wasn’t very good. I threw it away.”

Clint barely manages to get Bruce out the door with how hard he’s trying to get at the professor in an effort to maim and possibly kill him.

“Natasha made that sandwich for me!” He screeches at the professor as they leave.

“We know, we know. It’s okay,” Clint shushes while bodily hauling Bruce from the room.

OoOoOoOoOoO

“Why exactly,” Tony says once they’re all sitting around Bruce’s office desk with their happy meals (Ordered by Loki with no objections), “Do you bring Clint to Take Your Child To Work Day anyways?”

Bruce frowns, “Mostly because I got tired of the other professors gloating about getting an excuse to not do any grading for a day because they were busy showing their little squirts around. As long as I bring someone I can get away with slacking off for a day.” He waves a hand at Tony’s surprised look, “It’s not like the students give a shit either way though. If they had it their way I’d never grade anything, that way they wouldn’t have to face the bright red Fs on their papers when I hand them back.”

“You’re secretly diabolically evil,” Tony decides. No one raises any objections. “One question though, what do you do instead of show Clint around, seeing as he obviously doesn’t care.”
“Very astute of you,” Clint chirps before stuffing a handful of fries into his mouth. “I couldn’t care less what Bruce does for a living.”

“Thanks,” Bruce says dryly. “And don’t talk with your mouth full. It’s disgusting.”

Clint wisely refrains from making a “See food!” joke and shovels more fries into his mouth instead. To his right, Loki has commandeered all of the happy meal toys and is lining them up for some sort of parade. “That doesn’t answer my question,” Tony points out, just a bit distracted by the happy meal toy parade that Loki starts marching past him.

“Clint comes here for the desk,” Bruce states blandly and Tony blinks, clearly confused.

“The . . . Desk?”

“Neither of us have one like this our apartments,” Bruce explains steadily, patting the heavy wooden desk they’re seated around with fondness. “It’s wide, sturdy, and easy to clean.”

Realization dawns on Tony with that last comment and he leaps back from the desk like it’s on fire. Loki follows close behind, toys gathered up and out of harms way.

Clint absolutely cackles, nearly falling out of his chair as he tips his head back and howls with laughter. “I assume you two can find your own way home then?” Bruce asks good-naturedly.

“Yep, definitely, bye,” Tony says as he drags Loki with him out of the office, “Next year remind me not to let curiosity and boredom get the better of me, because I’m never coming to work with you again.” He slams the door shut behind him. Clint’s laughter can still be heard through the door.

When Tony and Loki’s hurried retreating footsteps have disappeared Clint takes a long swig of his soda before saying, “Well then, professor, what should we do now?”

Even Tony’s hands over his ears from where he’s walking away from the office as fast as possible can’t block out the noise of Clint’s excited whoop. “Gross, gross, gross,” Tony mutters.

“Next time, don’t ask,” Loki chides beside him, McDonalds toys clutched against his chest.
The One With The Pie

Chapter Summary

This is the story of how Tony skips Christmas, spends the day sulking at Pepper’s place, and becomes the very first person ever to make Steve’s shit-list.

Chapter Notes

The Friends moment that this chapter was originally vaguely based on sort of became a metaphor, which then evolved into the biggest angst ball ever.

It starts because Tony doesn’t show up for Christmas.

This actually comes as a surprise seeing as Tony’s the one who usually makes them all get rip-roaring drunk before opening presents so that the night usually ends in too many giggles, a lot of falling over, and someone hugging the toilet like it’s the only thing keeping them alive (That someone is usually Bruce). But this year when Clint and Bruce parade into his room to fetch him for the yearly craziness and festivities, Tony is nowhere to be found.

Unsurprisingly, Steve freaks the fuck out. Normally this wouldn’t be a problem, Tony’s his own man and can take care of himself. Except that they all remember the year after he broke up with Pepper and how that particular Christmas had gone (AKA, the night that ended with Thor and Steve finding Tony passed out in a dumpster. Really?). Steve has a right to worry, with that particular Christmas in mind.

Luckily, Pepper calls at just after noon to inform them that Tony is not wandering around the city in a drunken stupor, and is rather sulking at her apartment.

This is the story of how Tony spends most of Christmas day with his head in Pepper’s lap (and Happy does not get jealous because Happy is some sort of freaking saint), and succeeds in pissing off not only every person who spent a few hours worrying about where he was, but Steve as well. He pisses off Steve.

He pisses off Steve.

“It’s like the anti-Christ has risen,” Natasha says to Clint when Steve starts to storm around the room after Pepper hangs up.

“Considering that it’s Christmas, that is some extreme dramatic irony,” Clint hums in return. Unsurprisingly, neither of them appear too alarmed.

This is the story of how Tony skips Christmas, spends the day sulking at Pepper’s place, and becomes the very first person ever to make Steve’s shit-list.

OoOoOoOoO
“You’re being ridiculous,” Pepper tells him a little at close to two in the afternoon.

Tony grumbles something into her leg before retorting, “I am not. I’ve spent nearly two months now trying to emotionally distance myself from Steve, and so far it hasn’t worked. If anything, I’ve made it worse. He keeps making disappointed faces at me, Pep! Disappointed faces!”

Pepper rolls her eyes. “So the solution for this problem was to skip out on Christmas?”

“Yes.”

“You’re going to have to go back home sometime, though,” she says and winces at the way her voice rises with poorly concealed desperation. Tony can not stay here forever, that much she knows for sure, but she’d feel pretty bad if she chucked him out onto the street. “Man up,” She snaps before Tony can protests that, yes, he would like to stay there forever. “I never told you to try and turn yourself into a total stranger to Steve, I told you to try and be friends. Friends don’t ditch Christmas get-togethers.”

“But-”

“Butts are for sitting,” Pepper chides and Tony is silenced instantly because what? “No buts.”

“But Pep-”

“I said no buts.”

“No buts, no cuts, no alligator guts!” Happy sing-songs as he passes them on his way to the kitchen with the yet-to-be-cooked Christmas ham. Tony can’t help but laugh.

A comfortable silence settles and Pepper runs her fingers through Tony’s hair, smiling when he sighs deeply and closes his eyes. “I know this is hard for you,” she tells him softly and Tony’s eyebrows furrow together just slightly, “but you’re doing the right thing.”

Tony keeps his eyes closed when he whispers, just loud enough for Pepper and Pepper alone to hear, “I just wish it was easier.”

OoOoOoOoO

“Apologize to Steve,” is the last thing Pepper says to him before Tony leaves. It’s not so much a request as a blatant order, and when Tony looks like he might object Pepper gives him a glare that would make most men burst into flames. Thus, he reluctantly agrees to do as she says. He knows if he doesn’t Natasha will just rat on him, so there’s no point in pretending that he talked to Steve when he actually didn’t, either.

In the past half-a-dozen weeks or so, Tony has become rather good at putting on a patent poker face in front of Steve. It’s not much different from the ones he uses at business meetings, and after awhile he can slip it into place with an unnerving amount of ease. If he smiles, if he chuckles, if he keeps his tone and body language light, passing of the façade of being okay stops being a chore and becomes a habit.

So it’s habit that makes him smile when he knocks on Steve’s door, ready to apologize because breaking a promise to Pepper is a death sentence.

It’s instinctual for that perfectly crafted mask to fall when Sharon Carter answers the door.

“You’re Tony Stark, right?” she says as soon as she answers and Tony just gapes at her.
“Um . . . Yes,” he says when he remembers to pick his jaw up off the floor. “Am I interrupting something?” He resists the strong urge to try and peek around her to see if Steve’s hiding somewhere inside. Tony wipes the thoughts of naked Steve and just-been-sexed Steve and does-that-blush-go-all-the-way-down Steve out of his head and pointedly starts to stare at the ceiling. “I can go, if I’m intruding.”

Sharon smirks, actually smirks at him and Tony balks for a second, eyes snapping back to her in his surprise. “You’re exactly the guy I wanted to see, actually.”

Tony swallows nervously, “Er . . . What?”

“Come inside,” she moves towards the kitchen and leaves the door open behind her, adding, “That’s an order, not a request,” over her shoulder with a flourish of her hand to beckon him in. Tony’s stomach sinks with dread. He could run now, really, it wouldn’t be too hard. Just retreat across the hall to the safety of his own apartment or even run all the way back to Pepper’s place. However, the look Sharon gives him when he takes half a step back makes him freeze. “Don’t think I can’t chase you down and tackle you into the floor,” She warns, and Tony finds that he believes her.

Hesitantly, he steps inside and shuts the door behind him. Sharon bustles around the kitchen with a bottle of wine in one hand. “Glasses are on the top right,” Tony says when she starts haphazardly opening cupboard doors. Sharon blinks at him, something unreadable in her gaze, and grabs two thin stemmed wine glasses. “Is Steve here?” Tony asks while she pours the drinks.

“He’s out,” Sharon says absently. “Said he needed to cool off.” She raises an eyebrow when Tony appears faintly surprised by this, “You really ticked him off, Mr. Stark, didn’t you know? Natasha told me he was a real treat to sit with during the festivities. I guess it ended as a pretty sad excuse for Christmas.”

Tony narrows his eyes. “Natasha called you, then?” he guesses because of fucking course. He knows Natasha does what’s best for the rest of them, but he’s seriously starting to get alarmed by her connections. Sharon nods and hands him one of the glasses before gesturing towards the table. “Sit,” she orders. Tony sits. “Now tell me,” Sharon intones as she takes a seat across from him, swirling the wine around in her glass, “why you seem to find it necessary to upset Steve?”

For a moment, Tony just stares. “That . . . That wasn’t the purpose of-”

“Maybe it wasn’t the intentional purpose,” Sharon says, hands folded under her chin, “but it was the outcome.”

Tony grits his teeth and snaps, “I’m doing this for him!” before he can stop himself.

Sharon purses her lips, “Really? Because from here it looks like a pretty piss poor attempt at whatever it is. If you were really doing this for him he wouldn’t be upset.” Tony looks away. “He talks about you, you know,” she says then, softly, and Tony’s eyes focus on her again in astonishment. “He worries, he thinks that whatever this is between you, this avoidance and fighting, he thinks it’s his fault.”

“I told him it wasn’t,” Tony whispers.

“I’m pretty sure that when they notice someone is blatantly avoiding them most people are going to blame themselves, Mr. Stark, regardless of what the other party claims.”

Tony sighs, pinches the bridge of his nose, and takes a sip of his drink. “I’m going to get over it,” he
says aloud, “Soon, hopefully. And then we can go back to . . . Normal.” He pauses then, realizing that he’s unsure of what normal would be. Tony Stark is someone who flirts instinctively, and he’s grasping at straws as to whether or not he ever did anything else. The first day he thinks, he’d hated Steve. It had taken Thor’s insistent invitations to join the rest of them to hang out across the hall before Tony finally gave in. But that wasn’t normal, that was unsteady antagonism.

He thinks he remembers a night not long after that when Clint had tried to teach Thor and Steve how to play poker. It had been late spring, before they’d become properly acquainted with Extremely Angry Guy and his Extremely Attractive Female Friend, less than a week after Bucky had shipped out for another tour of duty. The memories are hazy with alcohol, but Tony can recall Steve’s small, broken smile when he’d finally won a hand. Had that been normal? If anything, it had been the first time Tony had taken the time to actually look at Steve, to map out the cracks underneath the boy scout smile. Maybe that was what normal was, keeping yourself at arm’s distance but still being able to understand a person.

Sharon clears her throat and Tony starts. “You zoned out pretty good there,” she says, “I’d ask if you were already drunk, but you’ve hardly touched your wine.”

“I’ve been pretty vigilant at trying to drink less these past couple of years,” he admits.

“Because of Steve?”

“What does it matter to you?” Tony asks darkly. It’s unsettling how easily she can read him, and he tenses his fingers around the base of his glass.

Sharon rolls her eyes, “I care about him too, you know, that’s why it matters. I’m trying to figure you out, Mr. Stark, trying to understand why you insist on hurting him.”

“I’m not-”

“You are.”

Tony balks, stares at her open-mouthed. “Then tell me how to stop,” he chokes out.

Sharon smiles, “That’s something you’ll need to figure out for yourself, I think. I wouldn’t know, I’ve only gone on a few dates with him.” She waves a hand, “I’m not even sure if that’s what you’d call official. He gets so flustered at just even giving me a kiss goodnight.” The smallest of frowns crosses her face, “I wonder if that’s just how he is normally, or if it’s because of Aunt Peggy.” Tony’s eyebrows climb into his hairline and Sharon sniffs. “I don’t want him to just see me as a replacement, you know. But at the same time I almost feel like I can’t leave him alone. What would Aunt Peggy say if I left him alone?”

The oven beeps and Sharon rises from her chair before Tony can find something to say in return. “I’m not sure that I would be, though,” she says quietly as she goes to the oven and pulls a steaming pie from it, setting it on the counter to cool, “Leaving him alone, I mean. I met a lot of his friends today, good people who care about him and look after him. He’s not alone. And you, too,” she adds, “He told me about how you were the one who spiffed him up for Aunt Peggy on The Second. I shouldn’t worry because, obviously, he’s not alone.”

“But he is lonely,” Tony whispers, and knows it to be true. That part, he thinks, is his fault. “The greatest loneliness is being surrounded by people and yet having no one to turn to.”

“Is that what he had you for?”

“I don’t know anymore,” Tony says, honestly, because he really doesn’t. In a way, knowing that he
was probably the person Steve confided in most makes him feel like he wasn’t useless, like he’d actually been Steve’s friend. The niggling thought of, “But you were just a confession box, nothing more,” makes itself known at the back of his mind all the same.

“Apple pie?” Sharon offers, “Steve popped it in the oven before he stormed off.”

Tony eyes the pie, “Give me half and I’ll be on my way. I have some work to do.”

Obligingly, Sharon cuts the pie in half before she proceeds to hold both slices at eye level and examine them. “You get the smaller half,” she says and holds out the slice to him that looks exactly the same as the one in her other hand. “Everyone was going on and on about Steve’s pies today and I’ve never had one.”

Tony takes his piece and tries not to roll his eyes. “Fine. Are you done trying to force me to bare my soul to you? Can I go?”

“You may go,” she relents.

Tony is not even halfway across the hall when he hears a muffled shout of, “Too hot!” a clatter, a splat, and a flurry of curses. He pokes his head back into Steve’s apartment and smirks.

“What happened?”

Sharon glares at him over the mess of ruined pie which is currently splattered all over the kitchen floor. “I took a bite before it had cooled and then knocked the plate on the ground. What does it look like.” Tony tips his head back and laughs while she scowls at him.

“Oh, don’t look at me like that,” He chuckles and holds out his half of the pie, “It’s really funny, you can’t tell me it’s not. Here.”

She stares at the offered pie, “What?”

“Pie,” Tony smiles, “You said you’d never have it before, and it would be a shame if you missed out just because of a stupid slip of the hand.”

Sharon takes it, eyes wide, and says, “You’re not what I thought you were.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t know.” She sets the pie aside and studies him, eyebrows furrowed together. “You still have a few hours,” she informs him after a pause, “‘Till Christmas is over, I mean. Plenty of time to make up for being a dick.” Before Tony can respond she closes the door in his face and leaves him standing, rather flabbergasted, in the hall by himself.

OoOoOoOoO

“When two people love each other very much . . .”

That’s how The Talk starts for most people, isn’t it. Parents take the time to sit their children down and tell them about the rather disturbing mechanics of “Love” and the kids giggle and become increasingly more confused and horrified by the minute. It’s more vague, a description of the dance steps without the music, than it is informative in most cases.

No one ever takes the time to tell you what love is. Tony thinks there should be a chart outlining the steps to it, the one two three, sashay it takes before you find yourself falling. “When you love
someone very much,” they say, but no one ever tells you what love is.

In reality there are three different L words. Tony’s been acquainted with all of them.

The first one is Lust. It’s the instant, instinctual attraction that in Tony’s experience is the most common of the three. Easy to curb, easy to fulfill, lust the simplest L word. He fell in lust with Steve the first day they met, through the cloud of rage that had instantly settled between them, he’d had the faint thought that went something like, “I’d ride that like it was the last horse at the rodeo,” before he’d whip-lashed himself back to reality when Steve had said, “Big man in a monkey-suit, take that away and what are you?”

The second L word is Like. It’s a childish word, equivalent to Pepper’s word choice of “Crush,” but it’s not untrue. Liking someone is different from lust. It was the point where Tony stopped being angry and had started noticing that Steve wasn’t the perfect soldier Tony had expected him to be. Liking started at a poker game, and was refusing to be squashed out no matter how much space Tony put between them.

The last word is Love. Tony has only really fallen in love once in his life. He remembers the moment, the time, the space between breaths and dance steps where Pepper had laughed when he twirled her, and the second he realized he couldn’t live without her. Love is the hardest, he knows. Love is what settles in the air when Bruce, Clint, and Natasha curl up on the sofa together. Love is the flowers Steve leaves on Peggy’s grave. Love is the way Jane smiles when Thor tells her about his family’s stories of the stars. Love is the slow fade, the after burn, of Loki’s jealousy. Love was the way Tony’s heart had fluttered when Pepper laughed.

It would be easy, he thinks, to map out the one two three, the dance steps before falling. Explanatory, informative, enlightening for the child who is told “When you love someone very much,” rather than a description of what love is.

Tony wishes someone had described it for him.

He wishes someone had told him that it wasn’t easy.

He wishes someone had told him the right and wrong way to fall, the ups and downs, or just even what to do or say to stop himself from tumbling head over heels.

Tonight, he starts with “Hey, Steve.”

He’s waiting in front of the coffee shop, hands stuffed in his pockets and his eyes scanning back and forth along the sidewalk for Steve’s return. “Don’t be a dick,” he mutters just seconds before he spots Steve, “She told me not to be a dick.”

“Hey, Steve,” seems like a pretty un-dick-ish way to start.

Steve stops, his eyes finding Tony’s as he passes. “Hey,” he says in return. Tony winces at how hollow his voice sounds. “What happened to you?”

Tony shrugs, “I could be asking the same of you. Have you been wandering around the city all night?” Steve looks away and Tony shakes his head, “Doesn’t matter, come here, I have something for you.” Slowly, Steve takes a step forward, and another, a third, until Tony can reach out and grab the sleeve of his sweater. “This way, come on,” Tony smiles as he drags Steve over to the curb. “I got you a Christmas gift. Well, by got I mean built, I’ve been working on it for a few weeks.”

Steve inhales as they come up beside a motorcycle parked right up against the curb. “Tony . . .”
“Don’t,” Tony interrupts, a hand falling to Steve’s shoulder, “Tell me ‘You shouldn’t have,’ because I wanted to, okay? I built it with you in mind, so it’s yours.”

A small, huff of a laugh escapes Steve, “I wasn’t going to chide you, Tony. I was going to ask if it was road ready right now.”

Tony grins, “What do you take me for?” Steve approaches the motorcycle and runs a curious hand over the handles. “Just promise me you’ll wear a helmet,” he warns before he turns away. Tony starts when he feels a hand on his arm, pulling him back.

“Aren’t you coming?” Steve asks, and Tony’s heart skips a beat.

“What?”

“For a ride, let’s go,’ Steve smiles.

If Tony were to write a book on love, he’d include a chapter about when to say no, and then he’d leave the pages blank. It’s hard to write about something you don’t know.

“Okay,” he breathes.

The bike is the very definition of perfection, Tony would know, he built it himself. It’s based on crayon sketches and sleepless nights where he tears down more bricks than he stacks, desperate to build up a crumbling wall between himself and Steve and knowing he’s failing. “Weren’t you mad at me?” he asks when Steve puts one of the helmets in his hands.

“Still am,” Steve admits, and Tony swallows, “But it’s Christmas, so what the heck.”

“I’m sorry,” Tony blurts out and Steve pauses in the middle of putting his helmet on.

“I know.”

In Tony’s book on love, the chapter about when to say no is full of blank pages. The chapter about what to do when someone forgives you for things you feel don’t deserve forgiveness is much the same. There might be a few scratched words such as, “Don’t fall,” scribbled in margins of otherwise empty pages, followed by a short, “Don’t do this to him,” and a trembling, “You’re breaking your own heart.” Tony knows the words all too well, wrote them there with his own hand across the corners of his mind, but when Steve laughs, a bright, air-like sound that makes Tony feel like the ground isn’t enough to hold him anymore, those words might as well be in a foreign language, stop signs in characters he can’t read and thus ignores.

“Where do you want to go?” Steve asks as he climbs onto the bike, reaching out a hand to pull Tony up behind him.

“Anywhere,” Tony says.

They take off.

In a road trip, years ago, Tony and Clint hung out of the windows and pointed at people on motorcycles blazing past them. They kept score of how many girls drove versus guys, how many had passengers, how many wore helmets, and how many passengers looked too uncomfortable to hold on to the driver. Tony always wondered how they didn’t fall off, hands behind them rather than clinging to the rider in front. It seemed precarious at best, dangerous at its worst. When Steve kicks the motorcycle into gear and pulls out into the street with a pleased hum, buildings and streetlights already starting to blur, Tony knows that the passengers were fucking crazy for trying to balance
without the driver’s support.

The bike lurches as Steve zips it around a corner and Tony fumbles for something to hold onto, something, anything that is not Steve because if he gives in to that urge, there is definitely no going back. He starts to tip off to the side when Steve takes a hard right and feels a hand against his side.

“Don’t fall off,” Steve scolds, one hand reaching behind him to keep Tony on the seat.

Tony bats the hand away, determined to keep his some distance between them until they brake at a stoplight and he jolts forward, arms instinctively closing around Steve’s waist and head thunking down against Steve’s shoulder. “Jesus Christ,” he hisses, “How is it that you drive cars like an old lady and then use a motorcycle like a freaking *podracer*?!”

Steve laughs again and the light turns green.

Tony tightens his grip and tries not to shriek like a complete girl. For the most part, this effort is not successful, and he can hear Steve laughing at him over the wind.

Tony fell in love with Pepper Potts in between dance steps, halfway through some sort of very bad clash of the Cha-Cha Slide and the tango. (Contrary to popular imaginings, Tony is not good at dancing.) He remembers the moment the same way he remembers the first time he saw a shooting star, the first and only time his father praised him, the day in kindergarten he’d held out his hand and asked Rhodey to be his friend, and the last time he saw his mother smile. They’re precious things, tucked close to his heart, and it’s been a long, long time since he’s added on to them.

“It’s snowing!” Steve exclaims above the roar of the engine as they race down a nearly empty road.

Tony fell in love with Pepper Potts in between dance steps.

He falls in love with Steve Rogers on the back of a motorcycle in the last few minutes of a chilly Christmas night. Tony tightens his arms around Steve’s waist, settles his head more permanently against the back of Steve’s shoulder, and sucks in a shaking breath as the first few snowflakes melt on his cheeks. He can feel Steve’s heartbeat, steady and strong, through his chest where they’re pressed together, can feel the rise and fall of his lungs as he breathes and he never wants to let go.

The wall, so carefully constructed for nearly eight weeks, comes crashing down.

“You alright?” Steve calls back to him and Tony knows he can feel the electric thrum of his heart, the rise of panic in the beats and the settle of realization in between.

“I will be,” Tony says softly.

There would be sixty-nine chapters in a book about love written by Tony Stark, simply because he’s immature like that. Half of its pages would be blank because there are some things, many things, that he doesn’t know, can’t explain. Maybe no one can explain those things, and maybe that’s why parents don’t tell their children what love is.

Or maybe they don’t tell them to spare them the pain of it.

Steve’s still laughing when they come back to coffee shop, long, wheezing breaths and Tony can’t help but smile in turn. “That was great!” Steve says, head tipped back towards the sky where snow still drifts down on them. He catches a snowflake on his tongue and Tony shakes his head. “We’ll have to do that again sometime,” he adds.

Tony thinks he should get a pat on the back for how well he holds his smile in place, and two for
how his voice doesn’t waver when he replies, “Don’t you think you should take Sharon out on it? She seems like the type who would love that sort of thing.”

“Oh, yeah,” Steve says, blinks as if dazed, and frowns a bit. “But . . . didn’t you have fun, Tony?”

“More than you will ever know,” Tony answers, and it’s the most honest he’s been with Steve in weeks. “But motorcycles aren’t my thing, really.” Steve’s smile wavers, uncertain and confused, and Toy gestures up towards the building above him with a hand. “She’s waiting for you, you know. I think there’s a rule about keeping a girl waiting.”

“Oh, uh right,” Steve says and heads towards the door. He stops short and flashes one last smile back at Tony, “Thanks for the bike. I still expect a proper apology later though. You can’t buy all of my forgiveness.”

“But I can buy some of it?” Tony grins.

“Obviously.”

The winter night air whips up after the door closes behind Steve, suddenly ten degrees colder, and the snow clings icy-wet to Tony’s coat now as it falls. He thinks, numbly, that if he wrote a book about love the first chapter would be about the little flutters of the heart, the differences between Lust, Like, and actual Love, and the warm thrum of another’s heartbeat on a December night. It would be a chapter about promises and hopes, dreams and wishes. The pages after it would be empty with confusion and the details no one knows, or maybe no one wants to say, and would be scribbled with handwritten warnings meant to be ignored.

If Tony Stark wrote a book about love, the last chapter would be the shortest. It might be because he’s still learning, but the more likely reason is because there’s not much to say. He could write of how those promises and hopes and dreams and wishes still glow, and how he could reach out and catch them if he had the heart to try, but doesn’t. He could tell of the sting of December nights when there’s nothing left to hold on to, and the feeling of knowing that the right choice has been made, even through the haze of anguish that overwhelms that knowledge.

The last chapter of a book on love written by Tony Stark would be titled How To Let Go.
The One Where Tony Hates PBS

Chapter Summary

Easy and better aren't synonyms.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Steve wants you to go riding with him,” Loki says from the doorway of Tony’s room.

“I’m working,” Tony whispers into his pillow.

When Loki returns from relaying the message he crawls into bed beside Tony and rests his chin on Tony’s shoulder. “You figured it out, didn’t you,” he says, and it’s not a question. Tony mumbles incoherently into his pillow and Loki sighs and snakes his arms around the older man’s waist. “I think it’s my duty to inform you that you’re being extremely stupid,” he informs, a little too lightly, and Tony groans.

“Shut up.”

“You have one week to get over yourself, Stark, or I’m letting the birds loose in your room.”

Tony rolls over to glare up at Loki’s smug grin. “You wouldn’t.”

“Oh yes I would. And I’d let them poop on your bed.”

“You’re evil.”

“It’s startling to me that you haven’t noticed this fact before.”

Since Loki is true to his word, Tony wakes up a week later with a duck on his chest and a chicken trying to make a nest in his hair.

The scream of rage can be heard all the way down in the coffee shop.

OoOoOoOoOoO

Eventually, Tony manages to drag himself out of bed and across the hall. It’s not his wisest decision by far, but he knows that if he stays in his room any longer Loki’s going to do something drastic.

“You look like a homeless person,” Steve says when Tony walks in. Tony just waves a hand at him and mutters something unintelligible before moving to stand in front of the coffee machine. There’s a long, uncomfortable silence while Tony stares dazedly at the coffee pot and Steve watches him, his worried look slowly shifting to fond amusement. “You have to plug it in and turn it on, Tony,” he laughs.

“I know that!” Tony snaps in return. Steve rolls his eyes. He does as directed and proceeds to glare at the coffee machine as if it has somehow personally offended him. It’s a bad idea, he thinks, for him to even be here in the first place. But if he has to weigh his options of Repress Feelings All
Afternoon versus Spend Day Fending Off Birds he’ll always choose the former.

Tony looks up when Steve bursts out laughing from the sofa. The TV is flickering soft colors, but Tony’s too out of it to recognize the program. All the same, it strikes him as familiar.

“What are you watching?”

Steve looks startled for a heartbeat before he fumbles for the remote to change the channel, “Nothing,” he tries. Tony raises an eyebrow. “You’ll make fun of me,” Steve says and Tony frowns as he pours himself a cup of coffee.

“Considering that I live with Thor and Loki, who thrive off of bad Disney Channel shows, whatever it is probably won’t surprise me in the slightest. Unless it’s Barney. If you were watching Barney, I will definitely mock you for life.” He flops down onto the couch beside Steve and takes the remote from him before Steve can protest, hitting the recall button. Steve covers his face with his hands.

“It just reminds me of being a kid, okay?” he whispers when Tony grows quiet while the TV program flickers to life in front of them.

Tony glances at him and then back to the screen where Elmo is laying out colored letter blocks in front of the camera. “No, I get that. I’m not judging you for it.” He tosses the remote in Steve’s direction, smiling slightly when the blond practically juggles the thing in his efforts to catch it. “I just hate Sesame Street,” he adds when Steve has settled again.

Steve proceeds to look horrified by this revelation. “What? Why?”

“All of PBS, actually,” Tony clarifies with a wave of his hand. “It just brings up bad memories.” The silence that settles is unnerving, and Tony can feel Steve’s eyes boring into him without shifting his own from where he keeps them pointedly fixed on the screen. Apparently, falling in love with someone means you have the tendency to accidentally spill your heart out to them. Whoops. The silence stretches and Tony fidgets in his seat until he decides he can’t take it any more and blurts out, “I wrote a letter to Elmo once and he didn’t write back!”

He can’t tell if Steve’s sharp inhale of breath is the prelude to laughter or a sympathetic sigh. It appears to be neither, however, and Tony tries not to have a heart attack when Steve’s hand lands on Tony’s shoulder. “You wrote a letter to Elmo . . .” Steve says slowly and Tony lets his head fall into his hands with embarrassment.

“I was six.”

“What did you write to him about?”

Now this, this is new. Tony tenses for a heartbeat before forcing himself to look up at Steve, knowing he must appear astounded by the inquiry. “What?” he can’t help but whisper.

Steve smiles, “What did you write to him?” His hand is still on Tony’s shoulder, and Tony can feel the gentle tightening of his fingers when he speaks, the soft reassurance and Tony is so f*cked.

“Well, I . . . I asked him if . . . If he was always alone on the show because his father was busy too . . . .” It comes out as the barest of breaths, a horse and broken sound and Tony wants to scoop the words back up as soon as they’ve fallen out of him, to make sure they’re never heard again because he’s never told anyone that story. He expects to see sympathy in Steve’s eyes as he says it, fears the pity he knows most people give him when he talks about things like this, that’s why he doesn’t talk about them. Instead, Steve’s hand clenches against his shoulder, just slightly, a comforting tight grip, and his eyebrows furrow together with something other than pity, his gaze growing hard and cold.
“Your father-” he starts, tone low and dangerous. Tony cuts him off with a hand to Steve’s chest.

“Don’t. It’s not a big deal, okay? A lot of fathers don’t have time for their kids. Besides, he’s dead now. There’s nothing I can do about it.”

Steve’s eyes narrow. “It is a big deal, Tony. And Elmo didn’t write back?” He casts a furious glare towards the television and Tony can’t help but let out a huff of a laugh.

“He sent me a keychain?” he tries, but Steve’s expression only shifts to disappointment. “Again, I was six, Steve. Elmo doesn’t have time to write back to every sad little kid. They sent me a keychain to ensure my continued viewership, and I shouldn’t have expected anything else.”

“Viewership?” Steve asks, clearly confused.

“Well yeah, you know, they’re not gonna just send some rugrat a keychain without expecting something in return,” Tony scoffs, “that’s not how the world works.”

Tony should have seen the hurt-puppy face coming, really, he should have. But he doesn’t, and when Steve sends said look his way it’s like a punch right in the gut. “People do good things sometimes, Tony,” Steve tells him, and it’s not just the hurt-puppy face, because Tony can see that, “I am disappointed by your world views,” lurking in the corners of Steve’s eyes. Tony scowls.

“People do good things to feel the gratification of doing good things,” he argues. “When you do a good thing, don’t you always take a moment to think, ‘Ah, I feel good about doing this good thing’?” Tony can’t tell if Steve’s silence is born out of confusion, or agreement, so he continues regardless. “If you get any sort of happiness out of it, then it’s not selfless at all. There’s no such thing as a selfless good deed, Steve, everyone is looking to get something out of it. The people on Sesame Street wanted my viewership, so they sent me a cheap plastic keychain. It wasn’t out of any sort of kindness.”

There’s consideration in the slowly forming frown on Steve’s face. “That can’t be true. I’m sure there are a lot of things people do that . . .” He pauses and Tony smirks in triumph.

“Can’t think of anything, can you?”

“I will,” Steve assures him, “Give me some time and I’ll definitely think of something.”

“You’re just horrified to find that most of your do-goody life wasn’t as selfless as you thought it was,” Tony chuckles. Steve glares at him.

OoOoOoOoO

When Tony wanders back to his and Thor’s apartment he finds Thor sitting on the floor with something in his hands, looking way too fascinated for anyone’s liking. “What’cha got there, big guy?” he asks as he peers over Thor’s shoulder.

Thor glances up at him and says, quite loudly, “A magical device that the fine lady Jane has given me!” The magical device, to Tony’s amusement, happens to be a Magic Eight Ball. Thor holds it out to him to inspect, and Tony keeps himself from laughing, if only because he wants to see how this plays out.

“Oh, yes,” Tony says seriously, “You shouldn’t mess with these things, they’re quite powerful.”

“How so?” Thor asks and Tony barely keeps from snorting at how serious he looks about it.
“You ask the Magic Eight Ball a question, and the answer it gives you is always true.” He shakes the toy and says, as dramatically as possible, “Oh Magic Eight Ball, should I spend the rest of the day sleeping?” He flips it over and holds it out for Thor to read.

“You ask the Magic Eight Ball a question, and the answer it gives you is always true.” He shakes the toy and says, as dramatically as possible, “Oh Magic Eight Ball, should I spend the rest of the day sleeping?” He flips it over and holds it out for Thor to read.

“The word is yes!” Thor exclaims, and a little hiccup of laughter escapes Tony before he can stop it.

Struggling to keep his expression serious, Tony nods. “Then so it shall be,” he declares and hands the toy back to Thor before taking his leave and closing the bedroom door behind him.

Thor watches him go with an odd expression before turning back to the Magic Eight Ball and speaking a low, grim, “I see . . .”

OoOoOoOoOoO

“Still being a grump?” Loki asks when he flops down on the bed next to Tony a few hours later.

“I don’t know, did you bring those stupid birds in here with you?” Tony growls.

Loki smirks, “Thor and the birds are currently eating peanut butter in the kitchen, because a certain children’s toy told him to do it.”

Tony laughs, “Success! I wonder how long it will take him to realize that you aren’t actually required to do what the Magic Eight Ball says?”

“Far too long,” Loki says with a shake of his head. He leans over Tony then, hands splayed out across the mattress on either side of Tony’s shoulders. “Did you actually go out into the world today, Stark?”

“Does across the hall count as ‘Out into the world’?” Tony grins, and Loki purses his lips in disapproval. “I didn’t think so. Tell you what, I’ll go out tomorrow. Go for a walk or something.”

“Will you really?” The disbelief is clear in Loki’s tone.

Tony shrugs. “Probably. Steve’s trying to prove to me that there’s such thing as a selfless good deed and wants to do so by making me walk around Central Park. I hate the park,” he adds as an afterthought. To his astonishment, Loki frowns. “What’s that look for? I thought you wanted me to be out and about and stuff?”

Loki’s frown deepens. “There is such thing as a selfless good deed,” he says shortly and Tony balks with surprise.

“What? No there isn’t. Everyone gets something out of everything they do so—”

“Selfless good deeds exist,” Loki repeats. Tony’s eyes widen as he leans down until his lips brush along Tony’s ear. “I’ve seen them,” he whispers. When Tony finds the willpower to repress the full body shiver that courses through him and blink his world back into focus, Loki’s smiling down at him, a strange, almost sad sort of smile.

Tony swallows, “What’s that look for?”

Loki shakes his head and glances towards the closed door, eyes closing as he sighs. “Thor’s gone out,” he informs Tony after a moment.

“Is that an invitation?” Tony breathes, hands already skimming over Loki’s spine.

“Yes.”
When Tony wakes up the other side of the bed is empty, and has long grown cold. It’s not a surprise, really, Loki usually disappears shortly after Tony falls asleep. Something about the icy feel of the sheets under his fingertips makes Tony’s stomach sink, though.

“Have you seen your brother today?” he asks Thor when he makes his way to the kitchen.

Thor doesn’t answer for a few seconds, as he’s busy stuffing an entire packet of Poptarts into his mouth, but once he swallows he says, “No, but do not worry. Loki always comes back.” The certainty of those words do very little to settle Tony’s rising unease, however. “But,” Thor goes on, as if sensing Tony’s concern, “I will ask the magical device.” Tony rolls his eyes, suddenly finding that the joke of the Magic Eight Ball isn’t as funny anymore when Thor picks it up from where it was sitting on the counter and gives it a hearty shake. “It has informed me that Loki will return,” he booms brightly after studying the answer.

Tony pats him on the shoulder before making his way back to his room to get dressed.

By the time Steve comes around knocking on the door at noon, Loki still hasn’t shown up. Thor has dashed off somewhere with his Magic Eight Ball, and the apartment is eerily silent. Tony leaves a note for Loki to call him on the magic erase board on the back of the door before he leaves.

“You gonna prove to me that there’s such thing as a selfless good deed today?” he asks when he meets Steve in the hallway.

Steve nods resolutely, and tugs at Tony’s jacket sleeve without a word as they head down the stairs. The ride to Central Park is short, and Tony keeps his hands on the back of the motorcycle and tries not to fall off, but he doesn’t bat Steve’s hand away when the blond reaches back to keep him from toppling off when they brake too hard. “You drive like a crazy person, in case you didn’t hear me last time I told you,” Tony yells when they barely make a red light a few minutes later.

“I drive like a soldier,” Steve corrects wryly. Tony groans.

They stop for lunch at a little hotdog cart, which turns into a contest of who can eat the most sauerkraut on their food before getting sick. It’s a competition that leaves Tony laying on a park bench within a half hour while Steve throws bread at ducks.

“Giving bread to ducks is a good dead,” Steve says and Tony laughs.

“Giving bread to ducks is a way for city born people like us to claim that we have interacted with nature. And, also, bread makes ducks fat. Central Park is home to the fattest, most spoiled ducks in the world.” He waves a hand at Steve’s alarmed expression, as if somehow the fat ducks have been wronged by overfeeding (Tony’s sure that they’re very happy being fat). “Try again.”

Steve frowns. “What about when the working class give money to homeless people? Or charities?”

Tony shakes his head, “Is that the best you can do? Have you seen those charity commercials? Or those cardboard signs homeless people have? Those things are meant to wrench at your gut and make you feel guilty about not giving away your cash. So, thus, by giving away said cash, you’re freeing yourself from guilt.” He points an accusing finger at Steve, “Don’t tell me that isn’t it, because it would be a lie.”

Steve chucks an entire piece of bread into the pond as a response. Tony absolutely cackles.
“Is this what they call a ‘Double Date’?” Thor asks when he sits down with Jane across from Clint and Darcy at the coffee shop.

Darcy spits out her soda, “Oh, god, no. Clint just told me about your new Magic Eight Ball and I had to see this phenomena for myself.” Beside her, Clint flashes Thor an innocent smile and Thor’s eyebrows furrow in confusion.

“It is quite the phenomena indeed, Miss Darcy. The Magic Eight Ball predicts the future and knows the past.”

Darcy reaches for the thing when Thor produces it from his coat pocket, making grabby hands until he relinquishes it to her. “This thingy knows the past, huh? I’ve never heard that one before. Let’s give it a roll.” She shakes it high over her head and asks, unreasonably loud. “Did Clint wear women’s underwear for a week in high school because I dared him to?” Clint freezes halfway through a sip of coffee while Jane and Thor’s attention zeros in on the Magic Eight Ball. There’s a pause as Darcy rolls the toy over and reads. “It says yes.” She leers.

Clint swallows and looks away.

Jane snatches the Eight Ball away from Darcy and shakes it, “Well obviously this thing does know the past, so let’s ask the real question that’s on our minds.” She shakes it harder and grins at Clint, “Oh, Magic Eight Ball, when Clint wore lady panties in high school because Darcy dared him to, did he like it?” Clint’s eyes widen, and they all lean over the table to peer at the answer as Jane flips the ball over.

"Definitely," it reads. Clint chokes on his coffee and Darcy slaps him on the back in between her howls of laughter.

Tony messes with the collar of his coat as they walk, trying to block the midwinter gusts from his neck and failing. “What about . . . Bees?” Steve asks. Tony stares at him.

“Bees?”

Steve nods, “Yeah, bees. Like when you let them sting you.”

Tony flounders for a minute before choking out, “You let bees sting you?” and then promptly has to put his hands on his knees to keep himself from falling over laughing.

“I don’t want to kill them by swatting them away!” Steve protests, like letting bees sting you is something that’s completely normal. Tony’s practically gasping for air, chest heaving as he laughs, and laughs, and laughs until Steve has to put a hand on his back to keep him standing. “It’s not funny,” he pouts as Tony wipes away tears.

“That is, I kid you not, the best thing I’ve ever heard. But I hate to say that your efforts are for not, since bees die after they sting people.” Steve looks, as expected, completely horrified by this news and Tony adds, “Also, letting them sting you is just an act of avoiding the guilt of killing one. Which failed seeing as they died anyways.”

“Do whips and chains excite Clint?”
“He’s . . . Part of some weird threesome that includes Natasha,” Darcy points out when Jane starts shaking the Magic Eight Ball for an answer, “That’s a silly question.”

Jane pauses to think about this, and then relents, “Probably. New question then, does Clint go commando?” She shakes the toy and Clint sinks down into his seat, his face bright red.

“Why are we asking these kinds of questions again?”

“For science!” Jane and Darcy say together, turning the Magic Eight Ball over between them and giggling at the answer. Clint slumps even lower.

Thor doesn’t look amused, however, and he reaches around Jane to pluck the toy out of her hands. “The powers of mystical devices like this should not be used for such frivolity. You should be asking it serious things.”

Darcy blinks at him, “Whether or not Clint goes commando is a very serious matter, Thor.”

“Nay, it is a silly one,” Thor chides, “When clearly you can tell from the lack of creases along Clint’s backside that the answer is yes.”

Clint thunks his head down on the table and weeps.

OoOoOoOo

They’ve circled the lake twice, and Steve still hasn’t come up with a valid example of a selfless good deed.

“When Bucky’s mother took me in after my mom died . . .”

“Close,” Tony says, feeling bad about having to outline this particular good deed for Steve, “But how do you think she would have felt if she’d let you fall into the horrors of foster care? I’m sure she loved like her own, Steve, but . . .”

Steve sighs, “Yeah, I get it. It’s always guilt, isn’t it. And doing a good deed relieves that guilt and makes the person feel happy because that burden isn’t on their shoulders.” He kicks at a rock on the sidewalk, looking too forlorn for Tony’s liking, and Tony throws his hands up in the air.

“Jesus Christ, you look like the kid who’s been told Santa doesn’t exist! I said there were no such thing as selfless good deeds, I didn’t say there was no such thing as good people!”

Steve frowns, “You might as well have,” he mutters.

Tony let’s out a noise that sounds vaguely like, “Haaarrggh,” in his frustration. “You’re a moron, Steve.” Steve sniffs in protest, and Tony grabs him by the shoulders before he can vocalize it. “No, shush, listen to me. You are a good person. You did all those things, and went through all those things, because you believe in the goodness in others, in this world. It was, granted, a rather stupid belief, but that’s why it makes you a good person.” He shakes Steve a little when Steve looks confused, “Steve, you asked what I wrote to Elmo. No one has ever asked that, not even my mom. And yes, I have no doubt that you did it out of curiosity, but you also did it because you honestly cared. Or,” he hesitates then, hands automatically falling to his sides, “I, uh, hope you cared.”

“Of course I care,” Steve whispers.

Tony starts, stares, and forces a smile, “See? That’s why you’re a good guy, Steve. There might not be such a thing as a good deed, but as long as there’s people like you, well, that’s pretty damn close.”
Steve flushes a little at the praise. “And what about you?” he asks.

“What about me?”

“You’re a good guy, too, Tony.”

Tony scoffs. “I think you have me confused for someone else there.”

“No,” Steve says slowly, surely, “I know you are.”

OoOoOoOoO

“A proper question,” Thor explains humorlessly, “Should be about things that are unknown to you at the time, things that you hope for in the future or decisions you feel you can not make without guidance.”

Clint has yet to look up from where his head has fallen against the table, and Darcy is rubbing his back apologetically while she and Jane listen to Thor with amused attention. “I hate all of you,” Clint hisses between Thor’s words.

“I know,” Darcy soothes without missing a beat. Clint groans.

“For example,” Thor continues, “A proper question would be something like this.” He gives the ball a few good shakes before asking, “Will the lady Jane and I be wed one day?” He flips the ball over and frowns.

“The future is foggy,” Jane reads between his fingers. “Well, the ball gets kudos for that one. The sentiment is cute, but you should never try and see that far ahead.” Thor pouts a bit at this, and she pats his arm. “If you look into the future you’re only spoiling the surprise.”

“I suppose . . .”

“Let’s ask more questions about Clint’s butt,” Darcy coos, reaching for the Magic Eight Ball and sending Thor an approving smile when he reluctantly gives it to her.

Clint slams his head against the table again and wishes Natasha or Bruce would call him so he’d have an excuse to go do something else.

OoOoOoOoOoO

The phone call comes just as the sun is starting to set. Tony rummages around in his pockets for a few seconds before he finds his cell. They’ve just returned from the park, and Steve is busy locking up his motorcycle when Tony takes the call.

“Hello?”

“You asked me to call.”

Tony falters for a second, confused, and then checks the caller ID. “Loki! I did, yeah, you were . . . Out.”

“So I was,” Loki hums, and Tony frowns at the oddly light sound to the words. “I’m afraid I’ll be out for some time yet.”

“What?”
“You’re wrong, you know,” Loki says, ignoring the question, “There is such a thing as a selfless good deed. I’ve seen it.”

Alarm courses through Tony. “Where are you?”

There’s a pause, and for a moment Tony fears that Loki has hung up. “The train station,” Loki says eventually.

“Grand Central?”

“What’s it to you?”

“Don’t do anything stupid,” Tony snaps and hangs up, arm already raised to hail a taxi.

Steve approaches him Tony grabs him by the collar of his coat, “Listen,” he says, “I’m sorry, for the millionth time, that I’ve been being a dick lately. But today was . . . Today was great. I haven’t laughed that hard in ages, and no one has ever told me I’m a good person. So, thank you for that. Now I have to go do the good person thing and stop Loki from being an idiot.”

“You’re . . . Welcome?” Steve tries. Tony grins at him an opens the door of the taxi that screeches up beside them only to be pulled back by Steve’s hand on his arm. “I meant what I said before, Tony, “You’ve said a lot of things, Steve,” Tony reminds with a chuckle.


Tony takes half a step back, reaching for the cab door again. “I know.”

“Do you?” Steve asks.

Tony practically trips into the taxi, and looks over his shoulder at Steve, “What?”

“Go help Loki,” Steve orders, and shuts the taxi door with a pat against the cab’s side, sending it off.

OoOoOoOoOoO

“There is no Platform 9 ¾ here,” Loki says when Tony finds him standing between platforms nine and ten.

Tony can’t even find it in him to be mad at the nonchalance of that comment, and simply stands there as he tries to regain his breath as subtly as possible, although the heaving of his chest still gives it away that he ran to get here. “What are you doing?” he asks once he can breathe properly again.

“The selfless thing,” Loki says. He hums and tilts his head to the side, studying Tony’s harried appearance. “You said that there is no such thing as a selfless good deed, but you were wrong.”

“How so?”

Loki laughs, a short, bitter sound. “How so? I suppose it is rather hard to see something such as selflessness in a mirror, but that’s not much of an excuse.” When Tony continues to look bemused, Loki sighs. “You, Stark. The selfless one, the king of the selfless good deed, is you.”

Tony’s jaw drops. “You’re a crazy person.”

“I accept that.”
“Why would it be me? I’m the most selfish, greedy man on the face of the planet.”

Loki smiles, “Yet you’re the one denying yourself what you want most in the world. There is no relief of guilt in that, Stark. There is only pain. Selflessness is going through what you are going through, knowing that you gain nothing from it.” He turns towards the tracks, his eyes fixed on the train that sits, waiting, not far away. “I could not do what you are doing, at least not at first, and I sought comfort in you instead of owning up to that fact. But enough is enough.”

“What are you talking about?” Tony whispers.

“You love him,” Loki says, “And you will love him until the end of your days, despite your efforts to do otherwise. I can not stay here and continue to interfere with that, and I can not reside with the brother who . . .” He scowls, anger clear in his eyes, “. . . Who sees me as nothing more than a sibling.”

“Um,” Tony starts, because he really doesn’t know what to say to any of that.

“If you can do the selfless thing, you, who claims that his life is built on greed, then so can I,” Loki goes on with certainty. “Leaving will solve many problems, and might knock some proper sense into you, at best.” He smiles then, the same, soft, sad smile he’d given Tony the night before.

That smile is the last straw.

“You’re not leaving,” Tony snaps, hand closing around Loki’s wrist. “And while I agree with a few of those things you said, you’re wrong. If you leave, what do you think Thor will do? No matter how much he loves Jane, you’re his brother, Loki. He’ll go looking for you.” He grits his teeth, “And, by the way, quit blaming yourself for . . . For the sleeping together thing. You said, ‘No strings,’ and I said ‘Why not.’ That’s on both of our shoulders. And while it wasn’t the smartest idea we ever had, it still happened. So you listen here. We’re going home, and you’re staying.”

Loki tries to pull away, but Tony holds him in place. “And where will I stay, exactly, because clearly your bed is no longer open to me,” he hisses.

Tony starts, “What the hell? We slept together last night! Where’d you get that conclusion from?”

“From the way you say his name in your sleep,” Loki says in a rush. Tony’s hand loosens around his wrist and Loki slips away, watching the confused surprise in Tony’s eyes. “You come with too many strings attached, Stark,” he states, “And I no longer want to be your settle.”

Tony opens his mouth, tries to say that that was not what it was, but the grief in Loki’s eyes stops him. “That’s a bit hypocritical of you,” he says instead, “when I was your settle too.”

“And I am taking away that option,” Loki says calmly, not denying Tony’s accusation. “Now neither of us can settle, and you’ll be forced to face the consequences of your affections for Rogers.” He smiles then, cool, calculating, “It’s better this way.”

“That doesn’t mean you need to leave,” Tony pleads. “That just means things need to change.”

Loki frowns, considering this, “It would be easier for everyone if I left.”

“Easier and better aren’t synonyms,” Tony says, and Loki laughs.

OoOoOoOoOoO

It’s nearly midnight when Tony shut the door to his room and goes to lean heavily against the
kitchen counter. “He’s sleeping,” he says quietly, “For now. But we’re going to have to keep an eye on him.”

“Aye,” Thor agrees. He’s nursing a beer between his hands, rolling it back and forth over his palms, eyes on the contents swirling around inside. “He really tried to run then?”

“Something like that,” Tony confirms.

“It’s not the first time.”

Tony’s eyebrows rise, “This has happened before?”

Thor smiles, the expression uncharacteristically forlorn. “Why do you think we are here? He ran from my father. He ran from expectations, from obligations, and from the disappointment he feared to see in my father’s eyes.”

“And you followed?” Tony guesses.

“Of course.”

Tony thinks on this new information for a moment, twisting and turning it over in his head before he stops to let the words, “My father,” sink in. Curiosity bites at him, but he doesn’t ask, it’s not his place. “I’m gonna crash at Steve’s place,” he says after a bit, clapping Thor on the shoulder, “There’s a sofa there with my name on it, and I’m exhausted.”

“I’ll keep an eye on Loki,” Thor promises without needing to be asked.

Tony pauses halfway towards the door and turns, stretching out a hand. “You still have that Magi Eight Ball, right? Can I see it a sec?” Thor drops it into his waiting hand, and Tony shakes it without voicing his question aloud. “This thing is no good,” He says after he rolls it to read the answer, “I may not be able to see the future, but I know that this one is wrong.” He hands the ball back to Thor and closes the door behind him as quietly as possible.

When Thor glances at it, the Magic Eight Ball reads “Yes.”

OoOoOoOoO

When Tony drags him across the hall, Steve isn’t home. Clint lets him in with a gesture towards the TV and an invitation of a Star Wars marathon.

“Steve went out for drinks with Sharon, I think,” He tells Tony ten minutes into A New Hope.

“Past midnight?” Tony asks blandly.

“My thoughts exactly. Either they better be getting it on, or I’m disappointed in Steve’s life choices,” Clint says lightly. Tony snorts out a laugh.

Unbeknownst to either of them, Steve was standing outside the coffee shop as this conversation was going on. His hands were stuffed into his pockets and he shifted back and forth on his heels uncomfortably, shoulders hunched.

“I’m sorry,” he says quietly.

Sharon shakes her head, a soft, understanding smile on her face. “I think that’s what I should be saying, I’m the one putting my foot down, after all.” Steve’s returning smile is shaky, and she sighs, “It was weird anyways, and you know it.”
“I wasn’t going to argue,” Steve chuckles, and Sharon smacks him gently on the arm.

“I don’t just want to be a shadow of Aunt Peggy to you,” she says seriously.

“I know.”

“But,” Sharon goes on, putting a hand to Steve’s cheek, “you should know that you’re every bit the good man Aunt Peggy said you were.”

Steve smiles again, this time bright and real, “You’ll have to show me those letters some time.”

“Sure thing.” She stands on her tiptoes to kiss him on the cheek before she steps away. “You’ll be okay, you know,” she says suddenly. “You have so many wonderful people, friends, who care about you and would do anything for you.”

“Are you one of them?” Steve asks.

“I will be,” Sharon assures. “Give me some time to get over your stupid boy scout smile, and I will be. Aunt Peggy would kick my butt if we parted on bad terms.”

“Probably,” Steve laughs.

It should be harder, Steve thinks as he climbs the stairs back up to his apartment, to break up than that. He’s relieved that in this case, it isn’t. “You’re chasing after ghosts with me,” Sharon had said over drinks, and Steve had known that she was right.

He’ll make it up to her, he decides, with time. He can start with letters, like the kinds Peggy sent home from the battlefield, and move up from there. To phone calls, and coffee, and smiles between friends.

Or maybe they’ll just skip to phone calls.

Steve’s phone rings in his pocket and he answers with a surprised, “That was quick.”

Sharon laughs in his ear. “I just wanted to give you some advice, if you’ll take it.”

“Shoot,” Steve says.

“I saw your sketchbook, the other day when I was over-” Steve pales, and thanks God that there’s no one around to see the look on his face, “-And you should probably know that feelings on pages are pretty worthless in real life.”

“Um.”

“Trust me on this,” She says, and hangs up.

Steve stares at his phone for a long moment before he starts to climb the stairs again.

OoOoOoOoO

Thor sits at the kitchen counter, his eyes never leaving the door to Tony’s room. He shakes the Magic Eight Ball between his hands, a constant, steady motion. “Does he remember?” he asks the darkness.

Through the purple-blue fluid, the Eight Ball reads, “No.”
“Hmm,” Thor murmurs, “I thought as much. I shouldn’t tell him, should I.”

Again, the Eight Ball reads, “No.”

Chapter End Notes

And thus, I leave you with a thousand unanswered questions and skip off into the night with an evil laugh. Mwahaha!
The One With Natasha's Husband

Chapter Summary

Someone comes home, one of Natasha's secrets is discovered, Clint shouts about things that happened a long time ago, and the mysterious contents of one sketchbook are revealed.

Steve gets the good news on the seventeenth of March.

“You’re coming home?” he practically squeals into the phone. Across the room, Tony sits up in his chair and Clint puts down his magazine. “When? Next week?” Tony puts a hand over his mouth as Steve starts jumping up and down. Clint has to bite his lips to keep from laughing. “We should go to Coney Island when you get back! What do you mean it’s not open yet . . .” Tony snorts into his hands.

There’s a lot of jabbering, a lot of arguing, and more smiles than any of them have seen on Steve’s face in ages (which is saying something, because Steve smiles a lot as it is) before Steve hangs up and shouts, “Bucky’s coming home!”

“So we gathered,” Tony says.

“As if it could be anyone else on the other end of the line,” Clint nods.

They make plans to pick Bucky up from the airport that are later scratched when Bucky calls and tells them he “Doesn’t want any dorks with signs waiting for him at baggage claim.” The face Steve makes when he chucks the sign he was coloring in the trash is priceless. Tony digs the thing out five minutes later and presents the idea of a party, and of course Tony Stark is the one to suggest a party, this should come as a surprise to no one.

“Can we get streamers?” Steve asks. Tony adds streamers to the steadily lengthening party list they’ve started. “And balloons?” Balloons promptly becomes number six on the list.

“Ice-cream cake!” Clint demands. “If there’s no ice-cream cake, I’m not coming.” Tony adds that too.

“Rocket-pops,” Steve says, jabbing a finger to the paper. Tony writes down Rocket Pops and underlines it. Twice.

Eventually, their list making migrates to the couch where Clint proceeds to fall asleep with his feet hanging off the back of the couch and his head nearly touching the floor. “We’re going to need a bigger space for all of this,” Tony points out when the list has reached two and a half pages.

“Only because you added Inflatable Bounce House,” Steve reminds. Tony regretfully crosses Inflatable Bounce House off the list and, after a pause, also runs a line through Pony Rides with a disappointed frown. “Is March too early to barbeque?” Steve asks with a cautious glance towards the window overlooking the balcony. The previous week it had snowed hard enough to close a few outer roads, so while the sun was currently shining, it was too soon to tell.

Tony chews on the end of his pen and says, “I’m sure it will be fine. And if we barbeque then we
can get rid of the entire page of food items.” He wads up said page and tosses it somewhere behind him, much to Steve’s annoyance. “Rocketpops and Clint’s ice-cream cake are still a go though.” He slumps into the couch cushions and sets his list down on Clint’s chest where it rises and falls with Clint’s snores. “How long has it been, anyways?” Steve glances at him and Tony clarifies, “Since Bucky’s been home, I mean.”

“A year last month.” Tony can hear the relief in Steve’s reply and sends the blond an easy smile.

“You weren’t worried, were you?” He teases. “Because I think Bucky would be offended if you were.”

Steve scoffs, “I wasn’t worried, Bucky can handle himself. I was just . . . Concerned.”

Tony laughs, “You do know those words mean the exact same thing, right?”

“You do know you two bicker like an old married couple, right?” Clint snipes, waking up simply to tell them that. Tony slams an elbow into his gut and Steve shakes his head.

“Tact, Barton,” Tony hisses.

“Is that a food?” Clint grins innocently.

Clint gets another elbow to the gut and spends the next hour on the floor claiming that he’s dying. Neither Steve nor Tony helps him. At all. Instead, they watch Jeopardy where Tony blurts out all the answers to the pop culture questions, and Steve calmly, and correctly, replies to all the history ones while Tony mutters, “I thought the first world war was against Mexico . . .”

“I wonder if he’ll be staying for awhile this time,” Steve says absently. He’s deeply absorbed in drawing something in his sketchbook, and Tony raises an eyebrow at the uncertainty of his tone.

“If you ask him to, I’m sure he will.”

Steve frowns, “It’s not that simple. You can’t tell a soldier not to fight, if you do they’ll just run off into the next battle they see.” Tony chuckles, recognizing this statement as true from Steve’s own actions, which are a bit more home based, but similar none the less. Such as a couple weeks ago when Natasha had told Steve to stop driving his motorcycle like a madman and Steve had then proceeded to drive right past her so fast that if she would have blinked at all she would have missed him entirely.

“Maybe he’ll decide to stay on his own then,” Tony tries. Steve gives a hopeful little hum in return. “So,” He starts when his eyes catch the smooth strokes of Steve’s pencil over paper, “Are you gonna show me what you’re drawing this time, or are you going to be vague about it again?”

“It’s unfinished. I don’t like showing off unfinished work,” Steve mumbles, the faintest of pinks coloring his cheeks. Tony almost decides he understands that, seeing as he hates letting people see his projects before he’s done. He reaches for Steve’s sketchpad anyways, unsurprised when Steve closes it and holds it high over his head. It’s not worth the effort to actually get off his butt and jump for, so Tony just rolls his eyes and slumps lower into the couch, kicking Clint on the floor while he’s at it.

“Leave me alone, I’m already dying,” Clint yells, and Tony smirks.

OoOoOoOoO

As with most things, however, the best laid plans always go to waste.
They’re picking up the ice-cream cake at the bakery when everything explodes in their faces. Tony’s leaning over the counter, inspecting the cake that has an alarming amount of gummy worms on it. “Why did Clint order gummy worms on this thing?” he grimaces.

The owner of the little bakery, a young man with dark hair and just a tinge of an odd European accent, shrugs. “Don’t ask me, sir. I just filled the order as requested,” he says a bit haughtily.

“Yes yes, I know you did, Kurt. I’m questioning Clint’s tastes, not your baking.”

Steve’s phone rings, and Tony’s busy poking at the toxically bright gummy worms as he answers. “Hello?” There’s a pause before Steve practically yells, “What do you mean you’ve been detained at the airport!?” Tony nearly falls face-first into the cake, which Kurt whips out of the way in the nick of time. After another pause, wherein Steve puts his free hand to his head and sighs, he says, too calmly, “You punched a security guard . . .”

On the other end of the line, Bucky makes an offended noise. “You make it sound like I’m some sort of criminal!”

“Who’s the one calling from airport confinement,” Steve says blandly.

“He was groping a woman at the security check. Not like, excusable security pat-down either. It was full on boob grabbing under the pretense of a pat-down,” Bucky tisks.

“You didn’t have to punch him.”

Bucky snorts, “Yes I did. Now, do me a favor, will ya? They said they can’t release me until I prove that I’m a legal member of the United States.”

“Don’t they realize you’re a soldier?” Steve asks, horrified.

“Apparently that’s not good enough. Can you send Natasha down here to come get me?”


“She has a copy of my birth certificate, duh.”

“You’ve only met Natasha a couple of times,” Steve hesitates. “Why would she have . . .”

There’s a long, tension filled silence before Bucky speaks again. “Long story, tell you later. Please, please, please send her down here. Please, Before I have to punch any of these other guards. They’re starting to give me skeevy looks cause I’ve been on the phone too long.” With that he hangs up and leaves Steve blinking at his phone in bemusement.

Tony flips a wad of cash (that is most likely far too much) at Kurt and scoops the cake up with a perplexed, “Guess we’re going to tell Natasha she has pickup duties then?”

“I guess,” Steve says.

OoOoOoO

Natasha isn’t at all pleased by the predicament, but she goes to get Bucky without protest while Clint and Bruce stare after her looking thoroughly confused.

“I didn’t even know they knew each other outside of the few times we’ve met Bucky,” Bruce whispers to Tony while Clint and Steve argue about whether or not they can cut the cake before Bucky gets there.
“A past lover, or something?” Tony suggests nonchalantly. There’s a clatter and Steve yelps, jumping back as Clint nearly drops the cake knife right on his foot. Tony immediately regrets his flippant comment at the sight of the look in Clint’s gaze, somewhere between anger and anguish. “Kidding,” he says softly.

Bruce shakes his head at Tony before he moves to Clint’s side, one arms slipping around his waist while he rests his chin on Clint’s shoulder to murmur something reassuring to him.

“Jesus,” Tony hisses to Steve who has tactfully retreated to hover near him, “You’d think I said something offensive.”

“It sort of was,” Steve says. Tony gapes at him.

“What? How?”

Steve shrugs, “I’m not too clear on how this, uh . . . Thing works between them, but what you said is probably about on the same level as bringing up a past lover to the current one.” Tony doesn’t look too convinced, but he accepts the explanation without further questioning.

OoOoOoO

It takes over an hour for Natasha to return with Bucky, and by that time Thor and Loki have shown up and decimated a large number of the balloons. Loki simply stabs them with something pointy when no one is paying attention, which consequently scares each of them at some point or another with the unexpected pop. Thor smashes them between his hands in a “Show of mighty strength, my friends!” Tony wishes they had bought some mylar balloons, because he really wants to see if Thor can crush one of those too.

When the door opens Bucky doesn’t even get over the threshold before he’s enveloped in the bone crushing hug of one very happy Steve. Natasha scoots around them with a raised eyebrow. Tony can feel the tension settle in the air the minute they step in, and his eyes flash to where Clint is sitting on the armchair, Bruce leaning against the back of it and a thousand questions in their eyes. But now isn’t the time.

He stalks over to them, hands shoved into his pockets, and says lowly, “If you ruin this for Steve, so help me God, no one will find your bodies.” Bruce gives him a reassuring nod, but Clint only slouches a bit. It should be a warning sign, really, but Tony merely pats him on the back and goes to cut the cake.

Once they’re all seated Steve starts babbling away to Bucky, asking him a thousand questions while Bucky amiably answers them.

“Woo any ladies?” is Tony’s only question (that he can slip into the conversation, because he really can’t get a word in edgewise between Steve and Bucky’s chatter).

Bucky laughs, “Oh, you have no idea. I know you like to think you’re the master of the sport of lady wooing, Stark, but you have nothing on me.”

“Conceded,” Tony agrees with wave of his fork.

“Are you going to be staying for awhile?” Steve asks hopefully.

Bucky nudges him playfully with his shoulder, “Why? Didja miss me?” Steve scowls and Bucky chuckles, “I’m staying for now. I’m hoping for at least a year.” The smile that spreads across Steve’s face is absolutely blinding.
This, of course, is the moment Clint decides to clear his throat and cough. His eyes are narrowed when he settles them on Bucky, untouched ice-cream cake in hand as he gestures with the other towards the soldier. “Excuse me for asking, but I’m dying to know why Natasha is in possession of a copy of your birth certificate.” Tony smacks a hand to his forehead. He knew he shouldn’t have trusted Clint to wait till later to come to blows about something that was probably stupid.

Bucky raises an eyebrow, cool and composed. “Oh, that? Didn’t you know?”

Across the room, Natasha says a sharp, “Bucky, not now,” that goes ignored. She starts to cross the room, gaze more dangerous than usual, but Bucky just grins at her.

“Why? It isn’t that big of a deal, why not let them know that we’re married.”

Oh, Tony thinks dazedly, it wasn’t so stupid after all.

All the air seems to rush out of the room and everyone falls silent, tension sparking up in an instant.

“What?” Clint’s voice breaks around the single word.

Steve has frozen in his seat, eyes wide. “Bucky . . .” He starts, faltering as he finds he has nothing to say. Tony places a hand on his arm and shakes his head, it’s not something they should get involved in, at least not now. Thor and Loki, who have been blowing up more balloons, make a hasty retreat towards the balcony door.

“Yeah,” Bucky says loftily in response to Clint’s question, “For, what, three years now? Just about?” Natasha closes in behind him and digs her nails into the back of his neck, making him yelp in surprise, “What?!?”

Her eyes fix on Clint, “It was just a mission,” she says quietly. “We needed to be undercover and have valid identification of—”

She doesn’t get to finish her explanation. Clint stands, dropping his cake to the floor. “A mission? That’s your excuse?” He gestures between himself and Bruce, who has fallen to take Clint’s place in the armchair, utter shock on his face. “And what about us? Are we just a mission too? I didn’t get into this thing thinking I was sleeping with a married woman, Nat!”

Behind him, Bruce whispers, “Why didn’t you break it off?”

Natasha’s eyes dart between them, “I can’t explain the details of my work to you! Clint, you know that!”

“I didn’t know your work involved getting married to—” He pauses then, some sort of realization flickering across his face, “He’s . . . Oh, Jesus, three years ago? Then . . .” Clint wavers a bit before taking a deep breath and turning away, heading towards the door. He flings it open with a harsh, “I can’t believe I fell for your shit again,” over his shoulder before the door slams behind him and he’s gone.

For a moment, no one even breathes. A minute passes, two, and Bruce stands. He barely casts Natasha a glance before he slips out the door, Clint’s left behind coat thrown over his arm.

“You’re a secret agent?” Tony can’t help but utter. Steve makes a shushing sound at him.

“No,” Natasha deadpans.

Bucky, who has appropriately sat in silence for the last few minutes, whispers, “Oops?” Natasha digs
her nails into his neck again.

“That was not your place,” she hisses near his ear, giving little mind to Tony and Steve leaning in to catch what they’re saying. “It was my place to tell them, not yours.”

“You were never going to tell them,” Bucky snaps.

“I wasn’t going to tell them because, until notified, we’re still on mission!” She yells. Steve and Tony lean back, startled by the sudden raise in volume. Her eyes are blazing when she straightens, marching towards the door. “You’d do well to remember that, Barnes,” She shouts as he leaves.

“Burned,” Tony says a little too gleefully. Bucky shoots him a scathing glare.

OoOoOoOoO

Clint makes it two blocks before Bruce catches up to him. “Jesus, don’t make me run like that,” Bruce wheezes as he draws up behind him. Clint doesn’t stop walking and Bruce stands in the middle of the sidewalk for a moment, hands on his knees as he tries to catch his breath, before jogging after him once more. “Can you stop for a minute so we can talk?” Again, Clint says nothing and keeps walking. Bruce rolls his eyes, “Or we can walk and talk, get some nice cardio in, that’s fine. And by nice I mean torture.”

Clint doesn’t respond, and Bruce keeps pace with him for a few more blocks before he tries to start a conversation again, “Where are we going?”

At this, Clint stops. He stands stock still on the sidewalk for a few heartbeats before he says, “There is no ‘We.’ I’m going alone.”

Bruce snorts out a short, humorless laugh. “Yeah, sure. That’s going to happen. Where are we going?” Clint stares at him and Bruce takes a moment to notice the angry tears pooling in the corners of his eyes before he whispers, “Crap. Crap, crap, crap. Don’t cry.”

“M’not going to cry,” Clint says, trying for serious but his voice trembles around the words. Bruce makes a pained little sound and grabs Clint by the front of his shirt, tugging him close until he can wrap his arms around him. “I fucked up,” Clint breathes against Bruce’s shoulder, the words more of a broken mess of syllables than actual words.

“No, you didn’t,” Bruce soothes.

OoOoOoOoO

Long after Natasha has left, and Tony has decided to hang out on the “None Of Our Business Balcony” with Thor and Loki (They’re filling balloons with water and hurling them over the edge at passerby far below. Steve doesn’t care enough to stop them), Steve pulls Bucky aside.

“You got married and didn’t tell me?” are the first words out of his mouth.

Bucky’s jaw drops, aghast at the utterly hurt expression on Steve’s face. “It’s not like it’s a real wedding, Steve. It was just a thing we had to do for an ongoing mission.”

“I thought I was supposed to be your best man . . .” Steve mutters.

Bucky smirks, “Oh? Well I’d heard you’d promised Tony he could be your best man.”

Steve immediately appears flustered, and Bucky’s eyes narrow with suspicion. “That was, uh, sort of
“a joke . . .”

“Really now . . .”

“It’s nothing. And besides, even if I did get married, you’re never around,” Steve accuses. “Maybe I
need a backup best man.”

“Don’t be like that,” Bucky snaps, “You know how it is.”

Steve grits his teeth, “I did, until you started taking side missions that involve getting married. I didn’t
even know Natasha was a part of . . . Of whatever it is she does.”

“It’s not much different than the battlefield,” Bucky says, “it just has more, uh, sneaking. Spying?
Intel. Intel’s a good word.” He shifts a little when Steve’s disbelieving glare doesn’t change. “Look,
it’s not really even romantic, okay? Or at least it isn’t any more. It was never much more than the
mission.”

“Bullshit.”

“It was eight months of undercover with some bonus benefits,” Bucky sighs, “And when we lost the
trail of . . . The mission, we went back to what we usually do. Natasha came back here, and I went
on another two months of duty. It’s not a big deal.”

“It is for Clint and Bruce.”

Bucky stares at him before groaning and running a hand through his hair, “That’s not my problem.”

By the time Natasha finds them, Bruce and Clint have circled back around to the coffee shop.
They’re curled in one of the over plush armchairs, Bruce’s eyelids drooping with exhaustion and
Clint looking more haggard than she’s seen him in years. When she enters Shield Coffee she waves a
hand at Coulson, who’s at the register. He nods to her and begins to quietly herd his customers out of
the shop, ignoring their annoyed complaints.

“Try not to break anything,” he tells her shortly before he retreats to the back room.

Clint isn’t in a position where he can see her approach without jostling Bruce off of him, but he’s not
oblivious. “Why are you here?” he says flatly.

“Nothing to talk about.”

Bruce shifts and blinks fully awake, eyes widening when he spots Natasha circling around the
armchair to stand in front of them. “We shouldn’t start a fight here,” he warns Clint.

“It’s fine,” Clint dismisses, “as long as we don’t break anything.” He turns his attention back to
Natasha. “I should have known, you know, that you weren’t entirely truthful about your fling with
Winter Soldier.” A cold smirk flickers across his face when Natasha purses her lips. “I’m right, aren’t
I? That’s his code name.”

“This isn’t the time or place, Clint,” she hisses.

“Was it fun? Your fling?”
“It wasn’t a fling.”

Clint sneers, “Oh, right, it was a fucking marriage. I remember now.”

Natasha tenses, “It was a mission, Clint.”

Bruce has just enough time to scramble out of the way before Clint is on his feet, eyes blazing. “I was a mission once too!” He snarls. “And so was Bruce! Or did you just forget about that.”

“Of course not—”

Clint cuts her off, “I was the mission who took a bullet for you! Two, actually!” His whole frame heaves as he speaks, shoulders shaking. “I will never shoot a bow again because of that!” Clint tugs his coat sleeve up, revealing a puckered scar under his hand along the bones of his wrist. “And what about Bruce? He was sick for a year after that because of that fucking chemical you guys had him make for you!” Bruce puts a hand on his shoulder, but Clint shakes him off, “I was bleeding out when you left me the first time, and I should have learned. It was for Winter Soldier then, too. I remember that much at least.”

Natasha stiffens, “I can’t just abandon a mission because of a couple of hurt soldiers.”

“We weren’t your soldiers,” Bruce whispers. This time when he puts a hand on Clint’s shoulder Clint doesn’t push him away. “We were specialists. That’s not the same thing. We didn’t sign up for what we did.” Natasha frowns, but Bruce continues, “Even if it was just for a mission, and it ended before . . . Before this thing of ours, you should have told us.”

“You should have ended it completely,” Clint adds, and Bruce nods.

Natasha is silent for a long moment, the challenge in her eyes slowly burning out. “Remind me,” she says dully, “who it was I came back for.”

“Only because Bucky was on a tour of duty,” Clint mutters. Bruce squeezes his shoulder and he quiets, arms crossing over his chest as he waits for Natasha to explain.

“I came back for the idiot who took two bullets for me and the scientist who gave us our winning ticket very nearly at the cost of his life,” she states. “Even if Bucky had been here, I wouldn’t have chosen any different.” Natasha takes a step towards Clint, and another when he doesn’t back away, “I found Bruce first because you’d disappeared off the map, but you’d been close by the whole time.”

“I wasn’t going to leave Bruce on his own,” Clint growls.

“And I never meant to leave either of you alone,” Natasha whispers. She’s slowly edging closer, reaching out until she can fit one hand against Clint’s cheek and the other over his shoulder, on top of Bruce’s. “I had a job to do, Clint. A job that’s not quite finished. As soon as it is, though, Bucky and I have already agreed to sign the papers. It’s just a mission.”

“You swear?” Clint asks, hesitant, unsure.


“I helped you commit adultery,” Clint mutters, but his gaze has softened slightly.

“Yeah, same. I’m a bit uncomfortable about that part,” Bruce confesses.
A tiny smile spreads across Natasha’s face. “Well, I guess we could keep our hands to ourselves until the mission is over . . .”

“No!” Bruce and Clint and Bruce shout simultaneously. Natasha is nearly knocked off her feet with how hard they crash into her, tumbling the three of them over onto the coffee stained couch.

“Not in my restaurant!” Coulson yells from the back room.

OoOoOoOoO

Steve is out on the balcony scolding Tony, Loki, and Thor for throwing water balloons on innocent passerby when Bucky finds it. For a minute Bucky just chuckles with the sketchbook in his hands, remembering the little sketchpads full of crayon drawings Steve used to tote around when they were small. He flips to the first page and scans over pencil lines depicting a city street, turns to the next to find a flock of pigeons huddled under a gargoyle’s wings out of the rain, and then flicks to the third and pauses.

It’s about at that moment that Steve comes back inside, the front of his shirt soaked from where Loki had told him to “catch” one of the water balloons. He opens his mouth to say something, greet Bucky or ask him what he’s doing when he sees what Bucky has in his hands and freezes.

Bucky fingers the edge of the page and carefully moves on to the next with barely a glance in Steve’s direction. “Hmm,” he hums, flipping a few more pages, “Should I just guess what’s going on here, or should you tell me?”

“Uh . . . I-it’s not, okay yes it is, b-but-” Steve stutters, face turning redder by the second.

Bucky sits down on the couch and lays the sketchbook on the coffee table. “How long has this been going on?” He asks calmly as he turns a few more pages.


Bucky raises an eyebrow, “How so?”

“I don’t know, but I must have.” Steve snatches the sketchbook up from the table and lays it gingerly across his lap, eyebrows furrowing together as he traces the tips of his fingers over the page. His nails scrape against graphite shaded hair, skimming down to the neckline and shoulders of the figure etched there. Bucky watches this without comment, taking note of Steve’s pained expression as he runs his fingers over what must be one of hundreds of similar sketches. In this one, the figure reclines on the sofa they’re currently sitting on, half asleep. “I don’t know what I did, but . . . He must have found out, somehow. It was a stupid thing anyways. I just sketched him one day and then found that I couldn’t stop. I was finding all these little nicks on him, these little details that I’d known about forever but were suddenly so much clearer when outlined on paper. And I realized that I . . .” He swallows, “It doesn’t matter. He must have found out. He avoided me for months, and we’re just starting to get back to normal. I can’t screw this up again, Bucky, it’s not worth it.”

He turns the page and begins to dance his fingertips over the spine of Tony Stark’s sketched back.

“Did I . . . Did I do something to make you mad?”

“No. Oh, Jesus, no. This is my problem, Steve, not yours. It’s not-”

Steve closes the sketchbook. “He said that it wasn’t my fault, but why else would he avoid me for so long?” Bucky shrugs.
“Are you sure that’s why he was avoiding you?”

“No. I tried to gauge his reaction when I told him I cared about him, but he just . . . Looked a bit startled? Confused?”

“I meant what I said before, Tony.”

“You’ve said a lot of things, Steve.”

“About caring. About you.”

Steve fiddles with the spine of the sketchbook in his hands, looking lost, and Bucky tries his best not to sigh. “I really don’t’ have the sort of advice you’re looking for,” he says finally. Bucky’s advice usually consists of things like “Flirt with them until they blush,” and “Use as many innuendos in the conversation as possible until they get it.”

Neither of them notices Loki hovering in the doorway leading from the balcony, pinching the bridge of his nose and muttering, “Gods, I’m surrounded by idiots.”
Chapter Summary

One day they will call themselves the Scheme Team in honor of their triumphs and failures at getting two of their friends to stop being complete idiots.

Loki likes to think he’s, more or less, the master of all things mischief. He knows nearly three dozen ways to cheat at any card game, prides himself on his silver tongue, has perfected the art of thinking fast when it comes to needing a witty retort, and doesn’t need a joke shop to supply him with prank ideas. Thus, he thinks, it should be painfully simple to solve the annoying problem that is Steve and Tony’s seemingly unrequited feelings.

It turns out to not be so simple at all, but he did get the painful part right.

The first thing he tries is the classic *Lock Them In A Small Space Plan*. It ends with Steve breaking the closet door and Tony grabbing Loki by the collar of his shirt to whisper death threats at him. Loki just smirks because, despite it being a failed plan, it was still funny.

Next, he tries the old *Umbrella Plan*. This one goes marginally better but still fails to produce the correct results. He waits for a rainy day (which isn’t hard to find in April) to enact it.

“Did you catch the weather report?” Tony asks as he sweeps towards the door.

“Sunny!” Loki calls after him. He waits a good twenty seconds after Tony leaves before dashing across the hall with an umbrella in hand. “Stark forgot his umbrella,” he explains as he shoves the thing into Steve’s arms, “Give this to him for me, will you? I have things to do, bye,” and he’s gone again.

From the window of Thor and Tony’s apartment he watches the moment when Steve catches up to Tony with the umbrella already open. There’s a brief conversation before they start walking down the street together, shoulder to shoulder under the umbrella to stay out of the rain, and Loki barely refrains from doing a victory fist pump.

“Steve walked with you to your lunch with Pepper today?” he asks slyly when Tony returns.

“Yeah. He brought me my umbrella,” Tony says absently as he starts shifting the pile of newspapers on the kitchen counter around.

“And?” Loki pries.

“And what?”

Loki does not refrain from letting out a frustrated groan.

The third time he tries a more blatant approach.

“Tell Rogers you’re in love with him,” Loki says to Tony when he hands him sixth cup of coffee one afternoon. Tony proceeds to drop said cup of coffee all down his front.
“Jesus Christ!” Tony shrieks, grabbing a wad of paper towels and patting his middle with them. “What is wrong with you? You don’t just say things like that out of the blue, Loki!” He tosses the now soaked paper towels at Loki’s head, misses, and scowls.

“I don’t see why not,” Loki deadpans. “If you tell him your feelings he’ll probably reciprocate.” Tony narrows his eyes, “It’s past April Fools,” he growls and stalks out of the room. Loki sighs.

The blatant approach having failed, he tries a slightly lesser, but still blatant, idea. He trips Tony into Steve’s lap on the last day of April.

It’s a pretty spectacular fall, if he says so himself. One second Tony’s walking away from the coffee shop’s counter where he’d gone to grab a few packets of sugar and the next he has his forehead against Steve’s shoulder, one arm braced against the back of the couch and the other on Steve’s arm. “Lovely,” he mutters before struggling to straighten himself.

“Are you alright?” Steve asks, concerned. Loki holds his breath, sure that this time his plans have not gone to waste.

“Just tripped,” Tony mutters and stands, his furious gaze falling on Loki. “What,” he grits out to Loki when he’s out of Steve’s earshot, “do you think you’re doing exactly?”

Loki shrugs, “Same thing I do every day, trying to take over the world.”

Tony gapes at him for a moment before snorting and going to get more sugar packets. He’s quickly running out of ideas.

“Steve draws pictures of you in his sketchbook,” Loki says to Tony in early May. Fuck subtlety.

“I’m sure,” Tony replies snidely. He shrugs out of his coat and moves across the room until he’s standing over where Loki’s sitting in one of the armchairs. “You need to stop,” he says darkly, “It’s not funny.”

Loki would disagree (because in his opinion this is the height of hilarity), but that’s hardly the point. “I’m trying to help,” he argues.

“Well, stop it,” Tony frowns. “It’s not helping at all, it’s just . . .” He draws off, searching for a word before deciding, “. . . Awkward.”

Loki raises a disbelieving eyebrow, “Is it really?”

“The tripping me into Steve part, definitely. The constant bombardment of lies about Steve, though, is hurtful,” Tony states. Loki’s faint smile falls. “That’s not the point of this, you know,” he tries to clarify. “I’m just-”

“-Not helping,” Tony finishes for him and goes to his room without another word.

After that, Loki decides he needs help. His options for acquiring any such thing, however, are slim. He can’t ask Thor because, unfortunately, Thor’s methods would not be much different from his own. They’d probably involve a lot more nakedness though. Loki contemplates the idea of trying the closet plan again with added nudity, comes to the conclusion that Tony might actually try and kill him if he went through with it, and moves on. His other options aren’t much better. Bruce will think it’s none of his business, Clint will suggest letting a couple dozen bad innuendos slip around them
(and that will be his best plan), and Natasha was the one who ratted Tony’s feelings out to Pepper in the first place.

Loki pauses to contemplate enlisting Natasha to his services anyways. She has all the requirements that would get the job done, prior knowledge of the circumstances, good tactical skills, and the amount of sarcasm needed to confront a plan gone wrong. But he remembers that Natasha is still the only person who can beat him at card games and decides that recruiting her is a no.

He’s scribbling out useless ideas on a notepad when inspiration strikes him.

Strikes him meaning Bucky walks through the door and loudly proclaims, “There is no milk in the world!” before going to the fridge, pulling it open, and grabbing the jug of milk from the door.

Loki stares at him, “Huh?”

“No milk at my place, no milk at Steve’s, it is a crisis,” Bucky says and proceeds to drink directly from the jug. Loki tries not to gag.

“You can keep that one,” he mutters, turning back to his list. There are ten things written on it ranging from Smash Their Faces Together all the way to Arrange A Near-Death Experience. Obviously, none of these are actual plans that should ever be used, although Loki has given some serious thought to the Near Death Experience one, since it always seemed to work well in movies. Bucky’s still chugging the milk when Loki realizes it and slowly turns to face him again. “You know about Rogers and Stark,” he states.

Bucky freezes, milk jug halfway to his mouth, “Um . . .”

“About them being morons who think their feelings are unrequited,” Loki specifies. Bucky’s eyes widen.

“Wait, it’s a two way street? I thought Steve was convinced-”

“Rogers is an idiot,” Loki snaps. “And Stark’s is an idiot too,” he adds. “And none of my plans to make them see over the wall of stupidity standing between them have worked. I need help. So, while you’re not the first person I would have chosen, you’re my best option,” he ends by pointing a finger at Bucky.

Bucky purses his lips, “I’ll take that as the backhanded compliment that it is, but if you’re doing this to make them happy. . .”

“I’m doing this because the unsatisfied sexual tension in the air when they’re near me is driving me up the wall,” Loki says blankly. “And, also, the amount of stupid this whole situation is producing could lower the IQ of an entire street.”

“I’ve heard that somewhere before,” Bucky says suspiciously.

“I only paraphrase great minds,” Loki hums. “But that’s not the point. The point is I’ve run out of ideas, Barnes, and I need a comrade in arms to get this over and done with.”

Bucky makes a face, “Okay, first of all, we are not comrades in anything. Second of all,” he jabs a finger onto the notepad where Loki’s been listing ideas, “did you already try this Arrange Near-Death Experience thing? Because that always works in movies.”

Loki grins.
After two entire days of planning and coming up with nothing that they haven’t already tried (short of arranging a near-death experience), Loki starts to get desperate.

“You did the tripping thing, right?” Bucky asks for the third time. Loki glares at him.

“Yes.”

“But the tripping thing always works!” Bucky folds his arms over his chest and his eyebrows furrow together. “This really shouldn’t be so hard. I mean, couldn’t we just tell them that the other one has feelings for them.”

Loki waves a dismissive hand, “I tried that with Stark and he didn’t believe me. However maybe if we took Rogers’ sketchbook . . .”

Bucky snorts, “Yeah, that’s not going to happen. I haven’t seen that thing at all since that one day. And when Steve hides something it’s basically futile to even attempt to find it, because you never will. Believe me, he took the cookie from my lunchbox once and I never saw that thing ever again.”

Loki pinches the bridge of his nose and tries not to cry at the stupidity of that revelation.

“Maybe because he ate it?” he suggests blandly. Bucky looks aghast at the very idea, and Loki rolls his eyes. They go back to contemplating (which is a lot more like brooding) in silence for awhile.

Awhile is actually less than five minutes, since it’s less than five minutes later that the door bangs inwards with a shout of, “This calls for some lady power!” The speed at which Bucky goes from sitting on the sofa to rolling under the coffee table is immensely impressive, and Loki raises an eyebrow from where he remains seated.

“It’s just Darcy,” he informs Bucky, who’s flat on his stomach under the table as if they’re under attack. Loki smirks, Bucky scowls in return, and they both look up to face their interruption.

Darcy is standing in the doorway with large box in her arms, one leg still raised from kicking the door open. There’s a rather unnervingly devious glint in her eye as she raises the box triumphantly over her head and exclaims, “Lady powers to the rescue! I brought the idea fuel and the backup, we are ready to get the scheming underway!”

Loki purses his lips, “What scheme is this, exactly?”

“The get Steve and Tony together one, obviously,” Darcy says in a tone that resounds with an unspoken, “Duh.”

Bucky, who has climbed back onto the couch by now, looks horrified. “How do you even know about that?”

Darcy scoffs, “What? Womanly instinct of course. And by that I mean the goo-goo eyes that those two have been making at each other since forever are nauseatingly noticeable. Also Natasha called me.”

“Natasha’s knowledge of the shit that goes on around here scares me,” Bucky hisses, as if he’s afraid she’s close enough to hear. Loki’s more concerned about wiretaps and bugging at this point.

“You said you brought backup?” Loki prompts.

“Oh yeah, whoops, forgot,” Darcy chuckles and leans back out into the hall, “Are you gonna help or
not? This box is heavy!”

There were about a hundred people Loki would have listed as people he expected to walk through the door at that moment, and Sharon Carter wouldn’t have been among them.

“We brought movies,” Sharon says lightly as she takes the box from Darcy.

“For research!” Darcy chimes in.

Bucky gapes at them, and then turns to Loki for clarification. “That’s-

“Sharon, Peggy’s niece and Steve’s girlfriend for all of a month around the winter holidays. I thought she’d dropped off the face of the earth, so I’m just as surprised as you are,” Loki says. Sharon flips him off around the box of movies.

Bucky turns back to her with a wide grin as she and Darcy approach the couch. “How you doin’?”

“No,” Sharon says flatly. Bucky slumps back down in his seat with a huff and Sharon drops the box onto his lap. “If we’re going to do this thing right, you guys are going to need to think like a romantic. Steve’s never going to go for any of the tactics you come up with otherwise.”

“You mean we have to think like a chick? In like, pinks and flowers and glitter?”

“Glitter is for strippers,” Sharon corrects.

“She means we need to think more deviously,” Loki surmises. Sharon flashes him an approving smile. “We need to move outside of the simple and obvious plans and on to more complicated ones.”

“With romance,” Darcy adds helpfully. “People don’t fall in love unless there’s romance.”

Bucky eyes the box on his lap and pulls out a DVD with a horrified expression, “Oh, god, we’re going to spend the day watching chick-flicks?”

“It is the only solution,” Darcy says darkly, and Bucky stares at the DVD in his hands as if he’s trying to suck the answers out of it just by looking at it.

“I’ll make the popcorn,” Sharon smiles.

OoOoOoOoOoO

They’re about halfway through 13 Going On 30 and commenting on how strange it is that the leading man looks a lot like Bruce when Darcy jumps off of the couch, onto the coffee table, and screams, “Dancing!” at the top of her lungs. The rest of them stare at her in confusion. Darcy points ecstatically at the screen, where the characters are dancing to Thriller, and exclaims, “Dancing! They key is dancing!”

“Um,” Bucky starts.

“I don’t understand,” Loki agrees, knowing that Bucky isn’t going to get much further than what he started with, seeing as Darcy’s supposed conclusion makes no sense.

Sharon, however, is staring at the television screen with an intrigued expression. “She might have something there,” she says aloud. Darcy fist pumps. “They do say that dancing is the vertical expression of horizontal desire legalized by music.” Sharon glances at their stunned faces and says, “Internet,” as an explanation. They nod in understanding.
Bucky grins, “I can show you some horizontal-”

“No,” Sharon says shortly, eyes never leaving the screen.

“Is this similar to the bird thing?” Loki asks, because while he may not know much about human interaction, he does watch a lot of *Animal Planet*.

“There are scientific studies suggesting so,” Sharon says, “but nothing conclusive. This is, however, a very good idea all the same.” Darcy whoops. “We’ll just need to detail some specifics, the first of which is-”

“Steve not knowing how to dance,” Bucky pipes up. Sharon nods. “That’s the key! That’s the key! I get it!” he says gleefully. “Sharon and I can cover that part, I know exactly what we need to do on Steve’s end.”

“A promise of basic dancing lessons just in time or Pepper’s wedding,” Sharon agrees.

Loki frowns, “But what about from Tony’s end? He already knows how to dance.”

Darcy raises a hand, “I can take care of that! Leave it to me!”

And with that, their final plan is in motion.

OoOoOoOoOo

“You need to dress lightly but nicely for this sort of thing,” Bucky says as he tosses the tie Steve was holding over his shoulder. “No ties. Not this time. It’s just a little practice.”

“Practice for a wedding,” Steve reminds and Bucky lets out an amused little huff.

“Well then you can wear the tie and the tux for the actual wedding. One of your tacky picnic blanket looking button-ups and some slacks will be fine for today.” Steve looks mildly offended at Bucky’s description of his clothes, but says nothing. Bucky pats him on the arm, “Don’t give me that look. You’re going to love it, you’ll see!”

Steve frowns, “I’m not so sure . . .”

“Why not? You were always talking about wanting to learn how to dance when we were . . . Well, back then,” Bucky fumbles. “What’s the difference now?”

“The right dance partner.”

Bucky’s face falls, “Oh. Well, I can’t promise you any miracles, but seriously, this will be fun. I hope.” He looks uncertain now, however, thrown off by Steve’s words. “You know I didn’t mean to bring up-” he tries.

Steve smiles, bright and easy, “It’s fine, Bucky. Really. It’s okay.”

“You sure?”

Nodding, Steve chuckles, “Yes, I’m sure. Now let’s go.” He pauses, “You’re not teaching me to dance, are you?”

“Definitely not,” Bucky says sourly, “I remember in grade school when they made us do the do-si-do. It shouldn’t even be possible for you to stomp on your partner’s feet, but you still managed it.”
“Sorry,” Steve says sheepishly.

“Apology not accepted. You broke my toe, man.”

OoOoOoOoO

Getting Steve ready is the easy part. Getting Tony out of bed, however, is not.

Darcy bangs pots together, blasts bad pop songs through the stereo in the living room, and even jumps right on top of Tony and beats him over the head with a pillow. Nothing works.

“I think he’s dead,” She says to Loki, seriously. Loki rolls his eyes and wanders into Thor’s room and emerges a few seconds later with a duck and a rooster under each arm.

“You know what to do,” he tells the birds before chucking them onto Tony’s bed, crowing, quacking, and flapping, and shuts the door.

It’s 3.2 seconds before Tony screams, and Loki declares it a new record.

“What the hell is wrong with you people?!” Tony yells when he finally makes it out of his bedroom, covered in feathers.

Darcy grins, “You promised to teach me to dance today.”

“I did?”

“Yes. For Pepper’s wedding? I asked you last night while you were working on that thingy.”

Tony stares up at the ceiling as if trying to recall such a thing ever happening. Considering his tendency to unconsciously answer any question thrown his way while he’s working with an obedient yes (thank you, Pepper), it’s a highly likely scenario. “Can I reschedule?” he asks the ceiling.

“Nope,” Darcy says and pushes him towards the bathroom, “Now get showered, get dressed, and let’s go. We’re running late.”

“How can we be running late when you’re already here?” Tony inquires, but lets Darcy shove him into the bathroom anyways.

Darcy and Loki high-five.

OoOoOoOoOoO

“Where are we going?”

“Are we there yet?”

“Why can’t we just practice at the apartment?”

“Is that a hotel?”

“Bucky, why are we at a hotel?”

These are just some of the many endless questions that Steve asks on the way, and since Bucky has known Steve his whole life, he feels he deserves an award for how blatantly he can lie through his teeth in front of him. Although this might not be a skill so much as Steve’s tendency to believe that only criminals and cartoon villains lie.
So the answers to those questions go something like:

“It’s a secret.”

“No.”

“Because there’s not enough room.”

“Maybe.”

And, “For your own good. Quit asking questions.”

He half leads, half drags Steve into the hotel and past the desk where he waves at the clerk before hauling Steve towards the hallway off to the right. “Quit digging your heels in you giant sissy,” he hisses, practically carrying Steve towards the large double doors ahead at this point.

“I don’t like this,” Steve whimpers and Bucky sighs, lets go, and folds his arms over his chest.

“Don’t make me call in the backup,” he warns. Steve raises a disbelieving eyebrow. Bucky whips out his phone and dials. “You have forced it to come to this,” he says solemnly before speaking into the phone. “Steve’s being a baby, get over here.”

Steve squares his shoulders, “I am not being a baby. I just don’t like getting into situations I know nothing about. This feels like some sort of trap.”

Bucky puts on a mock offended expression. “I’m hurt by your accusation.”

“Your acting could do with a bit of improvement if that’s how you behave when someone is right,” a cool voice says.

Steve whirls and starts as he comes face to face with Sharon. He stumbles for a second, mouth falling open in surprise before he blurts out, “You’re in on this too?”

Sharon smirks, “Yes. A hello would have been nice, by the way.”

Blushing with embarrassment, Steve mutters a hasty apology. “Sorry, I didn’t mean-“

“I know you didn’t. But you should put more faith in Bucky.” Bucky preens behind them and Sharon rolls her eyes. “We’re trying to help you.”

Steve blinks, “You’re going to teach me to dance?”

Sharon smiles, “Something like that.” She holds out an arm, “Trust me?”

Hesitantly, Steve loops his arm through hers, “Yeah.”

They start to walk down the hall, Bucky waving after them and dabbing at an eye with a handkerchief. Sharon flips him off behind her back. “How’ve you been?” she asks once her attention is back on Steve.

“Good, actually,” he admits quietly. “I’ve, uh, missed you though. I’ve missed going out for coffee with someone who doesn’t complain about how much whipped-cream I put on my drink.”

Sharon laughs, “We’ll get coffee soon, I promise.” They reach the doors and Sharon moves to put her hands on his upper arms, “Now, look at me, okay?” Steve does, and she smiles, “You said you trusted me, so trust me on this, okay? I promise this is for your own good.”
“What?” Steve asks, but Sharon is already pushing him through the doors without an answer. He trips a bit over the threshold, stumbling out of the way just in time for the doors to slam shut behind him with the distinct click of a lock. He whirls, banging a fist on the door, “Sharon?”

“Trust me!” She calls through the wood to him.

Steve sighs and glances behind him at a very large, very empty ballroom before leaning his head against the door.

OoOoOoOoO

“I don’t understand why we couldn’t just do this in the living room,” Tony complains. Unlike Steve, he walks ahead of his scheming captors towards the ballroom, suspecting nothing. “I mean, yeah, there’s not a whole lot of space, but collared shirts are so uncomfortable.” He stops outside of the door to fiddle with said collar, undoing the top button while Loki sighs in defeat (He’d spent most of the car ride over continuously redoing said top button).

“Yeah yeah,” Darcy says, “Can we just get on with it?”

Tony eyes her, “With the dancing lessons?”

“Yes. Now go,” She points to the ballroom ahead, “I have to go, uh, freshen up.” She turns to Loki and grabs him by the arm, “And you, don’t mess this up.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Loki deadpans.

Darcy dashes off just as Tony opens the door and Loki closes and locks it behind him.

OoOoOoOoO

Steve still has one closed fist against the door when he hears the other one shut on the opposite side of the ballroom followed by an outraged shout of, “What the hell! Don’t shut me in some creepy ballroom by myself!”

Slowly, Steve turns, his heart feeling like it’s risen to his throat. Tony’s kicking at the opposite door and cursing a long string of profanities, clearly not amused by this predicament. “It’s not going to open,” Steve says, trying for an even tone and wincing when his words come out a little wobbly. How could Bucky and Sharon do this to him?

Tony whips around, eyes wide, and backs against the door. “Oh, fuck. Not this again. Loki! This stopped being funny a long time ago!” He yells, but gets no response from the solid door behind him. “Actually,” he corrects, “it was never funny. Also, when I get out of here I’m going to kill you.” The snicker on the other side of the door isn’t heartening in the slightest.

The lights start to dim and Tony’s eyes flicker upwards with a frown. There’s an upper balcony and his gaze quickly locks on to where Darcy is fussing with the light board that controls the chandelier hanging over the dance floor. “Et tu, Brute?” he hisses and she grins smugly at him.

“This is for your own good!” She calls down to both him and Steve before flicking a switch. A slow, orchestral piece of music starts playing, and Tony groans in realization. When he looks up to yell at Darcy to get him out there, she’s already gone.

“I’m sorry about this,” Steve says from across the room. Tony sighs.

“It’s not your fault. Loki’s been being a little shit for weeks now, and I should have known that the
lull in crazy just meant that he was planning something drastic.” Tony steps away from the door and makes his way to the middle of the room. He stops directly under the chandelier and rocks back on his heels, hands shoved into his pockets. “They’re not going to let us out until we do what they want.”

Steve frowns, “Which would be . . .”

“Dance I suppose,” Tony says with a sweeping gesture around the vast room. “I mean, this is a ballroom after all.”

“I don’t know how to dance,” Steve mumbles. Tony smiles.

“I know. You were waiting for the right partner and all that, I remember.” Hesitantly, he holds out a hand, “Sorry I’m not that, but I do know a thing or two about dancing. If I teach you we can get out of here, and you won’t have two left feet next week at Pepper’s wedding.”

Steve swallows, “Tony-”

“It’s dancing or standing around like a couple of weirdos until their rent time on this ballroom runs out,” Tony interjects. “Your choice, Steve.”

Slowly, Steve approaches him, “I’m going to murder Bucky when I get out of here,” he says. Tony’s eyebrows move towards his hairline.

“Bucky’s in on this too? Why?”

Steve coughs, “Um, I’d rather not, uh, discuss it. Ever.”

“Fine by me,” Tony smiles, “We all have our secrets after all.”

“Mine’s . . . Pretty bad,” Steve whispers. He’s standing in front of Tony now, posture rigged with nervous tension.

“Mine too,” Tony admits. “Now loosen up, or we’re never going to get anywhere with this.” He grabs Steve’s left hand in his right, “You’re leading, correct?”

“I guess?”

“Right hand on my side then, please. I’ve never done the lady’s part before, so I don’t know how well this is going to go over,” Tony chuckles, “So I apologize in advance if I mash your feet.”

“I’ll probably be the one stepping on your feet,” Steve says, but does as Tony instructs, face turning a fine shade of pink as he fits a hand just above Tony’s waist.

Tony taps his foot to the beat of the music, head slightly tilted as he listens. “Alright, we’re going to be starting with the waltz, which is pretty simple. Just do as I do, but like you’re looking in a mirror, understand? So when I step back with my right, you step forward with your left. Got it?” Steve nods, and Tony tilts his head again, listening to the soft lull of the music.

He steps back and Steve steps forward, the blond looking pleased when he doesn’t trod on any toes. Tony laughs, “Don’t get too excited, that’s just the first part. Now, stay with me here, ready?”

“Ready,” Steve affirms.

Tony steps to the right and Steve follows, fumbling a bit as he tries to mimic the strange motion Tony makes with his foot. “I was never sure what the hell that bit was for,” Tony says as he watches Steve
struggle, “We can just leave it out.” He slides his left foot over to meet his right and grins when Steve does the same without a problem. “Good, good. Now back again.” He steps back and Steve mirrors him, this time barely missing treading on Tony’s toes.

“Sorry,” Steve blushes.

“You’re fine, you’re fine,” Tony assures. “Now back and to the left.” It’s slow going, outlining every step, and Tony has a vague memory of doing something like this before, when he was three or four. He happily overlaps the old memory with the new one he’s building, tossing the former from his mind entirely. “Now all the way over to the left,” he says, watching Steve mirror them as their feet come back together where they started. He smiles, “And that’s the waltz!”

“Can we try it again?” Steve asks, hand tightening around Tony’s.

Tony’s breath catches in his throat, “Uh, yeah. Of course. Lead away. And don’t forget the spinning,” he adds. “The girls like the spinning thing. They say it’s all romantic and junk.”

Steve hums, somewhere between agreement and contemplation as they begin again. This time, he moves with more confidence, slow paced steps speeding up to better match the tempo of the music. “Does everyone like the spinning thing?” he asks.

“As long as it’s not like, theme park teacups, yeah, probably,” Tony replies. “The girls also like the, uh, shoot I have no idea what it’s called. The other spinning thing. Under the arm, you know?” He inhales as Steve drops the hand from his waist and turns him in the exact move he’d just described. “That’s the one,” he breathes when he comes back around and Steve’s hand is on his waist again. They make another turn around the room, Steve’s steps more assured as they go, and Tony pulls his hand back from his on their third turn and moving it to rest on Steve’s side. “Let me lead,” he says and Steve nods, ears turning pink.

Where Steve’s steps still bear hints of slight falters, Tony’s are flawless as he guides them across the floor. “You know,” he says lightly, “I hated dancing as a kid.”

“What changed your mind?” Steve questions.

“I have no idea,” Tony confesses. “Maybe it was the fact that once I was an adult I finally got to choose who I danced with and actually had fun with it.” He shrugs, “And, also, the ladies love this crap. Pepper said it was something about chemical reactions on the dance floor, but I think she’s full of it. But you, however, could definitely use this as a life skill. I’d tell you to try this new talent of yours with some of Pep’s bridesmaids next week, but seeing as you know all of them, that’s not the best idea.”

Steve raises a confused eyebrow, “Why?”

Tony huffs out a laugh, “Because you do not want to have a one-night stand with any bridesmaid led by Natasha as maid of honor.”

“Dancing leads to . . .” Steve draws off, face red.

“Steve, half the point of going to a wedding, at least for us single people, is to dance until we’re dizzy and then fall into bed with our favorite dance partner.”

They shift again, Steve’s hand falling to Tony’s waist as he takes the lead. They glide across the floor for awhile with only the music between them, Steve’s eyebrows furrowed together in thought. “Go for the dip,” Tony urges, “if I don’t teach you the dip you’ll never get the ladies to fall for you.” He whoops as Steve does as instructed and dips him until only his toes are still on the dance floor.
Laughing, he says, “Just like that, they ladies will be clamoring to dance with you if you dip like that next week. Whoa, blood rush.”

“What if you’re my favorite dance partner?”

Tony blinks and shakes his head, the blood rushing away from it as Steve pulls him back up. “What?” he whispers, mind racing back through their conversation.

“I like dancing with you,” Steve says, so softly Tony barely hears him. The meaning is there all the same, though

Tony’s eyes widen and he wrenches his hand out of Steve’s grip, stepping away. He watches the alarm flash across Steve’s face, the dejected fall of his hand to his side as it slips from Tony’s waist, and he freezes. “That’s . . . Not a good idea,” he whispers.

Steve stares at the ground when he speaks, eyes downcast. “I know. You’ve already made that clear before.”

“I’ve what?”

The blonde’s eyes snap up, locking with Tony’s across the slowly widening gap between them. “You-” he starts, stops, eyebrows furrowing together.

“Don’t,” Tony stops him, fear-wide eyes shifting rapidly around the room, searching for the door he’d lost track of while they were spinning on the dance floor. “Don’t say it. Please don’t. Oh, Jesus, this is what I’ve been trying to avoid. I have to go,” he moves to put a hand on Steve’s arm, instinctively, and draws back before he makes contact. “I’m sorry,” he whispers, and darts towards the door.

Miraculously, it’s unlocked, and without another word he leaves Steve standing alone in the middle of the dance floor.
The One With Pepper's Wedding Part 1

Chapter Summary

The gang goes to London, the plane ride is hell, the airport antics are crazy, and Pepper has one last thing to do before she gets married. It's for the bride, guys. It's for the bride.

Bucky can count the worst nights of his life on one hand.

The first was when Steve’s mother had died and they’d sat on her empty bed together until the sun rose, saying nothing. What had there been to say?

The second was the night Steve had been shot. He likes to call it that, rather than the night that Peggy died, because it’s easier to say. “They’ll find us soon,” he’d promised over and over again, Steve’s back against his chest as he pressed one hand to Steve’s shoulder, blood oozing out between his fingers, and the other over Steve’s eyes.

“It doesn’t matter,” Steve had said, “it’s too late.”

He kept his hand over Steve’s eyes until Peggy’s body had been taken away.

The third starts after he opens the ballroom door to find Steve standing alone on the dance floor. He wants to ask what happened, wants to ask what went wrong, what could have possibly gone wrong in what should have been a flawless plan, but he says nothing as Steve looks at him with dull eyes and whispers, “I made it worse.”

“We fucked up,” he tells Sharon that night as he combs his fingers through Steve’s hair while he sleeps. “We fucked up so bad.”

“Maybe this is just a stepping stone,” she tries, but her voice trembles with regret. “Maybe they’ll figure things out soon.”

“That’s what the plan was for,” Bucky whispers, “and look how well that worked out.”

He’s spent years telling Steve things like, “It’ll get better;” and, “We’ll be okay;” and, “I’ll never let anything bad happen to you.” For the first time he feels like those words have been nothing but lies.

OoOoOoOoO

“Why did you have to do that?!?”

Loki doesn’t even twitch in the face of Tony’s anger. He’s already sent Darcy home, and he has never felt any need to cower in the face of Tony Stark. “Yell at me all you want, Stark, but this time it’s your fault.”

“If you and Darcy hadn’t-”

Loki snarls and cuts him off, “Don’t you even try to take this out on Darcy! Or Sharon, or Bucky! If you’re going to blame anyone, blame me! But you’re only doing it because you’re too much of a coward to blame yourself!”
Tony flinches back, stunned. “You shouldn’t have interfered,” he whispers, the fight draining out of him. “It wasn’t your place.

The slow, pained smile Loki sends at him makes Tony shudder. “Isn’t it? I’m tired of watching you wallow in your own self pity, Stark.”

“But I’m not-”

“-Good enough?” Loki finishes for him, a sneer edging along the corners of his mouth. “Isn’t the whole point of love finding the one person who thinks that you are?”

Tony frowns, “Steve wants more than I can give him. He wants the little house and the white picket fence and the two point five kids and I can’t be that person.”

“Maybe you don’t need to be,” Loki snaps. “The point of having dreams like that is to share them with another person. And when you find a person who you want to spend the rest of your fucking life with, you change those dreams to suit that person. There’s no use dreaming up a life alone.” He pushes past Tony as he says this and opens the door to the hall. “Think about it, Stark,” Loki says, slamming the door behind him when he leaves.

OoOoOoOo

Steve spends the next week in bed and Tony spends it being bullied by Pepper and Natasha.

“The best man shouldn’t have to pushed around by you harpies,” Tony pouts as Natasha and Pepper pull him into yet another store.

“Happy’s not going to rescue you,” Pepper says, “if that’s what you were hoping for.”

Tony pauses, “He should. Aren’t I supposed to be planning his bachelor party? Isn’t that one of my duties?”

“Rhodey’s taking care of that because Happy doesn’t trust you not to order strippers,” Natasha says seriously. Tony whines.

“What the hell sort of bachelor party doesn’t have strippers?”

“The I’m Very Much In Love With My Fiancé And Don’t Need To See Other Naked Women kind,” Pepper states. Tony sticks his tongue out at her like the mature person he is. “Besides,” she adds, “you weren’t doing anything anyways. You were just planning on sulking in your room all week.”

Tony huffs in protest, but finds that he can’t verbally deny it. Natasha’s smug, knowing smile doesn’t help his mood any.

“Why are we shopping the day before we get on the plane, anyways? What’s the point,” he mutters as they drag him towards the shoe section.

“We’re going to London,” Natasha says as if it’s obvious.

“We need new clothes if we’re going to be in London,” Pepper clarifies.

Tony gapes at her, “Why? No one in London has seen your old clothes, they’re not going to know whether you bought it yesterday or five years ago!”

Pepper taps him on the nose, silencing his confused outburst before he can start ranting at her. “Quiet. You will never understand.”
“Men can never understand,” Natasha agrees.

Tony rolls his eyes.

OoOoOoOoO

There are things that every person describes as hell in their lives.

For Tony, those things are usually along the lines of family dinners (when he’d still had family to have them with), a pile of paperwork, shopping with Pepper and Natasha, and anything with birds.

For Steve hell is the battlefield, The Second, electronics stores, and black coffee.

However, on the day that they all pile onto the plane to fly to London, both Tony and Steve decide that hell is also an airplane with no place to run.

Tony squishes himself in between Pepper and Rhodey (stealing Happy’s seat, but since Happy is a saint he moves to sit behind them with Luke and Jessica). “This is what hell is,” Tony whispers to Rhodey and Pepper in turn. “This is like the last circle of hell where you’re facing down the devil and you are so **fucked**. I need to get off this plane.”

Pepper glares at him, “If you do not come to my wedding, Tony Stark, I will personally kill you.” Tony, admittedly, believes every single word of that and slumps in defeat.

Rhodey pats his arm, “You’re being a baby,” he says without a hint of remorse. Tony narrows his eyes.

“I am being perfectly reasonable,” Tony argues.

Across the aisle Steve slouches between Bucky and Darcy, his eyes fixed out the window as the plane starts to roll away from the terminal. “We should go sightseeing when we get there,” he says absently.

Bucky shoots Darcy a confused look around Steve, “Um, what?”

“Sightseeing. In London,” Steve repeats. “Anything so I’m not stuck in the hotel for two whole days.” Bucky can tell he’s already itching to get off the plane, and they haven’t even taken off yet. He sighs.

“Okay, we’ll go sightseeing.”

“Or you could go with Tony,” Darcy suggests. Bucky stares at her and decides that, clearly, Darcy is a crazy person. “You know, to try and fix things up?” she goes on, shrugging when Bucky mouths, “**Oh my god what is wrong with you?**” in her direction.

Steve doesn’t look away from the window as he says, “I’m not sure there’s anything left to fix.”

In the row just behind them, Loki barely resists banging his head on the back of Darcy’s seat. He’s trapped between the window and Thor and Jane’s star-crossed lovers mooning, and he rests his head against the window with a heavy sigh. Unable to resist, he kicks Darcy’s seat.

Darcy glares at him through the gap between her and Steve’s chairs. “Don’t be such a grump,” she scolds.

“You could have at least saved me from sitting next to these clowns,” he accuses. Darcy smirks.
“Those clowns are your brother and my best friend. Be nice, it’s a long flight.”

“Oh my god.”

It’s at that moment that Jane turns to him and drops what appears to be a bundle of string into his hands. Darcy sniggers and Loki stares. “Cat’s Cradle,” she says evenly. “Darcy’s right, it’s a long flight. You might as well learn something.”

Jane plucks the string back out of his hands and demonstrates, smiling when Loki looks fascinated. “It’s a children’s game?” he asks when she holds her hands apart to show him the finished product.

“Something like that. Darcy knows how to do it too, so if you need any help as either one of us.” She gives him the string again and Loki gives it a considering frown.

OoOoOoO

Whoever let Thor loose in London was an idiot.

No, seriously.

Also whoever let Thor buy a camera was an idiot.

“This is a fine country!” Thor proclaims the second the get off the plane.

Loki doesn’t even look up from where he’s still trying to defeat the opponent that is Cat’s Cradle. “Thor, this is the airport,” he says flatly.

“It is a very fine airport in a very fine country!” Thor decides. Loki rolls his eyes.

When he looks up he finds himself staring into the lens of a handheld camcorder, and he scowls. “Where did you get that.”

“Darcy and Jane gave it to me for Christmas,” Thor reminds.

Loki purses his lips, “There’s nothing to film in the airport, Thor, put it away.”

“I think I will not,” Thor says matter-of-factly and whirls around to go film other things (other things being Jane and Darcy gossiping).

It should be noted that even if they weren’t in a foreign country their group (which took up almost an entire plane) making its way through the airport was going to attract anyone’s morbid attention. It was like watching a really uncoordinated gaggle of geese try and maneuver through a maze. Thor, of course, caught everything on camera.

Some of the many, many things Thor films at the airport include:

- Bucky hitting on a French girl and getting his foot stomped on with a pretty formidable looking high heel.
- Darcy purchasing three different smoothies because she can’t decide which flavor to get and dropping two out of three down the escalator.
- The heel of one of Pepper’s shoes getting stuck on the moving sidewalk. Happy rescues her via a very heroic, and appropriate, bridal-style pickup while Tony and Rhodey spend ten minutes trying to pry the shoe out from between the sidewalk panels.
- Steve getting left behind because he stopped to help six different old ladies carry their bags.
- Tony starting back to look for Steve at the same time Steve catches up to them, which ends in
Tony decides he hates the hotel the second they get there.

“What the fuck?” he asks Pepper once he corners her in her room. Corners meaning that she’s busy fixing her hair in the bathroom mirror while Tony tires, and fails, to yell at her.

“No need to be angry,” she says smoothly. “It’s just a rehearsal dinner. You’re not required to do much of anything tonight.”

“That’s not what I was talking about,” he hisses. “I mean the room arrangement. You put me right next door to Steve!”

Pepper glances at him, one eyebrow raised, “And?”

“And you were the one who told me to stay away from him!” Tony snaps.

She sighs, “I’ve been informed that the situation has changed.” Tony gapes at her. “Don’t give me that look, you know that at the time my advice was sound. You were harboring nothing but a crush then.”

Tony frowns, “And what’s the difference now?” he asks defensively.

“That you’re in love with him.”

Tony balks, “I am not.”

A short laugh escapes Pepper at this. “I’ve seen that look on your face before, Tony. If anyone should know that look, I think it would be me.”

For the first time in a long time, Tony wants to hug her. He wants to hold her and berate himself for ever letting her go, while at the same time being eternally glad that he did. He stays where he is, though, hovering in the doorway between the bedroom and the bathroom of her suite. “What should I do?” he asks, because even if he’s changed, Steve hasn’t. It’s still the same situation, just with a little more added pain once it all goes to shit. Not that it hasn’t already, but he could still use some
Pepper turns away from the mirror, takes his hands in hers and squeezes them. “That’s the only part I can’t give you any hints about, Tony.” Tony whines and she smiles. “There’s one more thing that’s changed, since the last time we had this talk, but that’s for you to realize. Seeing as Loki’s meddling didn’t cue you in, I doubt anything I say will.”

“Loki’s a dick,” Tony says darkly. Pepper taps him on the nose with a finger.

“A dick that you slept with.”

“It scares me that you know about that.”

“I am the Tony whisperer. I know everything.” She pats his cheek and smiles when he scowls. “Now, promise me you’ll talk to Steve tonight.” Tony’s scowl deepens. “Promise. Me. Tony,” she repeats, emphasizing each word with another pat on his cheek. “For the bride.”

“Using that line on me is cheating,” he says, but sighs with defeat all the same.

OoOoOoOoO

Pepper corners Steve during the rehearsal dinner. She starts off by handing him a glass of wine.

“I don’t—” he starts, eyeing the wine with distaste.

“-Drink,” Pepper finishes for him. “You’ll want to tonight. Take it like a shot and then we need to talk.” Steve, surprisingly, does as directed and drinks the glass of wine in a single, impressive gulp. Pepper takes the glass from him and sets it aside, “Good boy. Now we talk.” Steve swallows.

“I’m not sure what this is about,” he starts, a bit unnerved by her serious tone.

“Bullshit. This is about Tony, and you know it.”

Steve blanches, “I have no idea what you’re talking about.” It’s quite obvious from Pepper’s unfazed look that she doesn’t buy it and Steve gulps.

“I’m not going to ask exactly what happened,” She says firmly, “I have Natasha for that. But I am going to make you promise that you’ll talk to him. Tonight. I won’t have anyone fighting at my wedding.”

“But—”

“For the bride,” Pepper pleads.

Long after Steve has wandered off, Loki pulls Pepper aside to say, “I don’t understand how one phrase can accomplish what I spent months trying, and failing, to do.”


OoOoOoOo

Tony decides that he can’t talk to Steve if he doesn’t see him. It’s a fine plan, if he says so himself, and he has already practiced what he’ll say to Pepper in the morning when she asks how it went.

“What, with Steve? I didn’t see him all day.”

For awhile, things go surprisingly smoothly. He stays at his table with Thor, Jane, and Rhodey,
appearing too occupied in conversation to go anywhere else, even to the bar. He regretted this last part, slightly, because sobriety and feelings didn’t mix so well together. But he wasn’t going to be talking about feelings, was he? If he didn’t see Steve, he didn’t have to talk to Steve. And seeing how he’d fled the ballroom the last time they’d talked, he was certain Steve didn’t want to talk to him either.

He should have known Pepper didn’t trust him, really, he should have. Tony blinks at her when she sits down at next to him some time later and smiles at him, blindingly innocent. “What did you do,” he hisses.

“It was for your own good,” she says calmly. “And don’t think I don’t know what you’re trying to do. You’ve played the same game when you’re trying to avoid doing paper work. It’s a bit harder to do when the target you’re trying to steer clear of is a living one, though.”

“I really, really hate you,” Tony mutters. Pepper just smirks and pats his arm.

“You love me and you know it. You can thank me later.”

Tony points a finger at her, “No. I hate you. You are a devious villain who has taken too many pointers from Natasha.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Pepper says. Tony groans and wishes he had enough courage to leave the table and get a glass of something strong. “Also, I’ve already told the bartender not to serve you any drinks,” she adds. Tony thumps his head down on the table.

OoOoOoO

“You’re really going to talk to him?” Bucky asks as he fiddles with the flowers on their table.

Steve nods, “Pepper used the ‘For the bride’ thing on me.”

“Ah,” Bucky says in sympathetic understanding, “the old wedding death sentence. If the bride asks you to jump off a building you’re basically obligated to do it.”

“I’d like to substitute my orders for that building thing,” Steve jokes, tone grim. Bucky punches him in the arm.

“So not funny. And it’s really not that bad, is it?” he hesitates, cautious about broaching the subject at all after what happened last week. Steve shrugs.

“I don’t know anymore. I mean, for so long I thought I’d already messed things up. I had been certain that he knew. But now . . .” He absently bats Bucky’s hands away from the now wilted looking flowers, “I’m not so sure I was right.”

Bucky frowns, “About messing things up, or about him knowing.”

“Both?”

Bucky sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose. “I have never known any two people so completely emotionally confused as the two of you. It’s actually sitcom-level ridiculous.”

Steve makes a face, “Except sitcoms are primarily funny.”

“I think you’ve just been missing out on the funny bits,” Bucky says. “Next time Darcy decides we have to watch romcoms all night come sit through that. The hilarity of those stupid things goes up by
“Tony,” Steve says calmly, “Please open the door.”

Tony snorts, “That is definitely not going to happen.”

There’s a sigh and then fading footsteps from the hallway, and Tony lifts his hands in premature victory just before the bathroom door creaks open.

“We have a connecting bathroom,” Steve says, like that missed little detail should have been obvious. Tony regrets not checking the room out that afternoon and curses Pepper’s foresight.

He fumbles behind himself for the doorknob, fiddling with the lock so he can make yet another hasty retreat. Tony starts to ease the door open once he figures it out, eyes leaving where Steve is slowly walking across the room towards him so he can make a break for it. He nearly jumps out of his skin when Steve’s hand lands on the door just above his shoulder, shutting it tight again. “Pepper said we need to have a talk,” he says lowly and Tony’s heart sinks into his gut.

“What if I don’t want to talk,” Tony whispers.

“Then listen,” Steve says. “I guess, really, that you don’t have to say much of anything. It’s . . . It’s my fault, anyways. I should be the one to explain.” He takes his hand away from the door and runs it through his hair and over the back of his neck in what Tony recognizes as his most telling nervous gesture. “So just listen, okay? Promise me you’ll at least hear me out.”

Tony nods dumbly, and Steve gives him a shaky smile.
“I’m sorry about, uh, last week. With the dancing and . . . What I said,” Steve starts, hand still nervously rubbing at the back of his neck. “I thought you already knew about everything, and that that’s why you’d avoided me for awhile last year. What I said was just one of those last desperate hope things, and I shouldn’t have said it at all but . . .” He pauses, eyes finding Tony’s, “You didn’t know, did you.”

“Um,” is all Tony finds he can say to that because what? “I think I need some clarification here,” he says finally.

Steve stiffens, “Well how do I put this . . . I . . . Um . . . I like you a lot, Tony.” Tony blinks and Steve drops his hand from his neck, eyebrows furrowing together, “You don’t get it, good grief. How do I-”

He moves forward before Tony realizes what’s happening. It’s the briefest of kisses, the lightest flutter of Steve’s lips on his before Steve pulls away again. Tony stares at him for a long, uncomfortable moment, watches Steve shift on his toes, eyes downcast, tongue darting out to swipe over the lips he’d only just kissed Tony with and Tony inhales and blurs out, “Holy shit!” because, honestly, it’s the only proper reaction to have.

Steve flinches at the words, “I know you already don’t, uh, feel the same, but I just . . . I needed to get that out in the open and I-”

“Oh my god, shut up,” Tony says breathlessly. “Just shut up.” And then he’s surging forward, grabbing Steve by the collar of his nice rehearsal dinner shirt, and kissing him like he’s wanted to do for years. Steve makes a startled little noise that Tony swallows as he nips at Steve’s lower lip. He feels Steve’s hands find his back, stutter down his spine and hold him there as he sways, thinks he’s falling for a moment until his shoulders meet the door again. Tony shoves a leg in between Steve’s and presses up against him like he’s trying to blend them into one being, one hand tangling into Steve’s hair to hold him there, keep him there, never let him leave because he fears that if he lets go that they’ll be back to standing on opposite sides of the room again.

Steve’s the one who breaks away for breath first, tilting his head to the side just enough to pull away, and he rests his forehead on Tony’s as he closes his eyes, shivers, and simply breathes. “I think there’s been a misunderstanding,” he says, a strange little broken jumble of words that’s halfway between a laugh and a sob. Tony slips his hand out of Steve’s hair and traces it down the blonde’s jaw line and chin, over the side of his neck and across his collar bone. “What are we doing, Tony?” Steve asks, like it’s some sort of philosophical question that even the greatest minds of their time can’t answer. Considering that Tony’s one of said great minds, maybe they can’t.

“Something stupid,” Tony breathes between them, and kisses Steve again for all he’s worth.
Chapter Summary

"Something stupid," he’d said, and he hadn't been lying.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

If time could stop Tony would freeze frame this moment.

He lays on his side as the sun rises and runs his fingers through Steve’s hair, smiling when Steve hums contentedly in his sleep. One of Steve’s arms is thrown over Tony’s hip, the other tucked under the pillow. They’re curled so close together that Tony can count his eyelashes. The morning sunlight is just starting to drift in from between the curtains, illuminating the little drifting bits of dust in the air and the marks on skin left from the night before. Tony traces out the soft purpling along Steve’s collarbone and smiles when Steve’s arm unconsciously tightens around Tony’s hip and over the light bruises where his hands had gripped them.

If Tony could stop time he would freeze frame this moment. The sun would never do any more than peek over the horizon. The bits of dust in the light would stop drifting, falling, floating and hang lingering in the air forever. The marks along Steve’s collarbone would never fade. He would freeze time so that their breaths would be stuck mingling between them for eternity and the sheets would never grow cold.

If time stopped Tony would never have to leave.

It takes more willpower than he has to slip out of bed. His hands linger too long over Steve’s ever so carefully following the paths of the lifelines on Steve’s palms with his thumb as he moves Steve’s arm from his waist. When he sits up he spends far too long watching Steve sleep, the rise and fall of his chest when he breathes and the flutter of his eyelids as he dreams. He wants to map out every inch of skin, paint the contours of Steve’s body across the inside of his eyes like the sunspots that linger too long when you forget to look away from the sky.

It’s nearly 6:30 when Tony finally forces himself to slip out of bed and into the shower. He lets the hot water wash away almost all traces of the night before and scrubs at kiss marks and small bruises as if he can make those fall away and rinse down the drain as well. If water could wash away memories, he would let it, just this once. It would make the morning to come easier if he couldn’t remember what he’d done.

“Something stupid,” he’d said, and he hadn’t been lying.

“Let me do this stupid thing just this once,” he’d told Steve under the cover of shadows, inhaling sharply when Steve smiled against his jaw line, leaving trails of gentle bite marks down his neck.

“I don’t like being called a ‘Stupid thing,’” Steve had hummed in return, eyes bright in the darkness, and Tony had laughed.

The discussion had ended there.
Tony scrubs at the marks Steve had left and frowns when they simply stand out more, proof of the night before staining his skin. When he dresses he’s careful to cover them, not so much to hide them away as to help him forget that they’re there at all. He can still see one though, a bit high on his neck, a blossoming bloom of purple-red almost touching the line of his spine. He tightens his tie so as to excuse it away as the chafing of a new tux, should anyone ask.

Steve’s still asleep when he leaves, eyes shut tight against the morning light gathering across the sheets pooled around his waist. Tony hesitates in the doorway, laptop tucked under one arm, and almost lets himself think that sneaking back into bed would be alright, just this once.

Almost.

He closes the door behind him with a whispered, “I’m sorry,” he knows Steve doesn’t hear.

OoOoOoO

The continental hotel breakfast is, unsurprisingly, worse than every single similar hotel breakfast Tony’s ever had in America. He takes one bite of a biscuit and spits it back out. It’s appalling to him, in that moment, that one man could miss donuts so much. He would gladly trade every biscuit at this hotel for the world’s most nauseating Krispy Cream, and that’s a fact.

He sets his laptop up in the corner furthest from the door and picks at the little plate of watery eggs he’s decided are only marginally better than the biscuit from hell. It would be easiest if he could just pack up and leave now, but he knows that if he misses Pepper’s wedding she will, quite literally, hunt him down and skin him alive. Even if he fled to the middle of some foreign jungle, Pepper would find him. So he considers his options for every day after the wedding. There are seats open for destination to everywhere from France to Vietnam, and Tony weighs his options on both locality and the chances of people he knows finding him. Pepper is guaranteed to find him eventually, but Steve however... .

His laptop slams shut and nearly smashes his fingers as a hand pushes it closed.

“You’re not running,” Steve says blandly. Tony freezes. “I guess it was a bit silly of me to think that I’d be the one you’d stick around for,” Steve’s tone is low, disappointed, hurt, and Tony lets his head fall into his hands.

“It’s not like that,” he says softly.

“Isn’t it?” Steve sits across from him at the table, one hand still on the laptop where it’s effectively ruining Tony’s plans for indefinite escape.

“Last night was... A really bad idea,” Tony starts, feeling helpless under Steve’s confused gaze. “I shouldn’t have gone along with it and I’m sorry.”

Steve stares at him for a long moment before his says, far too calmly, “You’re an idiot.” Tony blinks at him, stunned. “We’re consenting adults, Tony, and last night was just something that two consenting adults do.”

“Quit making everything so black and white,” Tony snaps after a pause. “Not everything is that simple.”
Steve raises an eyebrow, “From where I’m standing it is.”

Tony shakes his head, “Well then you’re wrong. I’m not - I can’t - Steve I can’t -”

“Can’t what?”

And, oh, how can he say it aloud? Can’t be good enough? Can’t be anything? Everything? Can’t be more than who he already is? Tony clenches his teeth together and exhales as he searches for the right words before finally letting, “Can’t be with you,” slip out before he can think it over. It’s the all of the above answer, and Tony winces as he says it.

Steve looks utterly shell-shocked at the words. “What are you talking about?”

Tony rubs a hand over his eyes, “You’ll thank me for it someday, believe me. You don’t want to be stuck with me for any period of time. It’s better if I hurt you now rather than later, and, hell, you probably weren’t even entirely in your right mind last night. Feelings, and stuff, those are just things that can shift and fade over time, so it’s . . . Better if it’s now rather than later.”

“I was completely conscious of what I did last night,” Steve says lowly. Tony frowns.

“I could taste the alcohol on your lips, Steve,” he replies.

Steve stiffens, “Is that what you think this is? Some drunken fling? Tony I had one glass, and with my size it takes a whole lot more than that to get me even buzzed. I meant every single word I said last night!”

Tony stands then, “And will you still mean those words in a week? In a month? In a year? In ten years? I don’t want to be the thing you look back on with regret, Steve! I can’t be someone else’s regret! And I can’t be someone who takes up your time and wastes it until you realize that I’m not worth it!”

Steve’s eyes widen and he opens his mouth to say something, but Tony doesn’t stick around to hear it. He doesn’t even bother to pry his laptop out from under Steve’s hand when he flees.

OoOoOoOoO

“Hold my flowers,” Pepper tells him when he walks into her dressing room. Tony puts his hands behind his back.

“No way. I’m not holding the magic wedding flowers. I’m not touching those with a ten foot pole,” he mutters. Pepper pauses in the middle of putting on her shoes to stare at him.

“You had sex with Steve,” she says without hesitation.

Tony narrows his eyes, “Okay, what the hell, did you have my room bugged or something?”

Pepper smirks, “No. But you do have an impressive hickey on your neck.” Tony slaps a hand over the side of his neck with a curse. So much for waving it off as tuxedo chafing. She laughs and tosses him the bouquet before he can protest. “Hold my flowers and stop sulking.

Tony catches them and scowls. “Oh, great, now I’m cursed. You have cursed me, Pepper.”

“That’s only if you catch them after I’m married, moron,” Pepper says calmly. “Now, tell me why you’re here an hour early.”

“What? Can’t a man be early for-” He doesn’t finish whatever half-assed explanation he was going
for, and falters under Pepper’s disbelieving eyebrow. “Okay, fuck it. Steve and I had sex and it was a mistake.”

Pepper stares at him for a long, uncomfortable minute before she says, “Wow. Your idiocy level just hit the moon with that one. I’m astounded.”

“Pepper . . .” He starts to whine. She silences him by standing and putting a finger to his lips.

“Tony Stark, you idiot, for once in your life just listen.” He shuts up, eyes wide and a little cross-eyed as he tries to look at the finger on his lips. “You are good enough,” Pepper says with confidence, and Tony shudders.

“I’m not,” he protests. “I’m a disappointment, I’m a wreck, I’m-”

“-More than enough for Steve,” Pepper finishes for him. That makes Tony grow silent, and Pepper smiles. “Now let me fix your hair, you look like a hobo. And no hobos are walking me down the aisle today.”

OoOoOoOoO

Somewhere in the back of his mind Tony had always thought giving Pepper away at her wedding would be the hard part. He was wrong.

The hardest part is having to walk down the aisle twice (once in his position as Happy’s best man, once walking Pepper down the aisle) and then standing there for the longest hour of his life. He zones out for the first forty-five minutes (Rhodey elbowing him in the side every time he starts to nod off), and spends the last fifteen making sure no one sees him cry. Pepper, however, smirks at him over Happy’s shoulder and Tony knows she saw him. He barely refrains from sticking his tongue out at her.

Worse than all of that combined, however, is Steve’s eyes on him. He can feel them from all the way across the chapel, boring into him even though Tony never turns to confirm exactly where Steve is sitting. He’s a bit too busy trying not to cry, which isn’t easy considering how hard Pepper cries. Happy’s crying, though, is borderline hysterical. Rhodey stomps on his foot when he snickers.

“Quit being a dick,” Rhodey hisses at him while the vows are being wrapped up.

“That’s like asking a penguin not to be awesome,” Tony whispers back.

“You look like a-” Rhodey starts, but shuts up when both he and Tony notice Natasha’s death glare being directed at them from the other side of the pulpit.

Tony stays well clear of the swarm of people that surge up to congratulate Pepper and Happy when it’s all over, too afraid of bumping into someone he doesn’t want to see.

“Claustrophobic?” Darcy asks when she extracts herself from the crowd to stand at his side.

“Affect-phobic,” Loki corrects wryly, appearing on Tony’s other side. If there had been more room, Tony would have jumped.

“Ah,” Darcy says as if she understands.

Tony decides to ignore whatever affect-phobic means. “You guys don’t want to catch the bouquet?” he asks instead.
Loki makes a face at the very idea and Darcy shrugs. “Eh, I’m young,” she says, “no need to rush.” Tony gifts her with an approving nod and she grins. “But shouldn’t you be out there? You’re-”

“No one will ever find your body if you say old,” he warns. Darcy, wisely, doesn’t finish that sentence.

“Thirty-two is pretty old,” Loki says seriously. Tony smacks him on the arm.

The crowd starts to part as Pepper turns around, bouquet held aloft. Tony covers his ears as the girls start to scream in excitement. He will never, ever understand this ritual. Although he’s starting to think placing bets on who catches it would be an amusing idea. Pepper tosses the flowers high and Tony watches as they arc towards the chapel ceiling while the girls, and some guys, below jump and flail in an effort to catch it. He sees Jane miss it by a few inches as it sails overhead, smiles when Natasha doesn’t even try, and frowns when it disappears into the back of the crowd.

“Anticlimactic,” he complains.

Darcy nudges him, “Um, not quite . . .”

The crowd parts with the surprised squeals of some of the girls to reveal Steve holding the flowers in one hand that’s half raised as if he was in the middle of explaining something with hand motions. Bucky’s standing beside him with a horrified look on his face. Tony can’t decide whether to laugh or to cry. Loki gives him a knowing look and Darcy claps.

“Oh my god,” Tony chokes out.

Steve holds the bouquet as far away from himself as possible as he carries it back to his room, ignoring Bucky’s babbling the whole way.

“I can’t believe you caught that! You weren’t even trying! It’s like it was magnetized to fall into your hand!” Bucky says excitedly before turning oddly serious, “But, no, for real. Set it on fire. You do not want the wedding curse. All the ladies will be scrambling to get you because you’re guaranteed to be the next one married.”

Steve snorts, clearly not believing any of this. “Seeing as Jessica and Luke are engaged, I’m positive that that’s not true.”

Bucky sweeps his hands through the air and says, mysteriously, “Anything could happen.”

“You’re just bitter because of that one time some girl caught the bouquet at a wedding while standing next to you and was convinced-”

Bucky cuts him off with a hand to his mouth, “You made a vow to never discuss that psycho again. Bro Code, man.”

Steve laughs. “Maybe you should have caught it,” he jokes. Bucky looks appropriately terrified of the idea.

“Let this lone wolf be!” He cries, aghast that the very suggestion of marriage. Steve shakes his head and pats him on the arm.

“Go be a lone wolf elsewhere, Bucky. I have things to do,” he shoos Bucky away with a wave of the dreaded bouquet in his general direction, chuckling when Bucky nearly trips over himself in an
effort to get away. He’s still laughing when he enters his room and shuts the door behind him. The flowers are left on the nightstand and he’s halfway out of his tux before his eyes fall on the door to the bathroom.

He honestly doesn’t expect the door on the other side of the shower to be unlocked, let alone for Tony to be in his room instead of halfway across the globe, but he is. Steve crosses the room slowly, just waiting for Tony to bolt again, but Tony doesn’t move from where he’s sitting on the end of the bed, barely even breathes until Steve sits next to him.

Tony sighs, “I’m not going to let this be anything,” he says immediately, going right for the throat. Steve says nothing. “It was a one night thing fueled by whatever crazy juice they put in the water here, and it’s not going to go beyond that.” He glances at Steve, “Please don’t ask it to be. I can’t . . .”

“Your new excuse is drugs in the water,” Steve deadpans. Tony nods. “Now, is that on my part or yours?”

“Yours,” Tony decides. “Mine,” he changes his mind. “Or, uh, both.” He reaches to pluck a stray flower petal off the sleeve of Steve’s shirt, “Saw you catch the bouquet back there. Your bride’s gonna be a lucky lady.”

“Tony—”

“Don’t,” Tony pleads. “Please don’t.”

Steve purses his lips and scrubs a hand over his face, “Fine. But I have one question.”

“Go for it,” Tony says, already prepared to whip out any number of lies as a reply.

“This claimed insanity of yours, and blamed of mine, that’s your excuse?”

“Um, yes.”

“London is full of crazy?”

“Yes.”

“Well seeing as I’m still in London, and you’re still in London . . .” He leans over and kisses Tony before any protests can be said and Tony groans.

OoOoOoOoO

The next morning when Tony tries to sneak out of bed again, smiling when Tony rolls his eyes and lets himself be pulled back in. “Still in London,” he reminds while they pack, stopping too often to fall back into bed in a tangle of limbs and sheets.

“The airport is still London,” he declares when he corners Tony between two payphones (who even knew those still existed?) and kisses him, clings to him out of sight until the last boarding call can be heard.

“Still over international waters,” Tony whispers when he puts his head on Steve’s shoulder, half asleep during the long flight home. He wakes up before they land and pointedly pries himself away, posture suddenly rigid and controlled. Steve watches him with a considering look.

“Still in London,” Steve says when Tony tries to sneak out of bed again, smiling when Tony rolls his eyes and lets himself be pulled back in. “Still in London,” he reminds while they pack, stopping too often to fall back into bed in a tangle of limbs and sheets.

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The cab ride back to their building is rowdy, Bucky and Natasha arguing over who gets control of the radio in the van while Thor, Clint, and Bruce decide to make their own music with some rousing drinking songs they learned at a London Pub. Loki spends the ride glaring at Thor’s newly purchased union jack hat like it’s the scum of the earth. Steve and Tony stay silent the entire way.

It’s a hassle to unload everything from the cab (mostly because Loki doesn’t help at all since he dashes off to check on Chick and Duck the second they all pile out). It’s a hassle to get everything and everyone into the elevators. It’s a hassle to unpack (or in Thor’s case dump everything on the floor), and it’s a hassle to get everyone to go somewhere else, Jesus Christ, so that there’s room to breathe. In the end Natasha herds them all downstairs to the coffee shop to go bother Coulson.

When they leave, Tony really wishes he’d gone with them.

“We’re not still in London,” he says, keeping a fair amount of space between himself and Steve. Tony looks away when Steve’s eyebrows furrow together, the little frown of disappointment marring his features. It should have never gotten this far, Tony realizes too late, and he bites at his lip with regret. “I’m going to, uh, go stay at Pepper and Happy’s place while they’re on their honeymoon, give you some space, time to clear your head and-”

“I’m not going to suddenly realize that you’re right about this,” Steve interrupts. Tony swallows. “You will, though. Everyone does.”

Steve lets Tony leave, lets the door shut between them, lets him run with the stinging knowledge that he might never come back. He glances at his watch as he listens to Tony’s fading footsteps down the hallway and frowns. It reads well after midnight, yet Natasha had just taken everyone down for coffee . . .

Realization hits him and he doesn’t even bother to shut and lock the door behind him as he scrambles out of the apartment. He takes the stairs, practically flying down them in his haste. He has seconds, maybe minutes, to spare and yet he’s not even out of breath when he bursts out of the building and stumbles out onto the street. The likelihood of Tony taking a cab is slim, and the chance that he walked past the coffee shop is even slimmer, so Steve goes left.

There is really no way in hell Tony should have gotten that far, but Steve runs two blocks before he slows down, eyes darting down alleyways and over the other side of the street. He can’t have missed him, could he?

But the slow mill of passerby parts, just enough.

Tony is just a little further down the sidewalk, hands shoved into his pockets and shoulders slumped as he walks, and Steve stops.

“Hey, Tony!” he shouts, screams, yells over the dull summer traffic. Tony halts mid step. “My watch is still on London time!” Steve says, voice breaking over the words with elated hope.

Slowly, Tony turns to face him, posture lightening as he stares at Steve, tips his head back, and laughs. “Oh, god,” he wheezes, hands falling to his knees, “If that’s the line that makes me come back, I’m so screwed, aren’t I?”

Steve chuckles, “I’m the one who just ran down half a building’s worth of stairs.”

“Well then we’re both screwed,” Tony decides, huffing with surprise when Steve grabs him, kisses him hard in the middle of the sidewalk. “You’re going to regret this,” he warns softly when they break apart.
“Never,” Steve promises.

Chapter End Notes

And, unfortunately, with that I must go on a really, I swear to god, temporary hiatus. There are still MANY more Avengers Friends!AU chapters to come! But I have finals to study for and a 100-120 page script to write that's only half done. I WILL RETURN AFTER MAY 5th! Until then, feel free to scream at me. And watch Avengers. Don't miss the premier, guys!
The One With All The Kissing

Chapter Summary

It's the return of the friends who spend too much time on other people's couches!

Chapter Notes

Posting this early in a vague attempt to calm my hyperventilation about the movie tonight, and as a special treat to the rest of you who are probably feeling the same as I am.

Tony’s heard fairytale-like accounts of weekends and days spent in bed, of time wasted away between sheets and hours whileed in a suspended state of contentment. He’s heard of such things, of course, but he’s never had any sort of desire to do them. Pepper had tried to coax him into one such weekend once, but Tony had gotten antsy after a couple of hours and had wandered back to his workshop while Pepper had been asleep. The following fight had was probably one of the main contributing factors to their breakup, now that Tony thinks about it. Wasting time like that is exactly what it sounds like to him; wasting time. It’s time he could be using to work on things, to design and invent and create. Uselessly spent time is just throwing away hours that he could have used to, especially with such things as *entire weekends in bed*. A half a dozen hours is all he has time for, in his opinion.

Or at least that’s what he used to think.

“I don’t want to get up,” Tony whines into a pillow the morning after they get back from London. Steve just laughs.

This is how Tony spends his first ever weekend in bed. And, really, it’s not what everyone tells him it is. Or at least what he imagined it is. What Tony imagined was a lot of sex, a lot of sleeping, and a lot of lying around doing nothing. It’s quite the opposite.

There’s not as much sex as there is foreplay. There are hours spent just exploring, tasting, feeling, touching, discovering, and two times out of three that’s all it is. They map out each other’s skin with fingers, teeth, tongue, memorize the sensitive places and the spots that make the other gasp. The sleep part comes easier than it ever has in Tony’s entire life, satisfied exhaustion creeping up on him when he only means to take a short nap. There’s never an actual moment where they do nothing, either. Tony works on his iPad and Steve draws, the two of them shoulder to shoulder against the headboard. When they’re hungry Steve slips out to get them something, and of course there’s never a moment when they’re bored.

Monday dawns with reluctance. Steve wakes Tony up by tracing out patterns along his shoulder blades, and Tony huffs out a sigh into the mattress. “I have a meeting today. I have to go in Pepper’s stead while she and Happy are frolicking through Greece on their honeymoon,” he mutters, regret clear in his tone.
“Better get going then,” Steve deadpans. Tony smirks.

“I’ve never had to sneak out before.” Steve raises an eyebrow and Tony looks practically giddy at his confusion. “No one knows yet, you see, about this.” He rolls over so he can properly wave a hand between them, smiling when Steve’s arm repositions itself across his waist. “And they were all such dicks about it before I was thinking it would be kinda fun to keep them from knowing about it.”

Steve frowns disapprovingly, “They were trying to help, Tony.”

“It was none of their business.”

“Tony . . .”

“Please, Steve? Please, please, please? It’ll be fun. I promise. If we make them think that nothing happened between us they’re freak out. Please? I want to pretend I’m on that show with that Kutcher guy and scream, ‘Punk’d!’ or whatever when we tell them the truth,” Tony clasps his hands together under his chin as he says this, “Please, Steve? Come on.”

Steve purses his lips, “Only if it’s for a little while. I don’t like lying.”

“It’s not lying,” Tony persists, “It’s simply the withholding of new information.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s the same thing.”

Tony does too, but he’s not going to admit that aloud. He reaches over the side of the bed and snags a shirt, which ends up being Steve’s, and tosses it aside. “Help me find my clothes. I can’t go out of your room butt naked, it’s indecent.” Steve snorts. “Okay,” Tony corrects, “I can’t go out butt naked in front of Clint. I do have some standards, you know.”

Steve shakes his head and hands Tony a pair of pants he’s dug out from underneath the bed. “That’s not what you said last night,” he hums and Tony gapes at him.

“I’ve turned you into a monster,” Tony says seriously. Steve just gives him an innocent smile. “Now help me think of an excuse for why I’m walking out of your room at nine in the morning.”

They really don’t need an excuse, however, seeing as when they’re halfway through the living room discussing proper sock sorting techniques (Steve is no longer allowed to pick excuse topics after this), Clint isn’t even home. Tony whoops when he realizes this and practically jumps Steve with the excuse that Clint’s absence gives them a few extra minutes that would have otherwise been spent on excuses.

Of course it’s while they’re right in the middle of a pretty good liplock that the front door opens. Tony thanks God every day for his fairly quick reaction time to unexpected situations as he breaks away from a startled looking Steve and turns very robotically to face the intruders. Clint, Natasha, and Bruce are standing in the doorway and staring at them, Natasha looking more bored than surprised.

“And that’s how they tell people goodbye in Europe!” Tony exclaims and stiffly moves towards the door. Despite never turning around he can practically see Steve’s shoulders shaking with laughter as he methodically moves to give overly dramatic kisses to both a Bruce and Clint, who are too stunned and horrified to stop him. He pauses in front of Natasha, who gazes back at him with an unreadable expression, and he gives her the swiftest peck he can manage before dashing down the hallway.

When he’s gone Natasha turns to Steve and says, blandly, “What was that?”
Steve’s still trembling with suppressed mirth and he puts a hand over his mouth to stifle a laugh as he replies with a rather shaky, “I have no idea.”

Bruce and Clint stay frozen with shock near the door for another ten minutes while Natasha goes about fixing breakfast.

OoOoOoOoOoOo

Loki locks himself in Tony’s room. It’s vacant for the whole weekend, and he knows full well why that is. He makes sure Thor doesn’t notice during the few hours that he’s home, leaves notes on the fridge saying that he’s simply gone out when he’s really just sitting in the second bedroom, back to the door, his hands over his ears and his face pressed into the space between his knees and chest.

He can still hear Thor reading the notes out loud. Loki thinks that maybe he’s reading them to Chick and Duck, but he never checks to confirm.

“Gone out with Darcy,” one reads.

“Went to see a movie,” another says.

“Getting groceries,” the third states.

All of them are blatant lies. He turns off the light in Tony’s room and draws the curtains closed, waiting, wondering how long it will take for Thor, or anyone for that matter, to realize the notes are just false words on paper.

To Loki, darkness is safety. It’s a cradle where he doesn’t have to see anything, a protection from a world that he sometimes wishes he wasn’t a part of. Darkness hides everything in its shadows, everything good, everything bad, everything that Loki doesn’t want to see or think about.

Darkness doesn’t block out sound. Even with his hands over his ears he hears everything that goes on in the apartment. He hears Jane come and go a few times, hears Thor leave with her, hears a knock on the front door he doesn’t leave the room to answer, and hears Chick and Duck calling for him. They’re the only ones who know he’s there.

“Not now,” he tells them when they call for him just outside the door, “not now.”

Some small part of him had hoped that if he could fix things between Tony and Steve everything would somehow fall into place. If Tony could figure things out then maybe he could as well.

It doesn’t work that way. He knew better than to expect such easy simplicity from the world.

Loki feels like something is clawing at him, ripping him apart from the inside out with every minute that he passes alone in the shadowed room. Tony doesn’t come home. Rip. Thor doesn’t notice the notes are false. Tear. He’s alone. Shred. He’s alone. Bleed.

He’s alone.

Break.

OoOoOoOoO

The meeting is terribly boring. Tony forgets what they’re even discussing less than ten minutes in, and decides that a much better use of his time is pretending he has very important work to do on his phone. The work, of course, being texting.
He starts with the basics.

What are you wearing?

Aren’t you supposed to be in a meeting?

I am in a meeting. What are you wearing?

Pay attention to your meeting, Tony.

Draw me like one of your French girls, Steve.

Does Pepper know you’re not paying attention to the meeting?

Do you even know what sexting is?

Yes. Pay attention to the meeting, Tony.

Tony sighs and pockets his phone again and nearly bangs his head down on the table before he remembers where he is and that he has an entire week of this to get through. He groans and wishes a fire would break out just so he’d have an excuse to leave.

OoOoOoOoO

Natasha leans over Steve’s shoulder as he fumbles to put his phone back in his pocket. “Anything you want to tell us?” she asks, smirking as Steve sputters and turns beet red.

“No. Just telling Tony to pay attention during his business meeting,” Steve says a little too hastily.

Natasha eyes him, “Can you answer a couple of questions for me?”

Steve swallows, “Um, sure?”

“You’re happy?”

She’s faintly surprised by the way his eyes instantly light up when he replies with a steady, “Yes.”

“And this is what you want?”

“What’s what I want?” he questions, his ploy of not understanding what was asked betrayed by the smile on his face which is enough of an answer on its own.

“Final question,” Natasha goes on, prodding him in the shoulder with a finger, “And tell me this honestly. Is this a phase?”

Steve’s eyes widen, “No,” he says without hesitation. “Is that what . . .”

“I don’t know what Tony thinks, but I do know it’s what Pepper’s afraid of,” Natasha murmurs. “I’m just making sure. That’s what I’ve been doing all year, really. It wouldn’t do any good to see either of you hurt by this.” She shrugs and straightens up. “So I’d advise that you try not to mess this up.” Steve’s eyes narrow and she waves a dismissive hand at him. “Don’t worry, Tony will be getting the same advice later today. I’m not pinning anything on you specifically.”

OoOoOoOoO

Loki likes the solid feel of the door against his back. It grounds him and reminds him where he is
with every breath he takes that ricochets his heartbeat through the wood and back into his ribs. For awhile he sleeps, the door to his back and his hands over his ears to muffle the drone of the outside world.

The door keeps him focused even as he dreams. It’s funny, really, how the dreams he creates in shadows are always more prominent than those his mind makes up at night. They’re no brighter, no simpler, or no easy to understand, but they linger long after he has woken rather than fade with the morning’s light.

He dreams of the creaking of swings. The sound rings harshly in his ears, the grate of chain links over dirt and rust. Underneath his hands he can feel the cold metal of each individual link and he traces them around, up, down, over and over again with the tips of his fingers. He doesn’t swing, however, finds that he’s almost afraid to, the prospect of taking flight while never really leaving the ground terrifying. Instead he keeps his eyes on the playground sand and scuffs it underneath his shoes.

The door is still behind him, solid, grounding even in the depths of sleep.

He’s waiting. For what, he can’t remember. Waiting to swing? Waiting to leave? Waiting to go home? Waiting . . He keeps his gaze fixed on the sand, the sound of swing chains squeaking in his ears and the cold metal of them under his palms.

Loki opens his eyes and inhales, sharp and loud in the darkness. His hands are chilled over his ears, cool like they’d only just been resting over chain-linked swings, and he sucks in breath after breath as he tries to clear the image from his mind.

He’d been waiting.

Had anyone ever come?

OoOoOoOoOoO

Pepper calls Tony two minutes after the meeting ends.

“Don’t yell at me,” Tony immediately says as he answers the phone.

Pepper pauses and sighs before she responds with the mandatory, “What did you do to the board?”

Tony blinks, “What, at the meeting? Nothing. I was good, I swear.”

“Then why would I yell at you?”

Tony falters, realizing his mistake, “Er . . .”

“Did you do to Steve, Tony?”

“Nothing!” Tony snaps, slightly offended. “Well, this and that, which I’m sure you don’t want to hear about.” He can picture Pepper’s face as he says this and practically cackles at the mental image of it, which is only further helped along by the long silence he receives in return. “But I didn’t do anything bad,” he finishes, “besides, you know, dirty bad and-”

“Tony, please stop,” Pepper orders.

“You’re no fun,” Tony whines. “Who else can I brag to? Aren’t we biffles?”

“I have no desire to know about your sexual exploits with Steve. Or anyone.” She’s glaring at him
through the phone, Tony knows she is, he can hear it in the tone of her voice. “I was asking whether or not you fixed things since I last saw you. And by fixed I mean did you magically get rid of your own immense stupidity.”

Tony makes a mock offended sort of noise, “Pepper! That’s mean!”

“He sighs, “Fine. Yes, we’re uuhhh . . .” He stops. “Something? What the heck are we? Secretly dating? Whatever, it doesn’t matter. I . . . I think we’re going to be okay. For now at least.

Apparently, as Tony surmises by the groan Pepper gives him, this wasn’t what she wanted to hear. “For now?” she practically screams in his ear. “What does ‘for now’ mean?”

“It means I’m not stupid enough to think it’s going to last forever,” Tony says evenly. “Eventually he’ll get tired of me, and I’ll just smash my feelings back into the handy-dandy feelings box that is my heart. No big deal.”

Except that it is a big deal, and he knows it. He tried to run away because it was a big deal, he just hadn’t gotten very far.

“He’s not going to get tired of you, Tony, don’t be ridiculous.”

Tony huffs, “I’m not being ridiculous, I’m being logical. This is a conclusion based on solid evidence from previous and similar events.”

“I didn’t get tired of you, Tony.” Tony stills where he stands, one hand holding the cell phone to his ear. “I just realized that we weren’t going to work. There’s a difference.”

“Then maybe Steve will realize the same,” Tony mutters. “Look, Pepper, don’t try and convince me that won’t be the case because I know how this thing works, okay? I’ve done this dance a handful of times and I know how the finale goes. I’ll be fine.”

He hangs up before she can tell him otherwise.

OoOoOoOoO

Domesticity, even on the small scale, was never part of Tony’s life plan. But when Steve calls and tells him to pick up some groceries for dinner he doesn’t argue. He spends more time than he should getting everything on Steve’s list (partly because Tony Stark has never done his own grocery shopping before), and carries the bags up the stairs without complaint, practically skipping as he does. Somewhere in the back of his mind he thinks that it’s a bit weird to feel this carefree about something he’s certain is doomed to fail, but he brushes the thought away. It’s better to enjoy it while it lasts. And, besides, keeping everything a secret will make it easier in the long run.

See, here’s the thing about secrets. People don’t know them, they aren’t meant to know them. If they hold out for as long as they can about telling everyone then there’ll be less people Tony has to face once everything blows up in his face. He won’t have to feel as many pitying eyes on him, won’t have to sit through a bunch of “You’ll get over it” speeches, and won’t have to know that his friends are all looking at him with judgment in their gaze, even if it’s not going to be his fault.

He’s not going to be the first to back out.

When he gets back Natasha gives him the stink eye from where she’s sitting on the sofa. Tony scowls at her, “You talked to Pepper?”
“Correct.”

“Well I don’t want to hear it from her. Or you. So just drop it.” He stalks over to the kitchen and dumps the groceries on the table.

“I wasn’t going to say anything,” Natasha says and Tony stops.

“What?”

“I was thinking I’d let you figure it out for yourself.”

Tony gapes at her for a moment, but doesn’t come up with a proper response before Steve walks in through the door with two cups of coffee in his hands. Tony turns to him, “Please say one of those is for me. I’ve had a hard day and I need sustenance.”

Steve smiles and crosses the room to hand one of the cups to Natasha before backtracking to give the other to Tony. “Coffee isn’t sustenance,” he chides before swooping in to give Tony a quick kiss.

“Hey, hey, hey,” Tony whispers, pushing him back, “Natasha’s here.”

“She already knows.”

“You can’t keep a secret for five minutes, can you?” Tony sighs.

“Pepper told her.”

“Yeah, I know,” Tony mutters darkly, “But if Natasha’s here then Bruce and Clint-”

“-Are napping,” Steve finishes for him. “Don’t worry.” He kisses Tony again and is met with no protest before he begins rifling through the grocery bags. “Why’d you get two cans of tomatoes?”

Tony glances over his shoulder, “Because you didn’t tell me if you wanted diced or crushed. I don’t know what the difference is.”

Steve holds up the can of diced tomatoes, “These ones are better for pasta,” he holds up the crushed ones with the opposite hand, “And these are better for chili. Remember that. Now come help me make dinner.”

“On a list of worst ideas ever, me cooking is pretty close to the top,” Tony argues, but Steve drops the can of diced tomatoes into his hand despite the protest, a fond smile on his face. “I know Pepper told you about the omelets!” he yells while Steve drags him over towards the cabinet.

“Spaghetti sauce isn’t that hard, Tony.”

“Neither are omelets!”

The thing about domesticity and Tony’s life plans was that he never realized how easily he could fall into it. It’s oddly simple. He prepares the sauce while Steve works on the noodles and the garlic bread, their arms brushing against each other as they go. It’s all too easy to fall into step, moving around each other as they make dinner, talking, laughing when Tony spills too much basil into the pot and reassuring while Steve shows him how to correct it by dulling it with other spices. For awhile he lets himself think that he wouldn’t mind if it was like this forever. It’s a rather fleeting thought, and as soon as Tony lets it go he feels every muscle in his body tense with dread.

“Watch out,” Steve warns as he hooks a finger into one of the belt loops on the back of Tony’s jeans, tugging him back from the stove so he can open the oven door and slide his pan of garlic bread in.
“That’ll need about twelve minutes, and by that time the sauce should be done.” He moves his hand up Tony’s back while he closes the oven again and sets the timer.

Tony leans back against him. “The sauce is gonna be awful.”

Steve smiles, “It’ll be fine.”

After awhile even Loki grows tired of darkness.

He had hoped to slip out for the night without anyone knowing, had showered and changed in record time. The sooner he left the sooner he could be back and the less Thor would know. Tonight, however, was not meant to be his lucky night.

When he emerges from the bathroom Thor was sitting on one of the recliners with both Duck and Chick in his lap. Loki stiffens and freezes in the doorway. “I thought you were out with Jane tonight.”

“I was. I returned a half hour ago,” Thor says calmly. Loki counts back the minutes, eyes narrowing as he realizes he probably walked right past Thor on his way to the bathroom. “Where are you going?”

“Out.”

Thor frowns, “Really?”

Loki starts at the implications behind that single word. “Yes, really. Why would I lie?” Thor almost smirks at that. “I’ll be back in an hour or so. No need to wait up for me.” He strides past his brother as quick as he can, grabbing his coat from where it’s been sitting on one of the kitchen chairs all weekend. He’s pulling it on as he realizes his mistake.

Thor’s the one to voice it aloud, “You always wear a coat, even in summer, and yours has been sitting on that chair since we got back from London.” He doesn’t ask, not really, though Loki desperately wishes he would. Instead the tension sparks through the air between them until the door slams shut. Loki’s already halfway down the stairs before Thor can even rise from his chair.

The sauce isn’t a disaster. Tony gives himself a pat on the back for that. And then an extra one for Steve who pulled it off the burner before it could catch fire. Besides that little incident dinner is a rather quiet affair, one that gets even quieter once Thor wanders in from across the hall to eat with the rest of them.

Bruce and Clint hold a lazy debate over whether they should watch The Brothers Bloom or Ghost Protocol, for which Natasha plays tiebreaker by telling them that it’s either movies or sex, not both. Tony pretends he doesn’t hear that and instead watches Steve turn five different shades of red. Thor stays silent through most of dinner, which is odd, but no one comments on it. They’ve learned through experience that Thor’s silence is something to be reckoned with.

“I’m up for a movie,” Tony says, waving his fork around and flinging bits of tomatoes everywhere.

“I have closing shift at the coffee shop,” Steve relents.

“I’ll just watch with Thor then, he still hasn’t seen Back To The Future.” He turns to Thor, “You up
for some mind blowing DeLorean awesomeness, buddy?” Thor mumbles something unintelligible around his fork which Tony decides is as close to an agreement as he’s going to get. “Great!” He starts to stand from his chair and, completely on instinct, leans over to give Steve a swift kiss, “See you tomorrow then and . . .” He draws off and looks around the table as he notices everyone’s eyes on them. “. . . And that’s how we say goodbye in Europe!”

He makes his way around the table and manages to snag both Bruce and Clint in another round of excuse kisses before he swoops over a pokerfaced Natasha and grabs Thor by the arm to drag him out of his seat and towards the door. “Right then,” he says, a little too high pitched, “we’re off. Goodnight everyone.”

Even from the hallway he can hear the choke of Steve’s barely contained laughter mixed in with Bruce and Clint’s startled sputtering.

OoOoOoOoOo

Loki deleted the contacts from his cell phone long ago. Or rather, Thor had insisted he do so and at the time Loki had had no need to hold on to them. He hasn’t forgotten the right paths to take, however, or the right places to look. It’s disheartening, really, how easily he’s able to find the people he needs to talk to, get to where he needs to go, and end up in a darkened back alley not so different from others he’s found is way to many times before.

It’s been a few years, but Loki can still find the almost invisible, pinprick scars along the vein of his elbow, his wrist, in sharp patterns of cuts and needle marks over ivory skin. He maintains the fleeting, dying hope that someone will stop him, that someone will find him, though he knows the chances are slim.

The back door of one of the buildings opens and Loki walks towards the thin sliver of light leaking out of it. A hand reaches out into the night towards him, “Are you here for the menu order?”

“That I am,” Loki replies smoothly.

“The cost for some of everything is high. We only accept a complete down payment with first timers.”

“I’m hardly a first timer.” Loki raises an eyebrow as the door cracks open a bit further.

“Ah, my mistake. We haven’t seen you around here in awhile.”

“I got clean,” Loki readily admits.

“Is it rude to ask what made you come slinking back?”

“A tad. But I don’t mind. Sometimes things don’t go as planned, and I don’t much feel like watching my world fall down around me without a little something to dull the pain.” He draws a roll of bills out of his coat pocket, “I hear you’re still in the business, though, if you’d so please.”

The hand takes the cash and withdraws back inside the doorway. It emerges again a few moments later with a paper bag which Loki accepts before the door creaks closed.

The bag settles in Loki’s arms, oddly heavy despite its contents, and he pretends he doesn’t feel the way the weight seems to travel straight to his gut, sinking like a stone as he carries it with him back towards the crowd scattered streets.
The One Where Bruce Can't Flirt

Chapter Summary

Natasha challenges Tony to a duel of flirting skills, Bruce forgets how to socially interact like a normal person, Steve has a few things to say, and someone calls Loki out on his bullshit.

It turns out that Tony is spectacularly bad at keeping secrets. The amount of times he has to use the European Goodbye excuse before he gets a hold on himself is ridiculous, and he’s fairly sure that Clint and Bruce are traumatized for life. The number of nights he spends in Steve’s bed are rapidly starting to outnumber the ones he spends in his own, which is fine, really, seeing as he’s pretty sure Loki has started to take up permanent residence in his room anyways. In contrast, however, he tries to do the opposite with Steve’s room. He makes sure he leaves nothing behind, refuses the offer to keep some of his clothes there, and shoots down the suggestion that he stay past ten in the morning on weekdays.

The less he leaves behind the less he’ll have to go back for once everything falls apart.

“How long are you going to keep this up?” Steve asks one morning as he watches Tony fumble around for his tie. He doesn’t even bother to get up and simply stays half buried under the sheets while Tony gets dressed.

“Hmm?” Tony hums, triumphantly waving his misplaced tie in the air, “The secret thing? A couple more weeks, maybe. I’m kinda waiting for someone to call us on it, actually.” He slips his tie over his neck and leans over the side of the bed to place a kiss on the corner of Steve’s mouth. Tony’s out the door before Steve can give him a proper reply, and Steve rolls over to press his face into the pillow with a groan.

“That’s not what I was talking about,” he mutters, knowing full well that Tony can’t hear him.

OoOoOoOoOoO

After the incident with Old Yeller they decided that movie night should be a weekly event where anyone who was free could show up, and Steve chooses whose turn it was to pick the movie. Natasha has been permanently banned from having any say in movie choices until further notice. Currently, it’s Bucky’s turn to pick. Or maybe it’s Darcy’s. Steve had stopped putting any effort into keeping track a few months ago, mostly because Tony insisted it was much more fun to watch people argue about it, which was exactly what was happening now.

“You always pick depressing war movies!” Darcy complains, waving Bucky’s choices in his face, “No one likes them!”

Clint raises a hand from where he’s sitting on the sofa, squished between Natasha and Bruce. “Objection, I quite enjoy them.”

Darcy glares at him and Clint shrinks down into the couch cushion a bit. “They make Steve cry,” she states.
Tony pats Steve’s knee consolingly and says, “Yes, I told everyone you cried during Saving Private Ryan. Yes, you can punish me later.” Steve covers his face with a hand, torn between dying of embarrassment and wondering how exactly their relationship is still a secret when Tony flippantly throws remarks like that around every day.

“I’m not sitting here and watching some pansy-ass fruity thing again,” Bucky mutters as he eyes Darcy’s selections.

Darcy points an accusing finger at him, “Hey. You loved Mean Girls. Don’t tell me you didn’t.”

Bucky throws his hands up in the air, “That’s different! It’s—” A hand lands solidly on top of his head and he freezes.

“We’re watching Transformers because Tony hates it,” Sharon says, digging her nails into Bucky’s scalp, “No objections.”

Tony sticks his tongue out at her and hunches in his seat, muttering something about “Illogical robots” and “Living metal, doesn’t make sense.” Steve gives him a very mock sympathetic look that Tony smacks him on the arm for. “Whatever, I’m only here for the pizza,” he mumbles.

“Pizza’s not here yet,” Steve reminds.

They’re five minutes into the movie when the doorbell rings. Tony gets up to answer it with his usual flourish, leaning against the doorway to chat up the girl delivering their pizzas while the movie plays on behind him. Natasha raises a thin eyebrow and glances at Steve, “You don’t mind?”

Steve waves a hand, “Flirting is like breathing to him. He forgets he’s doing it and he doesn’t mean anything by it. I just wish he’d bring the pizzas over here, I’m starving.”

Tony sweeps back into the room with half a dozen pizzas balanced in one hand. Clint watches him with narrowed eyes. “Why would Steve mind if you were flirting with someone?”

“Because Steve thinks I’m a terrible slut and I need to keep my pants on,” Tony singsongs. Steve puts his head in his hands. “Any other questions, Barton?”

Clint frowns and turns to Natasha with a considering look, “I miss flirting.”

“Good. Your idea of flirting was offering me some of your potato chips,” Natasha deadpans. Bruce snorts out a laugh and Clint scowls at him.

“Like you did any better. You don’t know how to flirt at all. It’s embarrassing,” he snaps. Bruce looks affronted by this declaration.

“I got into your pants just fine, didn’t I?” Bruce growls.

Tony drops a box of pizza between them before things start to get heated. “Ladies, shush. Everyone in this room knows that I am the best at flirting. There’s no need to fight.”

Natasha stares at him, “Is that a challenge?”

Steve groans into his hands and Tony grins, “Do you want it to be?”

“Definitely,” Natasha says. Clint looks absolutely delighted by this turn of events, and by now no one is paying any attention to the movie, not even Thor. All eyes are directed at Natasha, who stands and looks Tony straight in the eye. “Rules?” she asks.
“We each only get one chance. Anyone in the room can participate,” Tony decides. Bucky immediately perks up. “We’ll call for more pizzas, one for each person who wants a shot at this, and whoever gets the delivery girl’s number wins.”

Natasha gives him a considering look, “Sounds fair. What are the stakes?”

“Whoever wins gets to choose what we watch on movie night for a month.” The leer Natasha sends his way as soon as he says this makes Tony shudder.

“I dibs going first!” Bucky declares from the floor.

Tony tosses him the pizza place’s menu, “Go for it.”

Bucky chuckles as he dials, “This game is already over.”

OoOoOoOoO

In total, six out of the ten people gathered for movie night volunteer to participate in the game. Bucky takes the first turn, and his attempt goes a little something like this.

“How you doin’?”

The pizza girl doesn’t look even a little bit amused and eyes Bucky where he leans against the open doorway. “That’ll be twelve bucks,” she says flatly. Bucky frowns.

“How about I give you twelve bucks and my number,” he tries.

She stares at him for a long minute, somewhere between consideration and amusement, before she holds out a hand, “Twelve bucks, keep the number.”

Bucky gapes at her, “Seriously?”

“Seriously. You’re cute, but I get the feeling that that opening line is a habit of yours,” she deadpans. Bucky blinks.

From the couch, Natasha says, “Hit the nail on the head a little harder, why don’t you,” and sounds just a bit too smug. Bucky flips her off behind his back and reluctantly hands the pizza girl the money, plus a rather handsome tip.

Tony volunteers to go second (volunteers meaning yells that it’s his turn and snatches the phone off the table to make the call). He orders a pizza consisting of only meat toppings and goes to stand next to the door and wait. Steve moves to hover over his shoulder, looking rather disgruntled about the whole situation.

“You guys shouldn’t be turning this into a contest. It’s mean,” he mutters in Tony’s ear.

Tony looks up at him, “Huh?”

“People aren’t trophies, Tony.”

Waving him off with a hand, Tony whispers, “I know what I’m doing, okay?” Reluctantly, Steve retreats not a second too soon. When there’s a knock Tony answers the door with a flourish that’s rather impressive even for him. The pizza girl stands there with a bored look on her face in spite of it, however.

“Listen,” he says, voice low and much too quiet for anyone inside the apartment to hear, “I know you’re probably getting annoyed by the amount of Pizza we’ve been ordering, but, see, we’re playing a little game.”

“Okay . . .” she says, uncertain.

“And I know it’s a bit rude, but I’m making these losers compete to see who’s the best at flirting. The winner would, obviously, get your number.” She narrows her eyes and Tony shakes his head. “You’re free to ignore all of them, of course, but that would spoil the fun.”

“Aren’t you spoiling the fun by telling me?” she asks.

Tony chuckles, “No. Because, see, now you can determine the winner at your own leisure. I’d rather not use you as a trophy without your consent.”

The pizza girl looks vaguely humored by this. “Is this part of the game?”

“I have no intention of winning,” Tony says evenly, “but yes. If you could giggle for me then I can at least come out of this a point ahead of Barnes, which would be lovely.” She laughs and Tony hands her the money and a tip. “Good girl,” he smiles. “Feel free to be entertained by the rest of these morons flirting very shamelessly with you for the rest of the night.”

He shuts the door and takes the pizza back over to the coffee table, fully aware of everyone else’s eyes on him. Bucky sneers, “No luck?”

“Nope. But at least I got her to laugh,” Tony flashes Bucky a peace sign and drops onto the couch next to Steve, a slice of pizza already balanced in his other hand. “Who’s up next?” Thor raises an enthusiastic hand and Loki rolls his eyes, getting up from where he’s sitting on the floor near his brother to squish into one of the armchairs with Darcy.

While Thor takes an ungodly amount of time deciding what to put on his pizza, Darcy braids Loki’s hair. “Are you ever going to cut this?” she asks as she finishes off braid number three.

“No.”

“Are you a hipster?” she flips the ends of his scarf into his face and he huffs in mild surprise. “Because, in case you didn’t know, it’s the middle of summer.”

Loki raises a thin eyebrow, “I’m easily chilled.” Darcy gives him a look of obvious disbelief and he scowls. “You better undo these when you’re done.” He fingers the edge of one thin braid with an annoyed expression. Darcy smirks but makes no promises. From the floor, Thor finishes ordering his pizza and goes to wait by the door, bouncing on his heels with enthusiasm. Loki narrows his eyes and pointedly looks away.

“Jane doesn’t care if he flirts with other girls?” he asks softly.

Darcy shrugs, “Jane’s not here, and Thor is a bit . . .” She draws off, searching for the right word, and then says, “Does your family practice polygamy?”

Loki stares at her, “No.”

“Hmm,” Darcy hums, glancing to where Thor is practically jumping up and down by the door. “Well he’s never been one to keep his eyes to himself, but that might just be a typical guy thing. He does love her, though.” She frowns at the slight, barely there twist of Loki’s mouth.
“I know,” he says, the words drawn out like a shallow breath, “I’ve heard him say it.”

“Why does that bother you?”

At this Loki smiles, thin and strained, “Because I’m selfish.”

For the fourth time a knock sounds against the door, and Thor throws it open with an alarming amount of gusto that makes the poor pizza girl take a step back in response. “Greetings!” he booms.

As usual, the girl hands him the pizza and holds out a hand, “Twelve dollars,” she says. In the room, Tony leans over the back of the couch and gives her a thumbs up.

Thor laughs, for absolutely no discernable reason, and the girl can’t help but smile. “Ah, my lady,” he says, “you are a rather fine specimen of beauty, if I may say so.” She blushes and Thor positively beams in response.

On the couch, Tony makes a speechless, mocking sort of motion towards the door, a movement which is imitated by Bucky without hesitation. “Wow, let’s just declare the winner already. Jesus, why did we let him play?” Bucky mutters.

“Because I forgot that Thor’s a freaking Adonis god?” Tony snaps, “And that all he has to do is smile and girls practically fall to their knees?” Bucky sighs and slumps over on the carpet. Neither of them notice that the door has shut until Thor flops down on the carpet again, stuffing a piece of pizza in his mouth.

“What the hell?” Darcy pipes up from the armchair.

“She kindly turned me down,” Thor explains around a mouthful of pepperoni, “I was defeated.” He looks around the room with far too wide a grin, “Who will play next in this mighty tournament?” They all stare at him for a moment before Clint holds out his hands for the phone, which Thor happily tosses to him.

“Order one with peppers,” Natasha tells him.

Clint purses his lips, “Just because you like spicy food doesn’t mean everyone does. I’m going to get pineapples.” Bruce makes a horrified face and Clint chuckles.

As with the previous four encounters, the pizza girls starts by asking for the money. Clint cuts her off with a wave of his hand and a rather clipped, “Yeah, twelve greens, I know.” He brandishes the money before whipping it out of her reach when she reaches for it. “Do you like this job?” The look on her face is more than enough of an answer. Clint gifts her with a small, sympathetic smile. “Are you in college then?”

“How many years do you have left?”

“Hopefully just a few summer classes and then I’ll be interning.”

Bucky’s mouth drops open, “Does Clint have magical flirtation powers, or something?”

“Yes,” Natasha says blandly, and Bruce nods. Thor gives them both a quizzical look.

“Clint is a wielder of magic?” he asks, spraying pizza as he does so. Sharon swats at him with a
disgusted look, leaning around Bucky to do so. Natasha frowns as if the force of not rolling her eyes in response is physically painful.

“Bucky meant that Clint is, uh, surprisingly good at this,” Bruce helpfully supplies.

Clint continues with the seemingly meaningless small talk for awhile longer before he hands the girl the money and closes the door with nothing but a pizza in his hands. “No luck?” Natasha asks, confused.

“I guess I’m just not her type,” Clint shrugs.

Bruce nods, “Since she’s trying for a PHD she probably likes smart guys.”

“Hey.”

Thus, Bruce takes the fifth turn, and orders only olives on his pizza out of spite. By now everyone is getting bored of the game, and no one protests when Sharon sticks a romantic comedy into the DVD player. “I was thinking of putting on Cujo,” she says in passing when Bucky starts glaring at the TV, “But I heard about the incident with Old Yeller, so I decided against it.”

When the knock at the door sounds again, Bruce stands, looking completely flustered, and goes to answer it. Natasha and Clint watch him from the kitchen table, their expressions somewhere between grim amusement and borderline hysteria (the later is mostly Clint, as he covers his mouth with a hand as soon as the door opens).

“Twelve bucks,” the pizza girl says, and Bruce lets out an uncalled for nervous giggle. Clint puts his head in his hands.

Bruce clears his throat, “Um, so, do you use those wood burning ovens to make the pizza?”

Her eyebrows furrow together, “Considering that we’re no longer in the 1900s, no. I think they use a normal electric oven.”

“Oh. Did you know that, er, the actual electric charge is caused by, um, subatomic particles and that, erm, the charge can be transferred between objects and organisms by both direct contact and conducting materials like certain metals?”

She stares at him before reply with a dull, “Yeah.” By this time, Clint’s whole frame is shaking (whether it’s because he’s laughing or crying, though, is a mystery as his head is still in his hands), and Natasha pats him consolingly on the back.

“Oh,” Bruce says. He hands her the money without another word and closes the door. Turning to where the rest of them are watching him, he gasps, “Was I talking about electricity?”

Clint raises his head, which reveals that he’s been both laughing and crying, as seen by the way he’s still choking down chuckles with tears in his eyes. “Yes,” he wheezes, “yes you were.”

“It’s better than trying to explain the effects and uses of different types of radioactive material to someone who doesn’t care,” Natasha soothes.

Bruce groans, “Oh, god, was that what it was with you? That was so horrible I wiped it from my mind.”

“No,” Clint corrects, “that one was mine. Nat’s was the bit about your anger issues. Which you started a conversation with.” Bruce sits at the table and promptly slams his head down on the
“Are we just going to call it a draw or what?” Bucky asks from the floor.

“Natasha hasn’t had a turn,” Tony points out.

Bucky narrows his eyes, “I’m pretty sure the pizza girl doesn’t swing that way.”

Natasha crosses the room, phone already in hand, and gives him a patronizing pat on the cheek. “It amuses me that you think something like that matters,” she says before she proceeds to order her pizza.

It turns out, really, that Natasha is right. It also turns out that Tony shouldn’t have made any sort of bets with her. Ever. Natasha wins back her rights to choose the films they watch on movie night with a single question.

“Feel like getting a drink and discussing how boys are stupid?”

The rest of them gape when the door shuts behind Natasha and the pizza girl, and Bruce and Clint give each other looks that suggest they hadn’t expected anything less. Bucky points an accusing finger at Tony. “This is your fault,” he mutters.

Tony holds up his hands in front of his chest defensively, “How was I supposed to know Natasha would . . . Okay, no, you’re right. That was a major mess up on my part. Natasha always gets what she wants.” Clint and Bruce make sounds of reluctant agreement and no one argues the matter any further.

When Natasha doesn’t return after the end of the second movie, everyone starts to disperse. Thor wanders off to call Jane and inform her of the night’s “Fine battle of wooing skills,” Bucky leaves to go “Sulk over failures,” to which Sharon says that, “Such things are nothing new, so there’s no reason to pout.” Bucky exits in a bit of a huff with Sharon close behind, laughing all the way down the hall. Darcy departs because her cell phone needs charging, and Loki drifts back across the hall a few minutes after her with all of the leftover pizza in hand. “It’ll keep Thor fed for a weekend,” he says when Clint gives him a quizzical look. Bruce drags Clint away not long after when Clint decides to reenact Bruce’s latest attempt at flirting, with a muttered, “I’ll show you electricity,” that makes Clint’s eyes light up with challenge.

Once they’re all gone, Tony leaps off the sofa in glee. “For the love of God, I thought they’d never leave!” he exclaims, throwing himself into Steve’s lap. His joy lasts promptly five and a half seconds before Steve pushes him away. Tony freezes.

“We need to talk,” Steve whispers, and Tony’s whole frame goes limp, his eyes dropping to the couch cushions.

“I was hoping it would have lasted a bit longer than this,” he whispers.

Steve blinks, “What? No. Geeze, Tony, I’m not breaking up with you. Look at me.” Tony continues to avert his gaze and Steve puts a hand on the back of the older man’s neck, ducking his own head down to meet Tony’s eyes. “Look at me,” he murmurs, “That’s not what I was going to say. I was just . . . How long are you . . . How long are we going to keep this a secret?”

“Until I’m sure this will last,” Tony wants to say, but he keeps his mouth shut. “I don’t know,” he says instead, honestly. It’s been almost a month, and he’s starting to wonder what it will take for
Steve to give up on him, to realize he’s not worth the trouble. A small part of him hopes that Pepper
was right, but he doesn’t want to believe it. Hopes are things that are made to be crushed, after all.

“I want to do more than this,” Steve says, and Tony frowns in confusion. “Not that this isn’t nice, but
I’d love to go out for dinner. Or to the cinema. Or the park. Heck, anywhere.”

“A date,” Tony states, slight disbelief in his tone.

“Yeah.”

“Dates are stepping stones to serious relationships,” Tony whispers hoarsely.

“Exactly,” Steve breathes, a soft smile flickering across his face. Tony swallows.

“I, uh, have a beach house? It’s a couple hours away. We could go. Next weekend. Long walks on
the beach and watching the sunset and all that schmoopy stuff,” Tony says in a rush.

“I’d like that,” Steve laughs.

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

Darcy’s waiting for a cab when Loki slips out of the apartment building. He doesn’t notice her, and
she watches him out of the corner of her eyes. She takes in everything from the stiffness of his stance
to his hunched shoulders and the way he keeps his hands in his pockets as he disappears into the
alleyway behind the building. There are a million reasons, she thinks, why she should mind her own
business and just go home. None of them are very good reasons. Darcy steps away from the curb
and sucks in a steadying breath before following.

The alley is shadowed by the surrounding apartment complexes and shops, the city lights casting
patterns where they shine down between the rungs and grates of the fire escapes overhead, the odd
electric glow from occupied windows framing the gentle late night hum of life inside. Loki stands
with his back to the wall halfway down the alleyway, illuminated only by the spark of firelight as he
lights something and inhales. Darcy’s in front of him before he can take a second taste.

“Are you stupid?” she asks, snatching the thing out of his hand. He stares at her, shocked. “You do
realize this crap is illegal, debatable medical uses or not.” She throws the blunt on the ground and
stamps the red burn of it out, crushing it beneath her heel. Loki opens his mouth, fury in his eyes, and
Darcy stops him with a fierce glare, “Don’t you dare give me any excuses, asshat, because there’s no
excuse for this.”

“I wasn’t going to excuse it,” Loki all but snarls, “I was going to tell you it was none of your
business.” He starts when Darcy grabs his wrist and pushes his sleeve up, making him wince at the
sharp drag and burn of cloth over skin. “What are you-”

She silences him with a swift prod to the bruises on his wrists, nail digging into fresh, still red
pinprick marks. Loki grits his teeth. “This, too? Seriously? What is wrong with you?!?” she snaps.

“You wouldn’t understand,” he hisses, “no one does!”

“Try me.”
Chapter Summary

Darcy smacks Loki in the face with some reality, Clint decides that every trip should be a group trip, Natasha is the queen of Strip Happy Days, and Tony and Steve can't take it anymore.

“Show me all of it,” Darcy says, and that’s how it starts.

She weasels Loki into revealing the locations of most of his hidden stashes around the apartment, as well as fishes some out for herself. She pulls out needles, baggies, lighters, and everything in between from false bottomed drawers, the undersides of furniture, and even a small paper bag taped the back of the fridge. “Is this the lot?” she asks when Loki glares at her from one of the armchairs, “Or should I look again.” Loki bares his teeth at her, a half snarl, half sneer, and she ties up grocery bag full of various illegal substances with a satisfied nod.

She makes Loki watch when she anonymously drops the whole collection off at a police station for confiscation and possible future incineration.

“It’s none of your business,” Loki hisses under his breath when they leave the station, heading down the street with no particular destination in mind. Darcy puts a hand on his arm and pulls him up short, halting him mid step.

“Walk with me,” she says, and it’s not so much a question as it is an order. Reluctantly, Loki lets her thread her arm through his and lead him down the sidewalk.

They make their way across streets, through the park, over bridges and under then, straight paths and winding ones, saying nothing until Loki looks around and finds that he has no idea where they are. Darcy guides him down dark back alleyways, thin spaces between buildings that are crumbling at their roots, bricks cracking almost audibly as they pass. Every now and then he notices signs of life, stray cats, stray people, bloodshot, weary eyes peeking out of shattered window frames and broken doorways. He swallows, “Where are we,” he asks, and finds himself clutching at Darcy’s hand where it rests on the inside of his elbow.

“The sort of place you’ll end up if you’re not careful,” Darcy says softly, and continues to lead him on.

Through claustrophobic alleys, past people crouched beside dumpsters, huddled in boxes out of the sunlight that barely drifts down between decrepit buildings, over puddles that have been pooled on asphalt for god knows how long, it hasn’t rained in weeks, Darcy tugs him along. She pauses in front of a particularly ramshackle looking structure and pulls him inside. The hairs on the back of Loki’s neck stand up as they pass through the doorway, the air within feeling ten degrees colder. Inside the rooms are swathed in shadows, and here and there people are crouched along the walls. The only real light comes from the sparks of flame that drift smoke into the stuffy air, or the odd streak of filtered sunlight bouncing of glass and scatterings of needles.

“I don’t like it here,” Loki whispers, trying to pull her back. The words come out breathless, shaky, but Darcy takes his hand and leads him towards the dangerously crooked stairs.
They climb, up four floors and then down a few winding hallways until Darcy brings him to a door that’s falling off its hinges. “Here,” she says, and her voice breaks around the single syllable, “This was where I was.”

Loki stares at her, eyes wide, and follows as she steps into the room. It’s covered in dust that’s smeared in places, disturbed like someone had been laying across the cold, wooden floorboards only recently. Darcy kneels next to the place where the dust is smudged and hovers a hand over the bare spot of the floor, not quite daring to touch. “My mother,” she starts, and Loki uses the pause to drop to his knees beside her, “Was a dealer. She didn’t use to be, not always, but after my dad left . . . I guess we were short on money, and she wasn’t the sort of person who ever should have been a mom. She didn’t know the first thing about children.” Darcy shakes her head, eyes falling closed, and Loki looks away. “We lost the house. I stopped going to school, if only because she stopped taking me. Eventually . . .” She draws off, hand falling to her lap where it grips the material of her jeans as if she means to tear them, “Eventually she died. They labeled it as suicide but . . . But really, how could they tell if an overdose was a purposeful event, or an accident?”

Loki inhales a shivering, shuddering breath. “What did you do?”

At this Darcy smiles, just a little, as though amused by his sudden curiosity. “Nothing, really. I was eleven by then, I’d missed most of elementary school. I picked up a few things from living here, though. I knew how to get money without actually working.”

“You mugged people,” Loki surmises.

“Pick-pocketed,” Darcy corrects. “But, yes. It only lasted a few months, though, because I tried to take the wallet off this one kid who handed me my ass on a platter in response.” She laughs and Loki raises an eyebrow, “And then he dragged me to the local police station and demanded I be placed in foster care for my own good.” She shrugs, “I got shifted around a few times, and finished middle school with no problem. I was never really close with any of my foster parents, but that kid was a good guy, a good friend. And he owes me for helping him pass history in tenth grade.” She smiles again and Loki raises his eyes to meet hers. “Then again, I owe him my life for knocking some sense into me.”

“You’ve thanked him?”

“I thank him every day by letting him bask in the presence of the awesome me,” Darcy says, very seriously. “But anyways, after all that I graduated, went to college, made a friend, a roommate, got a degree, and got a job. I didn’t stay here, I didn’t end up like those people you saw downstairs, because someone else cared enough to pull me out of this dump, even though he didn’t know me.”

She sighs, “The best way to repay a debt is to pass it on to someone else, to do what someone did for you to someone who needs help just as much as you did. So, seriously, I don’t care what your issue is. I don’t care that you think you’re alone, or that the world is falling apart around you, because at some point everyone feels like that. I just want to make sure you don’t end up in a place like this.”

She stands then, pulling Loki to his feet with her, “So if I see one more needle, one more dime bag, one more pill, one more anything, I’m checking you into some freaking rehab, kapeesh?”

“I’d just check myself out,” Loki mutters, but follows her as she starts to lead him out of the building.

“You wouldn’t be able to if I listed you as mentally unstable,” she says solemnly, and Loki raises a challenging eyebrow.

Once they’re outside, away from the shadowed, hazy side streets and back alleys, standing on the
sidewalk in the midsummer air, Loki asks, “That guy, the one who helped you, do I know him?”

Darcy smiles, “Yeah.”

OoOoOoOoOoO

“Why are you packing?” Clint asks, leaning heavily against the doorway as he watches Steve neatly fold some pants into a small suitcase. “Are you going somewhere?”

Steve glances at him as he puts some flip flops in the suitcase and begins to zip it up,

“No.”

Clint sidles into the room with a broad grin on his face, “Wow, you are actually the worst liar in the world. Where are you going?”

“Nowhere, I’m just - Oh! I forgot the sunscreen!” Steve dashes off towards the bathroom and returns a moment later with a tube of sunscreen in hand, which he slips into the suitcase before he finishes closing it.”

“Are you going to the beach?”

“No.”

Clint claps his hands together, “You are! Let me go too. I want to go, please let me go.” Steve opens his mouth and Clint latches onto his side, stopping any protests that might have been thrown at him, “Please, please, please, please, please! I love the beach.”

“It’s, um, sort of a private trip,” Steve tries, attempting and failing to pry Clint off of him.

“With who?”

“Um . . . Myself?” Steve says weakly. Clint narrows his eyes.

“You can’t go on a trip by yourself, that’s stupid.”

“It’s a business trip?” Steve says, but the statement comes out as more of a question.

Clint laughs, “It is not. You work at a coffee shop, idiot. The same coffee shop I work at. I wanna go. Let me go with.”

Steve sighs.

Ten seconds later Clint bursts out into the living room where Natasha and Bruce are playing videogames and yells, “We’re going to the beach!” at the top of his lungs.

Steve puts his head in his hands. Tony is going to kill him.

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

“I shouldn’t have expected we’d be able to slip away by ourselves,” Tony says over the phone while he haphazardly stuffs things into a large rollaway bag, “But, hey, it’s not like they’ll be with us the whole time. They have to fall asleep at some point. Or, at least most of them do. I’ve never actually seen Natasha sleep. Ever.” He switches the phone to his other ear as he dumps the contents of the top drawer of his nightstand into the bag. “I guess we should invite everyone else then, probably. The more the merrier.”
Across the hall Steve pinches the bridge of his nose, “Are you sure?”

“Yeah, it’ll be fun.” Tony tosses a swimsuit into the bag along with six pairs of sunglasses. “And I’ll squeeze us in some alone time somewhere, don’t worry.”

“If you say so,” Steve sighs.

“I do say so. Now finish packing so we can get out of here on time tomorrow.” He hangs up and slides the phone into his back pocket before wandering out of his room. Loki and Darcy are sitting on the floor, playing with Chick and Duck, and Thor is raiding the fridge with his usual, alarming amount of gusto. “Who wants to go to the beach?” Tony says, loud enough for everyone to hear him.

Thor pulls his head out of the fridge, half a ham sandwich hanging out of his mouth, “mimm mwere me mee murmme?”

Tony’s eyebrows raise to his hairline and he opens his mouth to ask what that even meant, but is interrupted when Loki says, “He wants to know if there’ll be sea turtles there.”

Tony blinks at him, “How the hell did you understand that?”

“I’m fluent in moron,” Loki says, picking up Duck to set the bird in his lap. “Thor, unless you plan to swim a couple miles in open water I highly doubt you’ll be seeing any sea turtles. It’s not the breeding season.”

“I don’t even want to know how you know that,” Darcy mutters. “Tony, do you have, like, a beach house or something?”

“Yep. I haven’t used it in ages, but it’s pretty nice. Great view of the ocean and stuff.”

“It sounds like it will be quite the merry trip!” Thor decides, slamming the fridge door hard enough to make the whole thing shake. “When do we leave?”

“Tomorrow morning. Get packing if you want to go.” Thor dashes off and Tony turns to take a seat on the floor between Loki and Darcy, “You kids coming?”

Darcy eyes Loki, taking in the slight, nearly unnoticeable tremble of his hands and the thin beads of sweat forming along his collarbone just above the low neckline of his shirt. “No,” she says quietly, “we have some things to take care of here.” She tilts her head in Tony’s direction with a broad smile.

Tony huffs, “What, you can’t cancel? Everyone else is going.”

“I’ll get sunburned,” Loki mutters.

“You could get sunburned through a window,” Tony reminds.

Loki scowls, “Someone has to stay here and take care of Chick and Duck. So unless you were planning on allowing them to come along for the ride—” Tony gets to his feet in a hurry as Chick makes a dash at him, wings flapping. “That’s what I thought,” he smirks as Tony retreats back to his room, Chick pecking at his heels.

When the door to Tony’s room closes again Darcy turns her attention back to Loki, “Maybe we can go later,” she says, watching Loki swipe a hand along the back of his neck. He pulls another, tight, strained looking frown as he withdraws his hand to stare at the tremble coursing along it. “If you feel up to it,” she adds.
“We’ll see,” Loki says in return, and he clenches his shaking fingers into his palm.

OoOoOoOoOoO

They make plans to leave before nine in the morning, all of which, of course, fall through rather spectacularly. Bruce and Natasha can’t get Clint out of bed, Jane runs late because the taxi gets lost just a block away, and Steve and Tony hole up in the coffee shop under some sort of idiotic illusion that no one can see them. Sharon and Bucky make faces at their backs through the display window from outside.

“Look at them, half asleep on each other over their morning coffee. Ugh,” Bucky says, arms folded over his chest. “I can’t even tell if they’re together now or not because that’s the exact same crap they did before.”

Sharon shrugs, “Either way, it’s a bit nauseating.” She leans heavily against the table, sunglasses and broad rimmed hat shading her from the mid morning light. “And here I sit,” she sighs, “resigned to dying as a crazy cat lady.”

Bucky snorts, “You don’t even like cats. Rephrase that to crazy old spinster who yells at children to stay off her lawn.”

“Same thing.”

For a long moment they stare through the window at where Tony is slowly listing over against Steve’s side. Bucky hums and looks away, “Well, how about this; if we’re both still single when we’re forty I’ll be your boyfriend.” Sharon is taking a sip from her water bottle when Bucky presents his idea, and when he finishes she chokes and sprays water everywhere before launching into a rather hysterical giggle. Bucky shakes some of the water off of his t-shirt and eyes her, “What’s so funny?”

She waves a hand at him, “You. The joke you just made.”

He gapes at her, “Joke? What joke?”

“About being my boyfriend,” she laughs again, hand over her mouth in a poor attempt to stifle the sound. Bucky pouts.

“It wasn’t a joke . . .”

“Oh yes it was.” She straightens up and eyes him, still smiling from badly repressed giggles, “You’re, uh, a nice guy and all, but . . .”

“But what?”

“But you’re Bucky?”

He scowls, “I don’t know what you’re implying—”

“I’m implying that I know you,” Sharon interrupts, “and your track record. So while the offer was cute, the ultimate answer is no.”

“But what if I was, say, a blind date?” Bucky tries. “I show up at your door, you’ve never met me before, and I say,” he lowers his voice a little, aiming for seductive, “‘Hey, how’re you doin’?’”

Sharon nearly spits out her water again. “First of all,” she says once she’s recovered, “I’d be a little
Bucky frowns and opens his mouth to protests, which is the exact moment that Jane rolls up in their large taxi van. Natasha, Bruce, and Clint come barreling over from across the street with their bags, Clint calling, “Get in, losers, we’re going to the beach!” over his shoulder as they pile into the van. Thor appears from seemingly nowhere and climbs in as well, while Steve and Tony emerge from the coffee shop. Sharon and Bucky are the last ones in, and Bucky leans over his seat while he buckles in to snap, “You’ll change your mind before the weekend is over,” to Sharon, who rolls her eyes in reply.

And then they’re off.

OoOoOoOoOoO

There is no need to recount the car ride other than to note that Jane should not be allowed to sit in shotgun because she tries to reach over and steer the taxi towards an oncoming storm rather than away from it. However, it doesn’t make much of a difference, because by the time they reach Tony’s beach house the clouds have broken open to unleash a full out coastal downpour.

They make a run from the taxi to the beach house, suitcases and bags held over their heads as they slip and slide down the path and across the deck while Tony fumbles for the keys. Once the door is open they bustle inside, shaking water off of them as best as they can, and stop in the doorway to stare at the inside of the house. Steve is the first to speak up. “Um, Tony,” he starts, eyes wide, “Why is the floor covered in sand?”

Tony, who is also staring at the sand that seems to have replaced a floor he knows was originally a nice, polished hardwood, shakes his head. “I have to make a call,” he says, and grabs his phone from his pocket.

Pepper answers on the third ring, “What is it this time?” she asks, sounding bored and just a little bit put out.

“There’s sand on the floor,” Tony states.

“Where? At the beach house? Of course there is, I already told you about the flood damage.”

Tony groans, “Pep, take a note. If I nod my head and just answer with ‘Yep,’ then I’m probably not actually listening to a single word you’re saying.”

“It’s just the first floor,” Pepper sighs, “a little sand never killed anyone.”

“I think Natasha could give you a pretty good argument against that point,” Tony says, and promptly hangs up. He then turns to face the rest of the group with a smile properly plastered in place. “Sand floors are in this year,” he proclaims, and that’s the end of that.

OoOoOoOoOoO

“Tell me about the first time,” Darcy says.

She sits with her back to headboard of Thor’s bed, one hand tangled with Loki’s as he leans on her, his spine arching against her chest and his head falling to her shoulder as he grits his teeth and shudders his way through another muscle spasm. Her other hand rests solidly on his forehead, keeping track of his rising and falling fever as the minutes tick into hours. Loki’s heels dig into the mattress as his whole body tenses, shivers, shakes, and stills again. His breathing varies between ragged and a forced, slow, calm intake of little breaths, heart hammering in his chest.
“It was worse,” he answers after awhile, “It was much worse.”

“Were you alone?”

“No,” his answers escape him in the barest of whispers. “Thor was with me. When he found me he threw it all out, burned it, broke everything that was breakable and destroyed it all. By that point I had been using . . . All sorts of things for, gods, a year or so. It took him that long to find me.” He laughs then, cold and low, “At least I haven’t thrown up yet.”

“Don’t rule it out,” Darcy warns, “you’re not out of the woods yet. And that is the one thing I’m not helping you with. I can’t do barf.”

Loki huffs, “You don’t have to help me at all.”

“If I don’t, no one else will.”

The words seem to echo around the room, bouncing off the walls and through Loki’s head, and he knows them to be true. “You do have a way of stating the truths no one wants to hear, don’t you,” he says.

“I’m sorry,” Darcy whispers.

“I’m not,” Loki breathes, “I don’t want anyone’s pity.”

Outside the wind begins to chase the storm clouds across the sky, lighting up the summer air with the first blinding flashes of electricity.

OoOoOoOoO

On the first day, Friday, it does nothing but rain. It becomes obvious that the storm is showing no signs of letting up after a few hours, and Thor begins to search the house for ways to entertain himself. Bruce and Clint build a sandcastle in the middle of the living room. Sharon, Jane, and Steve start in on a long debate on whether the food in the fridge (God knows how long it’s been there) is edible, and Tony, Bucky, and Natasha zone out on the sofa with matching looks of immense boredom on their faces. Or at least it’s boredom for Tony and Bucky, for all anyone knows Natasha’s bored face could actually be her “I’m plotting how to kill everyone in this room and dispose of the bodies in a way that they’ll never be found” face.

Eventually, Thor emerges from upstairs with a beat up old Happy Days box under one arm, looking way too proud of himself for such a menial discovery. Tony watches him set the thing up at the dining room table out of the corner of his eyes. “What, exactly, are you planning on doing with that, big guy?” he can’t help but ask.

“Play it,” Thor says. Tony rolls his eyes.

“You do know that’s the most boring game in the world, right? The only way it could even possibly be deemed interesting is if it included the word ‘Strip’ in the title.”

Abruptly, Natasha sits up, “All those in favor of Strip Happy Days raise your hand.”

Everyone raises their hands except for Steve and Jane, both of which seem rather mortified by the idea. However, with seven against two, they’re outvoted and dragged to sit at the table with everyone else. Natasha declares the for every five Cool Points you earn you win one item of someone else’s clothing, and so the game begins.
Somehow, Clint racks up Cool Points like nobody’s business, and takes a great amount of glee in getting Bucky down to nothing but his boxers. Thor, who despite having found the game, fails spectacularly at comprehending the rules and playing it correctly and somehow ends up with a negative number of Cool Points, which Sharon and Jane happily use as an excuse to divest him of his shirt. Tony, who finds himself without his pants less then twenty minutes into the game, is also not very good at playing (mostly because he takes the bored in “board game” quite literally), and uses what little Cool Points he earns to try and keep Natasha from winning every piece of Steve’s clothing by taking much of hers as a poor attempt to deter her. Jane and Bruce manage miraculously keep most of their clothes while Tony finds himself letting Steve win his t-shirt and his jacket simply because he knows that in two more turns the blond will be sitting in his chair butt-naked otherwise, seeing as Steve turns out to be almost as bad at playing as Thor (but not for lack of rule comprehension so much as he can’t seem to get a good roll to save his life).

When the weather finally starts to let up the sun has long gone down, not that anyone noticed through the torrential downpour and thunder. Natasha and Clint have managed to collect a nest of clothing items from the rest of the group and are displaying them on top of the table like a trophy. Clint has three different t-shirts tied around his arm like gang flags, and Natasha has taken Thor’s boxers and hoisted them as a flag on top of their spoils. The rest of them have given up on getting their lost clothes back and have changed into fresh ones so as to better glare at the victors with slightly less humiliation.

“We’re never getting those back, are we?” Steve asks the room at large, eyeing one of his favorite button-up shirts on top of the pile.

Bucky pats his arm consolingly and Tony shakes his head. “They belong to the enemy now,” Tony says solemnly, “You don’t want them back.”

While they mourn the loss of their clothing, Sharon, Thor, and Jane charge down the stairs with a giant inner tube held high over their heads between them, dressed in nothing but their swimsuits. “The mighty storm has subsided!” Thor booms, sounding triumphant for no reason in particular.

“Night swimming!” Sharon and Jane crow, and then they’re gone, dashing out the front door before anyone can stop them.

Steve stands with a worried look on his face, “Isn’t it dangerous to go swimming so soon after a storm? The water-”

Tony waves a dismissive hand, “They have Thor with them. He’s all heroic and stuff.” Bucky jumps to his feet then and runs up the stairs, returning less than a minute later in his swim trunks. “And now they have a soldier with them, too,” Tony adds as Bucky barrels out of the house and onto the beach after Thor and the girls, “They’ll be fine.” He sits there for a long moment, staring out the open door, before he glances at Steve, “Want to go for a walk?”

Steve blinks, “Huh?”

“On the beach,” Tony clarifies. “You know, sand, moonlight, ocean . . .” He draws off with a pointed look, well aware that Clint, Bruce, and Natasha are still in the room.

“Oh,” Steve says, clearing his throat, “Right. Let me just go get some shoes.” He wanders out of the room and Tony makes his way to the door.

Outside, the moonlight glints off the water that seems oddly still after the storm. It casts patterns in the sand, turning it gold where it lays flat and illuminating the shadows where wave-carved grooves are marked out along the shore. From where he leans against the door Tony can just make out where
Thor, Bucky, Sharon, and Jane are splashing along the shallows. Thor sits in the large inner tube while the other three push and pull him along through the gentle lap of waves along the sand. A hand falls on his shoulder and Tony jumps a bit, startled, until Steve breathes along the shell of his ear, “Let’s go.”

They step out onto the path leading away from the house, following it down the sand where they then make their own way along the shore. Tony keeps his hands in his pockets, walking side by side with Steve, shoulders brushing together until they’re far enough down the shore that the laughter of Thor’s group is just faint noise behind them, easily lost underneath the gentle roll and crash of waves in the darkness. Steve’s fingers lift to drag along the inside of Tony’s wrist and Tony detaches his hands from his pockets, letting them fall to his sides until Steve’s fingers slip between his.

“Romantic enough for you?” he asks, a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

“I still want to go on a real date,” Steve says. Tony laughs.

The moment is shattered as footsteps skitter across the sand behind them and Tony snaps his hand out of Steve’s grip like he’s been burned, stuffing his fingers back in his pockets and taking a step back. Steve gives him an unreadable look before they both turn to face the intruder, and Bucky skids to a stop a few feet away.

“Hey, Steve, do you know if there are any sharks around here?” Bucky asks.

“Um…” Steve’s eyebrows furrow together and he frowns, unsure of how to answer.

“Cause Sharon brought up Jaws and now Jane is freaking out and Thor has vowed to ‘Vanquish the terrible foe’ if a shark shows up,” Bucky explains. “So, uh, yeah.”

“We don’t get a lot of sharks this far up the coast,” Tony says.

“Great, thanks!” Bucky waves at them as he heads back down the beach towards where the others are.

There’s an unsettling silence for a few minutes until Bucky is nothing but a speck on the shoreline. When he’s gone, Steve turns to Tony with narrowed eyes, “What the hell was that?”

“A bunch of city kids worrying about a shark?” Tony suggests. Steve’s eyes narrow further and he stops, smile falling from his face.

“I meant before,” Steve says sharply. “You snapped your hand back like a whip, Tony.”

“Bucky was—” Tony tries, falters are he notices the look in Steve’s eyes. It’s anger, confusion, and hurt all rolled into one, threatening to boil over into words.

“Bucky’s my best friend,” Steve says, “He doesn’t care what I do, or who I do it with. We have to keep this a secret even from him?” His shoulders are shaking now, and Tony takes half a step back. “Tony,” Steve starts, the name slipping out so it sounds almost like a plea, “I’m tired of this.”


“No,” Steve snaps, knowing what was being asked without hearing the words. “I mean this secrecy. You said it was for fun, but it’s not.”

Tony bites his lip, “What are you talking about? Of course it’s for—”
“Are you ashamed of this?” Tony freezes, eyes fixed on the barely-there tremor of Steve’s shoulders, the rise and fall of his chest as he sucks in air.

“What makes you think-”

“You don’t stay for breakfast,” Steve begins, voice rising, “You refuse to keep a change of clothes at my place. You freak out every time anyone even comes close to finding out. You won’t go out in public with me, you won’t-” Steve clenches his hands at his sides, closing his eyes, “I asked you to go on a date and you took me to a secluded beach house. God, Tony, what else am I supposed to think?”

Tony purses his lips, “It’s not like that, Steve.”

“Then what is it like? Tell me.”

“You wouldn’t-”


“What am I supposed to say?”

“How about the truth?”

Tony grits his teeth, “The truth? Okay, I’ll give you the truth. The cold, hard truth. Right here and now.” He twists out of Steve’s grip, puts some space between them before he speaks again, “The truth is that I’ve been around awhile,” he says lowly, voice breaking, “I know how these things work, more often than not. I know that it’s all cute and fun at the beginning. You think it’s going to last forever because that’s what society and media and fairytales have led us all to believe. But then, without any warning, it all falls apart in your hands and no amount of kings horses and men can put it back together. I know, I’ve tried. And I knew what would happen before London, too. That’s why I tried to stay away. And I can see them, Steve, I can see all the little cracks and faults and broken pieces that have been taped together just waiting to crumble, and I can’t do that again. Especially not with you.”

Steve gapes at him, “Wha-”

“The more people that know, the more that I leave behind, the more I let myself get tangled up in this are all just things that are going to make it hurt that much more, in the end,” Tony says. His voice cracks, falters around the words, and he sucks in a shaky breath to cover his fumble, “And I can’t. I can’t, Steve. If I have to go through that with you, that will be it. I can’t lose you to something so stupid as an illusion of-”

“Illusion,” Steve stops him with a hand on his arm, “Is that what this is to you? You think I’m . . . I’m what, just playing with you?”

“No!” Tony snaps, “I just know from experience that all it takes is a little time for people to realize it’s not going to work. Give it a week, a month, hell, a year, and you’ll know I’m right. And then you’ll be looking at me the same way everyone else does, with disappointment.” He pulls away again, flinching away from Steve’s touch, “And if you look at me like that I won’t be able to bear it. I can’t be all those things you want of me, Steve. I can’t do that white-picket fence bullshit.”

“Tony-”
“Don’t ‘Tony’ me!” Tony practically screams, whole body tensing as Steve reaches for him again. “I know what I’m talking about! I can’t do responsibility, I can’t do relationships, I can’t do promises, and commitments, and forevers, no matter how much I may want to!” He stops, feeling the prickling sting in the corners of his eyes that he brushes away the back of his hand. “And I was thinking that if I kept this quiet you’d realize that sooner, and that if people didn’t know it would hurt a little bit less.” Tony laughs then, a bitter sound, “I was wrong. It hurts just as bad as I thought it would. I’ve laid it all down for you to see, and it feels like someone tore my heart out with their bare hands.” He spreads his arms out to his sides, “So there you have it, the true Tony Stark there for you to see.” He smiles a thin, tight, forced smile, “Terrible, isn’t it.”

And then he’s gone, running across the sand and down the shore. Steve stands there for a moment, hand still half raised to catch what has already taken off, and he lifts it to fist in his hair. “Jesus,” he hisses. He waits one second, two, ten, and then follows at his own pace, placing his feet in the indentations of footprints left behind just a minute before as he goes.
The One With The Jellyfish

Chapter Summary

Some people spend their whole lives running away, if only because it's the easiest solution.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Do you even have a driver’s license?” Loki asks, his head resting against the passenger-side window. The glass is cool against his skin, still chilled by the rain that has only just blown past, and he sighs when Darcy starts to tap out a beat against the steering wheel as she drives.

“Do I need one?” Loki balks at the question she shoots at him in return, and then pointedly buckles his seatbelt. “I’m just kidding,” she laughs when he starts checking to see if the car has airbags, “I totally have a license. Now sit down and shut up.” He scowls at her and she slaps a hand to his forehead, “You still have a mild fever. We’ll get some soup-to-go or something on the way.”

“What sort of place sells soup at this time of night?” Loki frowns.

“An extremely shady place,” Darcy decides, “or a Wendy’s.”

OoOoOoOoOoO

Bucky hangs off the edge of the inner tube, kicking his feet in the moonlit ocean water. “What if I saved you from a shark?” he tries.

Sharon looks coolly down at him from inside the inner tube, “I can save myself from a shark, thanks.”

“But what if.”

“The answer would still be no.”

Bucky groans. “You’re no fun at all, do you know that? No fun.”

“And you keep bringing up highly unlikely, very hypothetical situations that are stupid because, guess what, no.”

Bucky pouts for a second, looking ready to pose another hypothetical situation until Thor splashes over towards them and dunks Bucky under the waves with a hand. “The fine lady Jane wishes to everyone to partake in a grand game of Marcos and Polos,” he announces after he lets Bucky up for air.

Sharon grins, “I’m in.”

OoOoOoOoOoO

“I feel like an insane amount of idiocy is taking place outside,” Natasha says darkly from where she
stands in front of the window. The spoils of their game of Strip Happy Days still lay on the table behind her, forgotten while Bruce and Clint rummage around in the fridge.

“It’s probably just Tony. Again,” Bruce pipes up from the kitchen.

“Or Bucky,” Clint adds.

“Or everyone that is not me,” Natasha decides.

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

Tony runs until the burn in his legs fades to a dull, aching numbness which makes him stumble, fall, and sink to his knees in the sand. He’s unaware of how far he’s gone, how much distance he’s covered. It could be just a few yards or even a few miles for all he knows, either way it doesn’t matter. He just needs to get away, to put as much distance between himself and Steve as possible.

The closer together they are, the more he feels like he’s falling apart.

He fists his hands in his hair, trying in vain to still the trembling of his entire frame. God, he can’t believe he’d said all that, laid so much out for Steve to see that he never wanted anyone to know. It’s alright, though, he thinks, for everything to be out in the open like that. After all, he’s spent the last month or so just waiting for everything to fall apart on its own, forcing it to isn’t much different. They both have the same outcome, the same pain, the same suffocating realization that he’s ruined everything again. “God damn it,” he whispers. “God damn it!” his voice breaks and he curls in on himself, sucking in a shuddering breath. “What is wrong with me?”

“Nothing.”

Tony tenses as he feels a weight settle on the sand behind him and starts to move, to run again, only to be pulled back by strong arms wrapping around his shoulders. “Don’t” Tony starts, scrabbling at the arms that curl around him, pull him back, hold him in place.

“Don’t what?”

Tony tilts his head back so he can catch a glimpse of Steve’s face, the concern in his eyes mixed with some sort of strange, unexpected understanding that makes Tony’s breath catch. He digs his nails into Steve’s arms, “Don’t do this. You don’t want this,” he finishes in a rush, “Please. God, don’t do this to me. I’m no good. I just take and take and take, and I can’t . . . Steve, I can’t do that to you. You deserve to be happy, damn it. I’m not-”

“You’re really stupid,” Steve murmurs. He places a kiss on the back of Tony’s neck and Tony freezes.

“Wha-”

“You go on and on about all these things like you think that I expect them from you,” Steve chuckles and Tony blinks at him, stunned to hear the sound during a moment like this. “You listed forevers, and promises, and commitments, but I never asked for or expected any of those from you.” He smiles, “I expect a now, and that’s all I’m asking for. If you want some of that other stuff later then that’s fine, but we don’t have to think about it, because that’s not now, it’s later.”

“Later is when you’re going to get tired of me,” Tony whispers. “Now is no good if I know what happens later.”

Steve kisses his neck again, trails his way over to Tony’s jaw line. “Oh, I’m sorry,” he hums against
Tony’s skin, “I wasn’t aware you were a prophet. I should call the presses, because you are obviously capable of predicting the future.”

Tony sighs, rolls his eyes, and lets himself relax into Steve’s grip. “Fine then, what do you see in our future, oh wise one.”

“Who knows,” Steve says, “I don’t have the power of foresight.” Tony swats at him and he laughs, head tilting back towards the sky. Using the moment to his advantage Tony twists in his grip until their faces each other and pushes against Steve’s chest, toppling him over into the sand.

“I see beach sex in the future,” Tony murmurs, straddling Steve’s hips and leaning down to press a swift kiss to the corner of his mouth.

Steve huffs, “That doesn’t sound very sanitary.”

Tony smiles, “Since when is sex itself very sanitary.” Steve frowns, but doesn’t argue that point. Tony leans over him again and takes the blonde’s face in his hands, “No, seriously, tell me. I need to know. I need to know what I have to live up to.”

Steve shakes his head, “You’re stubborn.”

“Wow, tell me something I don’t know.”

“I’m not going to lay out my future plans for you, Tony, that would spoil the fun.”

“So you do have plans! I knew it!” Tony yells, “See, that’s why-”

Steve puts a hand over his mouth, “Don’t start. I only have one definite plan.” He pulls his hand away and watches Tony’s expression shift to confusion. “And all it consists of is just you,” he sits up a bit, pulling Tony down to him for a hard kiss, “and me,” he finishes when they break apart for breath.

Tony stares at him. “For how long?” he can’t help but ask.

“As long as you want,” Steve promises.

Tony swallows, “But what if-”

“But what if nothing,” Steve interrupts. “Quit bringing all these ‘ifs’ into this. If anything, we’ll figure it out when that if comes along. That’s how relationships work, Tony.”

“I’m not very good at those,” Tony mumbles.

“No one is.”

OoOoOoOoOoO

The pathway leading up to the beach house is still damp with rain, and water has formed shallow puddles that barely make a splash underfoot. It’s nearly midnight when Loki and Darcy make their way up the path, Darcy practically skipping ahead while Loki scuffs his feet along the ground behind her. “We don’t have to go, you know,” she reminds before they reach the door, “If you’re still feeling bad . . .”

Loki scoffs, “It’s nothing I haven’t dealt with before.”

Darcy stops him with a hand to his arm, “I’ve seen some of the worst effects of withdrawal.
Something could still happen whether you’ve done this before or not. Actually, it probably has a more like chance of happening. People can die from this sort of thing.”

“I’ll be fine.” He veers away from her, making a beeline towards an old, drooping tree on the side of the house, “I don’t need a babysitter. Go inside and socialize.”

She frowns, “Call me if anything weird happens.”

“Fine.”

She leaves, and Loki stalks over to the tree. There’s an old, fraying rope swing hanging limply from one of the tougher looking branches, and he catches it when it starts to sway a bit in the wind. Loki tests the strength of the unreliable looking thing with his hands, giving it a few firm tugs before he warily sits on it, fingers fisted around the ropes holding it in the air. The swing faces the ocean, overlooks the broad expanse of sand and water stretching out from the house onward towards the horizon. He kicks his feet where the grass and sand blend together, too cautious of the swing’s questionable stability to actually go anywhere. For a heartbeat he imagines that the material under his fingers is metal chain links rather than old, fraying rope, and he closes his eyes.

His eyes snap back open when warm hands close over his across the rope.

“You came,” Thor says. He’s dripping wet like he just walked out of the sea, and Loki inhales sharply at the sight, only partly out of surprise. “I thought you were staying home.”

“I had some things to deal with first,” Loki says quietly. “And Darcy wanted to come, so . . .”

Thor’s eyes narrow slightly, “You and the lady Darcy are . . .”

“Gods, no,” Loki snorts. “She’s just - she’s helping me with some stuff.”

“I could have-”

“You don’t have time for me anymore,” Loki cuts him off.

“You’re still my brother,” Thor says, so softly Loki barely hears him, and Loki grits his teeth in response. Thor’s fingers clench around his before gliding up the ropes of the swing and back down, testing the places where it’s starting to fray. “This is not so unlike back then, is it,” he continues, “Do you remember? It was on a swing like this-”

Loki takes his hands away from the rope, eyes wide.

“-that I-”

He puts them over his ears, fingers tangling in his hair as he blocks out Thor’s words and the gentle hum of the ocean waves and air. Whatever Thor’s trying to say, he instinctively doesn’t want to hear it, doesn’t want to know. “Brother,” Thor had said just seconds before, and no matter how much that word hurts him he doesn’t really want anything else. He doesn’t want to know how that sentence is going to end. “Brother,” Thor had said, and Loki is fine with using that word as a shield between himself and a colder reality. He pushes the foggy memories of chain-linked swings and empty, lonely playgrounds down, down, down, too deep into his heart and his mind to be anything more than just a haze of a dream.

He doesn’t want to know.

Thor carefully pries Loki’s hands away from his ears, “It’s alright,” he whispers, “I won’t say
anything.” He tugs and Loki stumbles to his feet so that they’re standing toe to toe, the swing bumping against the back of Loki’s knees. “Come, now, the night is still young and the water is cool.”

Loki purses his lips, “And Jane?”

“She and the lady Sharon have returned to the house with Bucky. Why?”

Loki frowns, “No reason. But I didn’t bring . . .” He picks at his coat, his shirt, and the belt loops of his jeans. “I’m not really much for swimming, you know.”

“You’ll be fine as you are.” He steps back and starts down the beach, looking over his shoulder for Loki to follow, and Loki does, tripping to catch up until they’re walking side by side. Just above the waterline Loki pulls off his jacket and hesitantly fingers the hem of his shirt, eyes pointedly fixed on the sand between his feet.

It’s not entirely unexpected when Thor tangles his fingers underneath the hem and tugs the shirt up over Loki’s head, divesting him of it like he would when Loki used to get tangled in his sweaters when they were small. And just as if they were still children, Thor asks, “Were you stuck?” with a small, teasing smile on his face.

“No,” Loki mutters, as he always does, and Thor takes off across the sand and towards the water with a wild, beckoning laugh.

Loki counts the footsteps like he counts the years, taking each one as if it’s a minute, a day, a month, a year back in time, placing his feet in the soft indents of sand where Thor had placed his. And isn’t that how it always was, tag-along, follow, stand in the shadow and the footprints of what he could never be? But once he hits the water there’s no more path to walk, no more footsteps to follow, nothing but cool, salt stinging water as far as the eye can see. He wades in up to his ankles, his knees, his waist until the denim of his jeans clings to his legs and the waves lap against his stomach. Thor moves just a little farther ahead, parting the waves with his hands as they wash towards him, delighting in the way they separate around his body and meet again behind him, painted in a cold white by the moonlight. The reflection of the sky does not hold in the ocean as it does in lakes, crisp and clear, and instead dances across the surface with every ripple and wake, flashes of the moon over the waves that break against body and shoreline. Loki tears the fleeting reflections apart with his fingers, scatters them apart across the water with the ripples he creates, and watches as they form again to be washed away by the constant rise and fall of the coming tide.

When Loki’s eyes are focused elsewhere, Thor dips below the surface and vanishes under the waves. For a moment, after realizing that he’s gone, Loki panics, the bright blossom of fear unfurling in his chest and wrapping its roots tight around his stomach. He does not worry for long, however, as Thor bursts out from the depths only a moment later, arms outstretched. Loki has no time to dodge, to protest or resist, so when Thor takes him down, broad arms wrapped around his thin shoulders, he sinks.

Deep, dark, down, pushed and pulled beneath the water with less force than blind trust. After sunset, the water of the sea is as dark as the sky above it, chilled with the lack of sunlight it holds during the day, and rolling as the waves on the surface suggest. It’s a whip and a rush, senses flooded and the body cradled by the water, a slow, sink downwards and onwards.

Thor’s hands find Loki’s shoulders, holding him under, and Loki does not struggle. There are bubbles of laughter between them, Thor’s more so than Loki’s, and the warm brush of skin on skin as their legs tangle together. For a moment Loki lets himself pretend that he really has stepped back in time, to sleepless nights and nightmares, and children hiding together under blankets while they
waited for morning’s first light to chase their fears away. He threads his fingers through Thor’s hair where it drifts around his face under the water, and holds his breath even though his lungs are already burning for air when he feels Thor’s forehead press against his, a heavy weight against his own.

And then it’s over. He lets go of his air, lets the bubbles release between them in one harsh, gasping breath before he claws his way back to the surface, back to reality, Thor’s hands slipping down his shoulders to his wrists.

He stands, chest heaving, nearly shoulder deep in the water for a long moment as Thor follows, shakes his hair out and free of water in the open night air, fingers still clasped tight over Loki’s wrists. There’s a moment, a pinprick in time where Loki realizes his mistake, watches his own realization echoed across Thor’s face as Thor drags a cautious thumb over the inside of Loki’s wrist.

“What’s this?” Thor asked, voice barely a breath as he finds the places where Loki’s wrists are still healing, the small, red, rough places where needles have made their mark on skin.

“Nothing,” Loki lies.

Thor twists Loki’s wrist in his grip, pulls it up out of the water so that he can see it clearly in the moonlight. “I thought we were done with this,” he hisses, sharp, angry, and Loki can’t help but flinch.

“Just because you close one door does not mean there’s a hundred more open ones for me to take,” Loki replies smoothly.

“Why would-”

He doesn’t have to finish the question, doesn’t need to because Loki doesn’t give him the chance before his last nerve snaps, already pulled tight and fraying by the months of wear and tear against it. “Because I can’t take it!” Loki cries. “And it’s not about her anymore, or even you, it’s about . . . It’s about me! And I’m selfish for making it so, I know, you don’t need to tell me.” He struggles away from Thor, starts to push his way through the waves and back towards the shore as fast as he can. The words rush out anyways, painfully true. “I don’t care if you’re with her, I don’t care if you love her, because that’s fine. That’s fine, I don’t care.” He reaches the sand, drags stalks halfway up the beach before he whirls to face his brother, face red with anguish and rage, “But for gods’ sake, Thor, don’t leave me behind! Don’t forget that I’m still here! Love her all you want, I honestly don’t care anymore, I’ve given up, but I can’t . . . I can’t be alone. Please.”

“Do you remember? It was on a swing like this that I-”

“Don’t leave me alone.”

Underneath his hands he can feel the cold metal of each individual link and he traces them around, up, down, over and over again with the tips of his fingers. He’s waiting.

“I can’t be alone.”

By the time Thor makes his way up the sand, Loki’s already gone, the door to the beach house slamming closed behind him. The fragile, fraying, empty swing sways from where it hangs from the boughs of the old tree, disturbed where Loki had brushed against it when he’d passed.

OoOoOoOoOoO

By the time the sun breaks over the horizon everything is as it was before. Clint and Natasha’s Strip
Happy Days winnings are still on the table, adorned with a flag made out of Thor’s boxers. Sharon is downstairs arguing with Bucky over breakfast while Steve bustles around the kitchen like the morning person he is. Tony’s zonked out on the sofa, and Thor on the floor, the latter of the two covered in sand from chest to toe where Bruce and Clint buried him and shaped the grains around his body like a mermaid’s tail and torso, shell bra and all. Jane wanders down after awhile to rummage around in the cabinet for some cereal and Darcy and Loki slip out of the house at just after nine, for what reason they do not say.

“There’s a nice little café in the town down the road,” Tony says to Steve when the hour is approaching noon. He leans against the doorframe so that he can talk to Steve where the blond is sitting on the front deck and outlining the ocean scenery in his sketchpad. “We could go?”

Steve looks up at him after a pause, a tentative smile on his face, “Like a date?”

“Exactly like a date,” Tony confirms, and it’s like he can feel the ground shifting under him, solidifying, stabilizing, giving him a firm place to stand for a long while yet.

OoOoOoOoOoO

Sharon, Bucky, Thor, and Jane head down the beach after lunch. They walk down the shore a ways to where the stretch of sand starts to get crowded with people laying out their towels and blankets for an afternoon nap in the sun. Which is exactly what they came out here to do. The water is a bit too communal for any swimming, the shallows filled with small children and their parents, the deeper places occupied by inexperienced, naive surfers hoping to catch a good wave too close to the coast. Bucky stretches out on his back under the umbrella they set up. Sharon spreads out just a few feet away on her stomach, head pillowed on her arms while she reads a book that lies open on the towel in front of her. Jane tries to teach Thor how to make a sandcastle (they’ve long ago stopped asking why Thor doesn’t know certain things almost everyone else knows, it’s not worth the effort), which has some strange consequences when Thor gets too distracted while digging the moat, and instead creates a giant hole in the beachside.

“What are you digging for?” Jane asks as she peers down into the massive pit Thor has made, leaning over the edge so far that she almost topples in until Thor reaches up a hand to steady her. “China?”

Thor laughs, “Digging to China would require much more than my bare hands alone, although it a compliment that you think that would be a feat I could accomplish.”

“He’s digging for dinosaurs,” Bucky pipes up, waving a lazy hand in the air.

For a moment Thor looks intrigued. “Can you find the remains of such great beasts in this location?”

“Um, probably not,” Jane says, and Thor’s face falls. “But you could probably find some really cool shells?” she adds, and Thor proceeds to show her what he’s already collected by disappearing into his pit and reappearing with his hands full of shells. Jane picks through them with mild interest, setting the nicer ones aside and tossing the broken bits to the waves. “Oh, look, a sand dollar,” she announces after awhile, and holds the perfectly intact pansy shell up to the sunlight for a better look.

Thor pokes his head up out of the hole. “What is a sand dollar?”

Jane hands it to him, “It’s a dried up echinoid,” she explains.

Thor blinks in confusion and Bucky tilts his sunglasses down the bridge of his nose with a small
sigh. “It’s a mermaid’s lost coin,” he says, “It’s good luck.”

Thor grins. “A treasure of the sea!” he proclaims.

OoOoOoOoO

They’re halfway through the produce section when Loki makes his decision. “I can’t stay,” he says abruptly, and Darcy fumbles with the tomato she’d been putting into a baggie, startled by the sudden announcement.

“Can’t stay what? At the beach house? We can leave after we drop off these groceries, if you want.”

Loki shakes his head, “No. Can’t stay here.”

Darcy frowns, “At the grocery store.”

“No, here,” Loki says, slightly exasperated. “In this place. The city, the state. Here.” He gestures around them like his arms could encompass an area of made up of miles rather than inches and feet. “I can’t stay here.”

Darcy watches the movement of his arms, the unhappy curve of his lips, and shrugs, “Where will you go?”

“Anywhere,” he replies, “Everywhere.”

“Alone?”

“Probably.”

She smiles, just slightly, “Well, we should at least finish the grocery shopping first.”

OoOoOoOoO

The café is a nice, quiet little place, not so different from the coffee shop they usually hang out in. They pick a small table outside that’s shaded by the overhang of the building and place their orders. “I feel like I’m somehow betraying Coulson by getting coffee here,” Steve says in a hushed tone when the waiter brings them their drinks.

Tony snorts in amusement, “It’s not like he’ll ever know.” Steve, however, doesn’t look so convinced.

They’re halfway through their meal when Tony realizes they’ve hardly said a word since they started eating, and he jabs Steve’s hand with his fork when Steve tries to take one of his fries. “Hey, hey, hey,” he scolds when Steve still manages to pilfer the fry. “You can’t order a salad and then eat all of my fries, that defeats the purpose of the salad.”

“I’m sharing,” Steve says innocently.

Tony frowns, “Sharing implies that I get some of your food as well.” Steve promptly offers his plate, sneaking another fry of Tony’s simultaneously. Tony makes a face, “That was a hypothetical point, Steve, I don’t want any of that rabbit food.” Steve gives Tony a knowing look and goes back to eating his salad and taking Tony’s fries. “Anyways,” Tony goes on after a minute or two, “Um, what exactly do people do on an actual date?”

Steve stares at him, “Date things?”
“Well yeah, I know that,” Tony huffs, “Dinner and a movie and all that, with a goodnight kiss as the cherry on top of the ordeal. But what are you supposed to do.” Steve puts his fork down and folds his hands on the table, eyeing Tony with a considering look.

“Usually you get to know each other,” he says after some thought, “Like ask each other about things you’re curious about.”

Tony brandishes his fork at him, “That doesn’t really work though, does it. In this instance I mean. I already know everything.”

Steve raises an eyebrow, “You do not.”

“Do too.”

“Fine. What’s my favorite color?”

“Blue.”

“Favorite movie?”

“Wizard of Oz. God knows why.”

“Birthday?”

“The grand old fourth of July.”

Steve pauses, “You didn’t remember Pepper’s birthday.”

Tony falters for a minute, “J-Jesus, is no one ever going to let me live that down?”

“But you remember mine,” Steve smiles.

“Only because it’s on the same day as a national holiday,” Tony mutters. Steve nudges him with a foot under the table and he sighs, “What? So what if I remember your birthday? Yay, big achievements for Tony Stark! Cake for everyone!” he says sarcastically. Steve positively grins and Tony clams up a bit at the sight.

“You’re blushing,” Steve points out. Tony groans and puts his head in his hands.

OoOoOoOoOoO

“What if we were the last two people left on earth?” Bucky asks, pushing his sunglasses up the bridge of his nose. He’s propped up on his elbows across his beach towel, trying to look over Sharon’s shoulder at the book she’s so absorbed in. “Would you date me then?”

“That’s not a date,” Sharon deadpans, “That’s an attempt to repopulate the earth.”

“Exactly.”

“No.”

Bucky scowls. “Okay then, what if the someone was pointing a gun at your head and asked you who you would date between me, Thor, and Steve. Who would you choose?”

Sharon glances at him, “Who’s the one holding the gun to my head.”
“I don’t - how should I know?!” Bucky snaps.

“It’s your hypothetical situation. You need to know these things,” Sharon smiles.

“Someone come help me out,” Jane calls, struggling to climb out of the hole Thor had dug in the sand. The two of them had been unearthing seashells for the past twenty minutes and piling them on the side of the pit. Sharon gets up to pull her out just as a rather large wave crashes up to them. It floods into the hole and washes over both girls’ ankles as they stumble back from the sandpit.

“This is most distressing,” Thor says solemnly from the hole as he stares at the water that has pooled around his feet, disrupting his progress.

“Jesus,” Sharon winces, eyebrows furrowing together, “I think I got stung.” She bends to touch her ankle, fingers tentatively testing the already reddening skin there.

“Jellyfish?” Bucky asks, getting to his feet to get a closer look.

“Probably,” Sharon mutters. She puts her foot back down and stumbles, grimacing. “Ow. Okay, yeah, definitely a jellyfish or something. God, it hurts.”

Bucky puffs out his chest, “I can carry you back to the beach house.”

“You have to carry the umbrella,” Sharon reminds, gesturing to the broad beach umbrella they brought with them.

Thor climbs out of the hole, “I can carry you.”

Sharon looks skeptical, “For two miles after digging a five foot deep hole with your bare hands?” Thor frowns, and Sharon sighs, “It’s not that bad. I can walk.” She puts some weight on her foot again and cringes, “Or maybe not . . .”

“Well,” Jane says quietly, “There’s always, um . . . I’ve heard that if you, uh, pee on it the pain goes away.”

Sharon narrows her eyes, “I am not going to pee on it.”

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

Loki spreads out a roadmap across the sandy living room floor. He traces his fingers over highways and back roads, cities and farmland, and open countryside that vanishes over the edge of the map and onwards. “I ran away shortly after high school,” he says when he feels Darcy’s eyes on him. She follows the path he made with his fingers, cautiously dances her nails across the same highways, countryside, and off roads. “I couldn’t take the expectations that were placed on me, and more so, I couldn’t take the ones that weren’t.”

He pauses to run an index finger up the center of the map, over the creases where it’s been folded. “I guess they didn’t tell Thor until he came home from school, and by then I’d already been gone for a couple months.”

“How long ago was that?” Darcy asks.

“Six years?” Loki hums, “Seven? It doesn’t matter. We played a game of cat and mouse, Thor and I. I ran and he chased. It took nearly a year for him to catch up to me. Sometimes . . .” He draws off, eyes clouding, “Sometimes I wish he hadn’t.” He sighs, “But that doesn’t matter now. He won’t come after me this time.”
“What makes you say that?”

Loki shrugs, “If there’s one thing Thor is good for it’s his promises. After the first time I made him swear not to follow if I ran again. He may have only agreed because he didn’t expect me to ever leave, but an oath is an oath, in the end. Besides, he has too much anchoring him here to chase after me now.”

“Did you really okay with this?” Steve asks for the twelfth time in the last hour. Tony rolls his eyes.

“Yes, I’m okay with it. Do you want me to superglue our hands together to prove it?” He drags his hand up to eye level as they walk, pulling Steve’s up with him, “Because if you ask me again I will.”

Steve smiles, “So, can we tell everyone now?”

Tony hesitates to reply and Steve frowns. “Well,” Tony starts, “I’d rather not tell them right this second. I have to make a few phone calls first and—” He stops as he notices the look Steve’s giving him, “Wait, no, don’t make that face. I’m not going to freak out again. I just know that Rhodey will maim me if he hears it from someone else. And Bucky’s a blabber mouth. So you have to let me tell Rhodey, and then you can go off and sing about your feelings or whatever to the world.”

“I don’t sing about my feelings,” Steve says.

“You sing in the shower.”

“You do, too!”

They’re almost up to the front door of the beach house when they stop, Tony giving Steve a teasing shove as they step apart a bit. “I’ll show you singing in the shower,” he laughs.

“I can’t tell if that was an actual challenge or a poorly executed innuendo,” Steve smiles.

Tony bites back another laugh, “Both? I’m pretty sure it was both,” he says as he pulls Steve down to him with a hand on the back of Steve’s neck and places a kiss to the corner of Steve’s mouth.

“So that means a shower singing competition and then whatever that bad innuendo implied?” Steve asks innocently.

“God, yes,” Tony grins, “Where have you been all my life?”

“Right here,” Steve whispers.

Which is the exact moment that Bucky, Thor, Jane, and Sharon bustle past them without even sparing them a second glance, startling both Steve and Tony into jumping apart. “What the hell was that?” Tony gasps, “They ran past like a bunch of scared sheep.”

He and Steve lean around to peer inside the door, “Hey, uh, guys, you okay?” Tony calls as the four of them dump their stuff on the floor and start up the stairs.

“Fine!” Jane answers.

“Just need a shower,” Bucky mutters.

“Or a hundred showers,” Sharon adds with a shudder.
“And a nap to wipe the images from our minds,” Thor decides.

Tony glances at Steve, “I don’t even want to know.”

“There goes the shower idea,” Steve mumbles.

Chapter End Notes

Quick note. I've been getting/finding a lot of fanart that's been done for this fic lately! SO IF YOU HAVE ART DON'T HIDE IT FROM ME BECAUSE I WILL FIND IT. Also SUPER THANK YOU to everyone who has made art so far! /(O U O)/\ I legitimately scream every time I find/receive art for this fic. I've never gotten any before, and all of it is just absolutely blowing me away!
Chapter Summary

Clint sees some things that should never be seen, Natasha decides a forced confession is the sweetest victory, Thor gets his hair cut, and ties are severed.

There’s one conversation that happens at least once a month between Bruce, Natasha, and Clint, and it goes a little something like this.

“Why don’t you just move in with us?” Bruce asks.

“You spend the night here three or four days a week anyways,” Natasha adds.

As usual, however, Clint’s reply is a steadfast, “No.”

From where he’s leaning against the kitchen counter, Bruce raises an eyebrow. “Why?”

Clint sighs, “I just like my space, okay? Can you stop pestering me about it?” He reaches around Bruce to snatch his coffee mug off the counter, taking a long, pointed swig from it. “And besides, this place only has two bedrooms.”

“I really don’t see how that’s an issue,” Natasha says.

“Well it is,” Clint mutters, “It is totally an issue. The biggest of issues.” He sips at his coffee and wanders over to the large bay window, the smallest of frowns on his face. “Besides, living here would just . . .”

“Make this ménage à trois official?” Natasha finishes for him. Clint chokes on his drink.

“That’s not what I was going to say, but sure,” he squeaks out, “Close enough.”

Natasha shrugs off his apparent alarm, “Why would that be a problem? Everyone is already well aware of what we do.”

Clint waved at her with a hand, “Yeah, but that's different. I still have my own space, my own room, my whole other life.”

“To escape to,” Bruce interrupts darkly, “That’s it, isn’t it? You want the available exit.”

Clint frowns, “No. I just . . . Moving in would be a permanent thing.”

“Obviously,” Natasha deadpans.

“And, uh,” Clint falters a bit, turning to gaze out the window again, “I’ve never . . . Had a permanent thing . . .”

Bruce lets out an exasperated groan and crosses the room to where Clint is standing. He grabs Clint by the shoulders and shakes him a little. “You are so lucky,” he says, “that I love you, because otherwise I would have tossed your ass out that window simply because what just came out of your mouth was beyond stupid.”
Natasha raises an agreeing hand, “Same.”

Clint huffs and pushes away from them, “Good to know. I guess. But, seriously, moving in? Can I just . . . I don’t know, have a little more time?”

“He’s under some grand illusion that living with Steve is the epitome of bachelor lifestyle, isn’t he?” Natasha mutters to Bruce.

“Either that or he likes getting lectured when he leaves his towel on the bathroom floor,” Bruce stage whispers in return.

Clint makes an exasperated sound and leans against the window, “That was one time. And besides-” He stops suddenly, eyes fixed out the window. “Uh, he just likes the place clean. See, look, he’s cleaning right now,” Clint gestures towards the window and across the street where Steve can be seen dusting in his apartment. “I didn’t know you could see our place from here. Huh.”

“And the oblivious award goes to,” Natasha says blandly.

“Clint, you could see our apartment from your window, that’s why we moved across from each other when we first came here,” Bruce reminds, “Why would you think it didn’t work both ways.”

“Maybe because I don’t actually have a reason to be looking into my own apartment,” Clint mutters. He turns back to the window, “Oh, and look. Tony’s over. And so begins another game of unsatisfied sexual tension with Tony and Ste - holy shit!” Clint presses his face against the glass, “What the hell is going on over there?”

Natasha and Bruce join him at the window, faces against the glass as they take in the sight of Tony cornering Steve and crowding him up against the window across the street. “Oh yeah, I forgot,” Natasha says just as Tony kisses Steve.

“Forgot what?!” Clint screeches. “Forgot - Oh god, my eyes!” He promptly turns away from the window, hands over his face in an attempt to miss seeing what he just saw, an action that is, obviously, just a bit too late.”

“Damn,” Natasha whistles, “I always thought Steve was packing but . . .”

“Inappropriate,” Bruce says lightly, but doesn’t turn away from the window either.

Clint makes a pained noise into his hands, “Can someone please just fill me in on what I’ve apparently missed?”

“Well Stark has his hand currently wrapped around-” Natasha starts.

“Not that! Not that!” Clint yells, “The other stuff!”

“Steve seems to be quite the vocalist and-” Bruce tries.

“No! Someone explain why! Why!”

“Because when two people love each other very much-” Natasha leers.

Clint screams, and goes to cover his ears instead, falling onto the couch with a frustrated, horrified little sob. “I hate you both,” he says into the couch cushion, “So much.”

OoOoOoOoOoO
It’s never the journey that hurts, in the end, so much as it is the idea and the feeling of leaving things behind. When Loki packs he’s well aware of this, has experienced it before, and he takes his time. He doesn’t require much to get by, and packs only what he knows he’ll need. Material things are, for the most part, unnecessary. He leaves behind every book, every trinket, every piece of himself that he knows will be missed but will never be essential. For awhile he sits on the edge of Tony’s bed, folding the top of the sheet over the covers and smoothing it out. He wonders how long it’s been since Tony slept in his own bed. There’s still space left in his backpack by the time he’s done, an empty, vacant pocket of air where he knows he knows he could fill, but finds that there’s really nothing to fill it with.

“When do you leave?” a voice asks from the doorway, and Loki tenses.

“Tuesday,” he whispers.

“Hmm.” The speaker crosses the room then, settling on the floor behind Loki. “Your hair is getting a bit long.”

“Hypocrite,” Loki whispers, a sound that’s almost a laugh. He turns to face the speaker, fishing a fine-toothed comb out of his backpack. “Do me a favor and,” Loki says, twirling a finger in a circular motion, “turn for me, Thor.”

Thor smiles and does so until his back is to Loki. “I was thinking I’d cut it short again, for awhile.”

Loki hums, somewhere between interest and agreement, and starts to run the comb through Thor’s hair. “How short?”

Tapping a hand to the back of his neck, Thor replies, “About here. Maybe shorter. Would you?”

“I am honestly and constantly surprised you still let me cut your hair after the time when I was nine,” Loki says. Thor lets out a rumbling laugh in return. “Don’t move,” he orders before standing and exiting the room. Thor stays put and closes his eyes with a sigh. Loki returns a moment later with a pair of scissors in hand. “I could chop it all off, you know, and you wouldn’t even notice until I was finished,” Loki points out. Thor smiles.

“Whatever you’d like.”

Loki settles behind him again, kneeling on the carpet with the scissors in one hand and the comb in the other. “If I don’t do it right you can always go get a professional to-”

Thor shakes his head, “No.”

“Stubborn,” Loki chides.

“I think that this would fall under the expression ‘The kettle calling the teapot black,’” Thor says.

Loki laughs.

“I don’t think that’s quite the right saying. Now stop moving around before I chop your ear off,” Loki chides.

There are things, habits, that people become accustomed to over time. Thor and Loki have been cutting each other’s hair since they were young. It is a calm practice, the soft and precise slash and snip of scissors becomes an almost soothing sound, accompanied only by almost inaudible breathing. “You gave me a promise,” Loki says quietly, “When we came here. Do you recall?”

“I do,” Thor confirms.
“I ask you now to keep your word.”

Thor lets out a quiet, frustrated growl of a noise, “Loki, I—”

“Your word, Thor,” Loki whispers. “You have to keep it. You have to . . .”

“Let you go?” Thor finishes for him. He raises a hand to the back of his neck, feeling Loki’s handiwork with the tips of his fingers, “Not bad. My turn.” They switch places, Loki reluctantly turns his back and hands Thor the scissors. “Just a little off the ends then?” Thor asks, holding a bit of Loki’s hair between his pointer and middle fingers.

“Like yours,” Loki decides. “Short.”

“You’ve never worn it short before.”

“Then maybe I should. A new look, a new start, isn’t that how it’s supposed to go?”

Thor nods, “I suppose so.” He pauses for a moment and then asks, “Tuesday, then?”

“Yes.”

“By car, or . . .” Thor draws off, expecting a confirmation.

Loki smiles, “If I told you that then you’d have the means to come after me, wouldn’t you. Your word, Thor.”

Thor exhaled, long and loud, “My word,” he agrees.

OoOooOoOoO

“Ew, ew, ew, ew,” Clint whines, his hands over his eyes as they make their way across the street towards the coffee shop, “Do we have to? I’ve already seen enough. Oh god, please don’t make me go in there.”

Natasha pries one hand away from Clint’s face while Bruce does the same to the other, “They’re not in the coffee shop, Clint,” she points out. “We’re just meeting up with Bucky and Sharon.”

“That’s just as bad!” Clint yells, digging his heels in as Bruce and Natasha drag him bodily into SHIELD Coffee.

Eventually, Clint calms down enough for them to push him onto their favorite sofa and begin discussing what they had come here to discuss. Bucky and Sharon are sitting on one of the armchairs, Bucky in the seat and Sharon perched on the arm with her cup of coffee. “So,” she says once Clint has stopped loudly declaring his protests for all the world to hear, “You know about Steve and Tony.”

Clint groans, “If by know you mean ‘Saw things that made my eyes bleed,’ then yes.”

Bucky laughs, “And I thought how I found out the hard way. Jesus.”

Natasha takes a sip of her coffee, “Oh, do elaborate.”

Bucky winks at her and Clint pointedly rolls his eyes. “I picked up the phone,” Bucky says, “When I was over at Steve’s apartment. I didn’t know Steve had already answered it from the line in his bedroom. The conversation went a little something like this.” He bats his eyelashes mockingly, “Tony says, ‘Oh, just tell Bucky you’re doing laundry,’ and then Steve replied, ‘So your name is
Laundry now?’ And then I hung up and bravely refrained from screaming.”

Natasha side-eyes Sharon, “He screamed didn’t he.”

“Yes,” Sharon confirms. Bucky glares at the both of them.

“So are we going to tell them that we know or what?” Clint asks.

“What’s the fun in that?” Natasha questions slyly.

Clint lets his head fall into his hands again, “Oh my god.”

OoOoOoOoOoO

Tony knows he’s in trouble the moment Steve drops the cordless phone in his hand. “Uh, what’s this for?” he asks as innocently as possible. Steve frowns.

“You said you’d call Rhodey two weeks ago, Tony,” Steve says lowly, and Tony slumps.

“Right, right, yeah. I know. I mean, it’s just—” He stops short as Steve kisses him, which has been Steve’s favorite method of shutting him up as of late. “You’re evil,” Tony mutters as he pulls away, “You smile that big boy scout smile but inside you’re just a mean—” Steve kisses him again and Tony sighs. “Yeah, okay. Calling him now.”

“Thank you,” Steve smiles.

For the past few weeks Tony has called Rhodey specifically when he knew that Rhodey wouldn’t pick up. Times like two in the morning, noon when he knew Rhodey would most likely be out running, or after seven when he knew Rhodey was probably watching the game. This, of course, was done entirely on purpose, and that fact hadn’t slipped by Steve’s notice. Which is exactly why he hands Tony the phone when he knows Rhodey will be more than happy to answer.

And that’s exactly what happens, “Tony!” Rhodey says when he answers the phone, “Finally! We seem to keep missing each other this week.”

“Er, yeah, you know how phone tag can get,” Tony chuckles dryly. Steve gives him a look and Tony rolls his eyes. Okay, so maybe he’s been turning his phone off so that when Rhodey calls him back it will go straight to voicemail, but so what? “Anyways, I, uh, need to tell you something.”

He can practically hear Rhodey’s judging scowl through the phone. “What did you do?” Rhodey says.

“What? Why does everyone always think I did something wrong?” Tony complains, “That’s what Pepper said, too!”

“It’s because the last time you called me to tell me something with that tone of voice it was because Pepper and left your ass in the middle of the city,” Rhodey reminds dully. “What happened this time?”

“Um,” Tony says, “Well it’s kinda sorta . . . Steve and I are together now?”

There’s a long pause on the other end and Tony holds his breath as he waits for a response. Finally, Rhodey says, “Can I be your best man?”

Every single cell in Tony’s brain shuts down. “W-what?”
“Can I Be Your Best Man,” Rhodey reiterates slowly.

“You’re not surprised?” Tony blurs out.

“Uh, was I supposed to be?”

Tony pinches the bridge of his nose, “Well, I don’t know. I just assumed—”

“That I was a blind moron?” Rhodey asks, “I’m flattered. But seriously, I’m your best man, right?”

“Rhodey!” Tony snaps, “I’m not - Oh, hell, whatever. On the really, really small chance that every happens, sure.” Rhodey lets out a triumphant whoop.

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

“You see,” Natasha explains, “While we can mess with them all we want—”

“‘Mess with’ is the wrong term,” Bucky interrupts, “I think you mean cockblock.”

Natasha purses her lips, “It’s the same thing, and that’s beside the point. As I was saying, it won’t do to just mess with them. It would be much more fun to try and force them to admit it.”

Clint groans into his hands, “Why?”

“Because they deserve it for making us think that we ruined everything,” Bucky mutters. “After that night where we made them dance.”

Natasha raises an eyebrow, “Why haven’t I heard this story?”

“Because it ended as a disaster,” Sharon says, “so I thought it best not to mention it. Anyways, continue, please. How exactly would we get them to admit such a thing?”

“I have a secret weapon,” Natasha says slyly.

“I have a really bad feeling about this,” Clint whispers, and jumps as two arms wrap around his neck from behind.

“Good,” says his attacker, “Because I was promised an iTunes gift card for my services today.”

Darcy grins, and tightens her grip on Clint until she practically has him in a strangle hold. “So, we’re cockblocking Steve and Tony?”

Natasha smiles, “That’s part of it. The other part is where you come in.”

OoOoOoOoOoO

“Do I have to?” Tony hisses as Steve shoves him into the coffee shop ahead of him. “Because, seriously, can’t we just leave them a note? A note reading, ‘Hey, Steve and I are fu—”

“Tony!” Steve snaps, “No! This is something that should be done in person. It’s a big deal.”

Tony sighs, “Only because you’re making it a big deal.

Steve stops, eyebrows furrowing together as he moves to look Tony in the eye, “You don’t think it’s a big deal?”

Tony’s heart does a little jump and jolt in his chest, “What, no, I mean . . . I just . . .” He rolls his
eyes and leans against Steve’s shoulder, “I didn’t mean it like that. I just don’t see why it would be a big deal to them.”

“They’re our friends, Tony.”

“Then why don’t you tell them?”

“We’ll tell them together.”

The two of them stop short as the approach the middle of the coffee shop, and six pairs of eyes staring at them. “Tell us what?” Natasha asks, her voice almost sickly sweet.

Tony swallows, “Uh, tell you that . . .” Steve nudges him and Tony coughs, “That . . . I’m buying everyone coffee today! Okay bye!” He makes a hasty retreat to the counter and Steve lets out an aggravated sigh.

Darcy catches Natasha’s gaze an grins, “My turn?”

“Oh, yes,” Natasha smiles, “Be my guest.”

Darcy slips away while the rest of them pull Steve in to join them. “So what were you going to tell us?” Sharon asks.

“Something important?” Bucky adds.

Steve falters, “I should really wait for Tony to get back.”

“Oh but Tony seems to be busy,” Bruce points out, motioning towards where Tony is holding way more coffee mugs than he can carry and is currently being cornered against the counter by Darcy. Steve raises an incredulous eyebrow as he turns to see what the fuss is about.

Darcy leans in towards Tony, and Tony leans back warily. “What are you up to?” he inquires suspiciously.

“Nothing,” Darcy smiles, “That jacket looks really good on you, though.”

“Er . . .”

She runs a hand up his arm, “It’s very nice. It really frames your muscles.”

Tony gapes at her, “My . . . What? Are you okay?”

The dramatic way Darcy glances in another direction makes Tony blink in confusion. “Not really,” she confesses, “But it’s okay. I can’t really tell you about it anyways.”

“What’s going on?” Tony asks warily, and Darcy gives him an obviously false shy smile.

“Well,” she says slowly, “Have you ever felt like you’re looking for something and you just look and look and look? But then it was right there under your nose the whole time?”

Tony’s eyes glaze over for a moment, and he flashes a quick look over Darcy’s head to where Steve is currently being manhandled by the rest of their friends. “Yeah,” he says softly. Darcy barely manages to stifle a snort of laughter.

“Good,” she says, sounding way too giddy as she gives him a pat on the arm, “Well then, I guess that’s something for you to think about?”
“Ye - What?” Tony sputters, the meaning of the conversation suddenly hitting him in more ways than one, “Wait, what are you-” But Darcy is already gone, practically skipping out the door. “Bu . . .” Tony tries and fails, staring after her until Steve manages to free himself and make his way over. “Hey, uh,” Tony says when Steve approaches, “I think Darcy just hit on me?”

Steve huffs out a laugh, “She did not.”

“She did too! She complimented my jacket!” Tony exclaims.

“And? It’s a very nice jacket,” Steve says.

Tony throws his hands in the air, “And she was hitting on me! It was weird!” Steve smiles and Tony turns away from him, “Fine, fine, don’t believe me. But something’s up,” he mutters, and storms out of the coffee shop. Steve following close behind, trying to apologize between fits of laughter.

Loki’s vacuuming when Tony barges in, slamming the door against the wall as he enters. “I know this is your fault,” he says, and Loki makes a face at him before turning off the vacuum.

“What, exactly, is my fault now?”

Tony gestures angrily around the room, “Whatever Darcy is doing! I know it’s your idea.” He stops and does a double take, “What did you do to your hair?”

Loki looks away, self-conscious, and touches a hand to the back of his neck, “It, uh, sort of curls up when it’s short, doesn’t it.”

“Uh, yeah,” Tony confirms, “But it’s not half bad. Why did you-”

“It doesn’t matter,” Loki shushes him, “Now what’s this about Darcy?”

“She was hitting on me,” Tony explains.

Loki snorts, “She wasn’t. Darcy has absolutely no interest in you.”

Tony opens his mouth to protest and stops, realization in his eyes, “That’s . . . Hey . . . Wait a second.” He runs across the hall without another word, and Loki rolls his eyes and returns to his vacuuming.

When Tony gets to Steve’s apartment Steve is eating a thing of yogurt, spoon still in his mouth when Tony makes a very dramatic entrance. “They know!” Tony yells, and Steve frowns around his spoon.

“Know what?”

“About us!” Tony explains, “About everything! That’s why Darcy was hitting on me! They’re trying to mess with us!”

Steve takes the spoon and tosses it in the sink, “I really don’t think-”

He stops as Darcy, Sharon, and Bucky waltz into the apartment, and Darcy gives Tony a swift pat on the butt as she passes that makes Tony freeze. “Call me later?” she mouths to him over her shoulder, and Steve’s eyes narrow.
Tony whirls and grabs him by the shoulders, “They. Know.”

“How?” Steve hisses.

“I don’t know! My blatant innuendos? Your failure to lock the door that one time? Because Natasha told everyone? Who cares! We need to strike back!”

“Tony . . .”

“This is a game of Chicken, Steve. And I am not confessing now, because that would mean we lose.”

Darcy is, actually, completely surprised when Tony calls. “Was this supposed to happen?” she whispers to Sharon while she fumbles for her phone. “I thought we were just supposed to wig them out.”

“Just answer it,” Bucky directs, pressing the phone to her palm. “Man up.”

“Woman up,” Darcy corrects coolly, and then answers the phone with a giggling, “Hi, Tony,” that makes Bucky gag.

“So,” Tony says smoothly, “You asked me to call?”

“Oh, yep, that was me,” Darcy says in a rush.

“I was wondering if you’d like to stop by tonight?”

Darcy covers the receiver of the phone with a hand and turns to Bucky, “He wants me to come over tonight!” she gasps.

Bucky’s gaze turns steely, “I can’t believe that guy! How could he even think about cheating on Ste - wait.” He glances at Sharon, “You don’t think . . .”

“They know that we know?” Sharon finishes for him, “Yes. That’s what I was thinking.”

Bucky turns back to Darcy, “Tell him yes. Tell him that you’ll come over.”

Darcy makes a face, “But-”

“Do it or Natasha will have our heads for letting an opportunity like this go to waste,” Bucky bites out.

Darcy nods, “Right.” She takes her hand off the receiver, “Hi, Tony, sorry, the, uh, reception was bad for a second. Tonight would be great. See you at eight?”

“Sounds good,” Tony says.

Darcy points at him with disproval, “Only because you’re a spoilsport. Natasha, tell me the truth now, which expression is more seductive? This?” Darcy gives her a small, almost mysterious smile
and looks up from under her lashes. “Or this?” She drops the smile, and puts on a more innocent look, somewhere between shy and naïve.

“The first,” Natasha says without hesitation.

“Agreed,” Bucky pipes up.

Sharon gives Darcy an encouraging push towards the door, “Now work your magic and make him confess.”

“This won’t take too long, will it?” Darcy asks as Bruce moves to pick a bit of lint off the back of her dress, “Because I actually have something to do tonight.”

“On a Monday?” Clint asks.

“Some of us have lives, Clint,” Darcy says sweetly, and knocks on the door while the rest of them scurry out of the way.

Bruce shoots Clint a knowing look, “Would you like some aloe for that burn?”

“Quiet,” Natasha shushes.

OoOoOoOoOoOoOoO

Tony fixes his tie for the hundredth time in the last hour, “I keep thinking it’s not straight,” he mutters.

Steve sighs and grabs him by the shoulders, “Let it be. Now look at me.” Tony does so and Steve smiles, “Honestly, I am not fond of this idea, but . . .”

“Don’t worry,” Tony smirks, “This will be a piece of cake, over and done with before you know it.” He stands on his toes and pulls Steve down to him just as a knock can be heard from the door. “Kiss me good luck, and then get out of here.” Steve does so and Tony shoos him towards the bathroom with a laugh.

When he opens the door he pretends to be oblivious to the obvious giddy giggles coming from around the corner in the hall. “Right on time,” he says to Darcy, “Come on in.”

Darcy steps inside and shuts the door behind her, nearly smacking a too-curious Bucky in the face with it. “So, here we are,” she says, “Are you nervous?”

Tony swallows, “Me? Nope. Why would I be nervous?”

“You’re right,” Darcy coos, “Silly me. Why would a flirt like yourself be nervous?” She turns away from him to look around the room, while Tony mutters “Flirt” under his breath as if he’s not quite sure what to make of that. “It’s a bit quiet in here, isn’t it.”

“I think Thor’s out with Jane and Loki went to do some errands,” Tony says hastily. “But why don’t I put on some music?”

“That would be nice,” Darcy agrees, following Tony over to the media center, “And maybe I could dance for you.” She sways towards him as Tony fumbles with the controller for the stereo.

“Aha,” Tony says, just a bit shrilly, “I’m not really one for, uh, dancing.”

Darcy puts her hands on his waist and Tony holds his breath, “Why? Are you waiting for the right
dance partner? Because I could be that.”

Tony grits his teeth, “Thanks for the offer but I really think that I’ve already found uh . . .” Darcy’s expression lights up and Tony’s eyes widen as he realizes how close he was to letting something, “Why don’t we move this to the bedroom?” he suggests as a last, very desperate attempt to ward her off.

For a moment, Darcy looks taken aback by this, “Really?”

“You don’t want to?” Tony asks, relieved, but Darcy stubbornly shakes her head.

“Oh no, I do. I just think we should start with some . . . Lotion! Yes, lotion. Go get some for me,” she orders, and Tony hurries over to the bathroom at the same time she makes a break for the door.

In the hallway, Darcy grabs Natasha and practically shrieks, “He wants to take it to the bedroom!”

“He’s full of shit,” Sharon says. “Or at least he’d better be.”

Natasha nods, “Tony may be an ass, but he’s not a cheater.”

“Debatable,” Bucky mutters, “but here, let’s do this.” He leans over and flicks a finger through the button line of Darcy’s shirt, popping it open.

Darcy gasps, “What the hell?”

“Boobs,” Bucky says simply, “If your bra is showing he’ll think you’re serious and back down. Probably.”

Sharon looks mildly impressed, “You didn’t even rip any buttons off.”

Bucky grins from ear to ear, “I am a professional.”

“Professional idiot?” Sharon asks.

“Hush,” Natasha says, and shoves Darcy back into the apartment, “Now make him fess up with your womanly charm.”

In the bathroom, Tony presses his back against the door, struggling not to hyperventilate. “This is way out of hand,” he says to Steve, “Way, way, way out of hand. I forfeit.” Steve raises an eyebrow, and Tony sighs, “Okay, that was a lie. But I’m very close to forfeiting! She wants me to get some lotion, Steve! Lotion!”

“Whoopie,” Steve deadpans, and hands him the lotion. “You got yourself into this with the whole secret thing, you can get yourself out of it, one way or another.” He opens the door and sends Tony tumbling back into the living room.

“Cruel!” Tony shouts at the now closed bathroom door. He rights himself just as Darcy stumbles back in from the hall. “Oh, were you leaving?”

Darcy blanches, “No, not without you, lover.” The last word comes out as a squeak that Darcy tries to cover with a light cough. She approaches him and Tony holds his breath to keep from confessing everything right then and there, his eyes pointedly directed at the ceiling once he notices her open top. “How should we start?” Darcy asks once they’re toe to toe again.

“Kissing, I suppose,” Tony blurts, immediately regretting it.
“Our first kiss,” Darcy says.

“Yay,” Tony cheers in a monotone. And then Darcy grabs him by the tie and kisses him.

It takes approximately six seconds for Tony to flip the fuck out.

He pushes Darcy away and practically trips over himself to put some space between them. “Okay! Okay! Enough! You win! I can’t have sex with you!”

Darcy claps her hands together, “Oh thank god. Now please elaborate why you can’t, if you will.”

Tony inhales and lets out, “Because I’m in love with Steve!” in one long rush.

“I knew it - Wait. What?” Darcy says, surprise clear on her face. Behind her, the hallway door creaks open to reveal their astonished listeners, much like the bathroom door that a wide-eyed Steve is slowly emerging from.


By this time the door to the hallway has opened fully, and Clint, Natasha, Bruce, Bucky, and Sharon peer in with matching shocked expressions. Tony freezes when he spots them, “Oh god. I said that out loud, didn’t I,” he says hoarsely.

“Yes you did,” Steve murmurs. Tony nearly jumps out of his skin when he realizes how close Steve’s standing.

“I.” Tony starts, but by then Steve has taken his face between his hands and kissed him, silencing any and all excuses.

“I love you, too,” Steve whispers in the too-small space between them.

Darcy makes a noise that sounds an awful lot like a squeal, “I just thought you guys were doing it, I didn’t know you were in love!”

“Neither did I,” Tony confesses.

From the hallway, Natasha puts a hand to her forehead, “If this were a romantic comedy it would be titled Completely Oblivious Idiots In Love.”

“Urgh,” Bucky says, eyes fixed on the wall, “I think it would be called Two Steps Away From Porn.” He jerks his head to where Steve and Tony seem to have gone into full-make-out mode, and Sharon steps inside to drag Darcy back out into the hall before they shut the door. “Don’t forget to use protection!” Bucky yells.

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

As far as Loki knows there is no specific word to describe a fear of permanence. Metathesiophobia is the fear of change, the fear that time will keep ticking away, that people will grow up and grow old and fade away, that while the world changes around you that you won’t change with it, and be nothing but a left behind relic. For Loki, change is comforting. It’s natural, it’s the way the world is supposed to work, ever changing, ever moving, and so he too moves with it.

Permanence is promises that are given, but never fulfilled, because permanence is a lie. Permanence
is the temporary set of ideals, or burdens, and getting lost in it just holds it in place until it strains and breaks, allowing the world and its people to keep changing.

There is no such thing as permanence.

When he first ran away Loki traveled by foot. He walked until he couldn’t feel his legs and then continued on, taking back roads and off roads with every intention of getting lost and never finding his way back. If he became lost he could disappear, slip away into the shadows and never have to worry again. “Hiding,” Thor had called it. “Vanishing,” Loki had corrected. When his feet had grown too sore to stand on he’d hitchhiked, and when he could risk spending the money, he took a bus.

Not once had he ever traveled by train.

Loki leaves in the hours between darkness and dawn, when the rosy hue on the horizon hesitates to break into an actual sunrise. “Be good while I’m gone,” he tells Chick and Duck while he fishes around in a drawer for a pad of paper and a pen. “Try not to get sick and make Thor fret, and don’t bother Tony too much. Although I must place an emphasis on ‘Too much’ because it would be terribly boring to let him alone, wouldn’t it.” Duck bobs his head as if in agreement while Chick tries to take Loki’s pen from his hands. “Now now,” Loki scolds gently, “If you take my pen I won’t have anything to write with, and it would be quite rude of me not to leave a note.”

It was easier the first time, he thinks later, to leave than it is now. Back then he was looking for escape, was all too glad to leave everything and everyone behind. Somehow, it’s different this time. It’s less like breaking away from chains than it is cutting strings, severing bits and pieces of thread that tie him to the city and the people in it. Chains break because they are forced to, snapping the metal that contains rather than holds. Cutting thread is an action that is done with care and intent, all the while knowing what the consequences of severing such strings could be.

Except Loki does not intend to detach himself from everything.

For awhile he waits at the station with the vague hope that someone will stop him, a hope that feels more like dread because part of him, most of him really, does not wish to be stopped. More than anything he simply wishes that someone cared enough to stop him.

Then again, he’d been so careful about making sure that no one did, that no one noticed.

When he takes his seat on the train his cell phone buzzes in his pocket. Briefly, Loki glances at the caller ID and contemplates answering, if only for a moment, before he turns it off.

“You’re not going to get that?”

“No,” Loki says smoothly, “Because I have no intention of letting him stop me again.”

“How do you know I’m not here to stop you?”

He laughs, a quiet, bitter sound, “Because you couldn’t even if you tried, Darcy.”

Darcy slides into the seat beside him with a small smile, “Can I ask why?”

Loki sighs, “The last time I tried to leave I was waiting for someone to pull me back, to tell me that I still had a place here.”

“You do have a place here,” Darcy says softly.
“It’s kind of you to think that,” Loki replies, “But I don’t. Not as things stand now anyways. I have played the parts of the brother, the lover, the victim.” He looks at Darcy, “And I feel that I have placed those burdens on enough people to last a lifetime.”

“You’re not a burden,” Darcy says.

“Thank you for thinking so,” Loki whispers.

Darcy nods, “Do they know you’ve left?”

“By now? Yes, I suppose they do.”

OoOoOoOoOoOoOo

Tony Stark was born ready to bear a thousand regrets on his shoulders, and probably even came to bear a few more. He can list every one of them in his head, sort them, order them, alphabetize them, but that doesn’t erase them, doesn’t forgive them.

In the end, he’s not sure whether this is a regret so much as it is a failure.

He can feel Thor watching him as the phone goes to voicemail against his ear, can feel his eyes on him, on the piece of paper in his hands. “I didn’t know,” he says quietly, guilt flaring in his stomach. “I should have-”

“Done what?” Thor asks, “Stopped him? What reason, pray tell, would you have given him to stay?”

Tony bites his lip, “Then why didn’t you follow him?”

“I gave him my word that I would not,” Thor says as evenly as he can.

Tony crumples and flattens the piece of paper between his hands a few times, smoothing it out on the counter after a minute of silence between them. “Why would he leave?”

Thor sighs, “That’s an answer I can not give. I think that . . . That Loki just needs some space, some time to figure things out. He’s sees the world differently than we do, he notices all the gray areas that lay between the lines of black and white the rest of us see, and I . . . I’m not sure he knows how to fit in with all that just yet.”

“Is he alone?” Tony whispers.

“No. And it would be best if you did not worry for him, Tony. He doesn’t want your pity, nor mine.”

Tony nods and crushes the piece of paper in his hands again, crumpling and creasing over the words, "I won’t be the stone that weighs anyone down."
Chapter Summary

Tony realizes that maybe "Later" isn't all he dreads it will be, Clint still won't move in, and Bucky confesses that the mission that ties him and Natasha together isn't an ordinary one.

“Say it again,” Tony whispers, and Steve laughs against his skin, just over his heart. It never gets old, Tony thinks as he watches Steve take his face in his hands. His eyes fluttering closed as their breath mingles together between them in the milliseconds before Steve kisses him, the weight of his body heavy and sound over Tony’s own.

“I love you,” Steve breathes, and Tony smiles. “I can say it as many times as you like. Every day, every hour, every minute until it sinks in to your thick skull.”

Tony huffs out a soft laugh, “Rude.”

Steve hums, a short, amused noise, “How come I have to say it over and over, and you don’t?”

“Because, obviously, I’m the insecure nincompoop. Whereas you are the sure-of-yourself moron who fell in love with me,” Tony scolds. “Isn’t this quite a terrible predicament we’ve gotten ourselves into?”

“Whatsoever shall I do?” Steve sighs mockingly, making a tisking sound under his breath.

Tony grins, “Well, I’ve been dying to hear exactly why you were stupid enough to fall in love with me.”

“As if your ego needs stroking,” Steve snorts. Tony leers at him and he rolls his eyes in return. “How about I save that one for later, and give you the when instead?”

Tony blinks, “The when?”

“Mmm, you know, the moment?”

And oh, yes, Tony knows. He knows it like he knows the rhythm of his own heartbeat, and the way it had stuttered and felt like it stopped on the back of a motorcycle during the first winter’s snow. That moment, his moment, has been catalogued in the back of his mind for the rest of eternity, something to cling to when he and Steve come to that inevitable, dreaded later. Sometimes he allows Steve’s belief that that particular later is something that will never come. Tony, however, has never been one to clutch on to such flimsy hopes.

“Tell me,” he murmurs, and he plans to tuck this one away too, to file it close to his heart.

Steve leans back a bit and props himself up on his elbows and smiles down at Tony, eyes flickering closed when Tony reaches up to run his fingers through his already mussed blond hair. “Let’s see,” he teases, watching the impatience flit across Tony’s face, “It was a Thursday.”

“A Thursday,” Tony echoes. “Just, uh, a normal Thursday?”
“Yep. A normal Thursday,” Steve confirms. “We were sitting on the couch, watching some movie or another, I can’t remember exactly what it was, and I was sketching. I was sketching you, actually.” He traces a finger down the line of Tony’s jaw and over his lips, “And it was just as I was at this point,” he says. Tony closes his eyes and leans into the touch, imagining that Steve’s fingers are made of graphite, that he himself is just lines of gray and black on white paper. “I stopped,” Steve goes on, “And I realized that I wasn’t even looking at you anymore as I drew. I had memorized you, I could draw every nick and scar and perfectly carved piece of you without even looking.” He grins when Tony’s eyebrows furrow together, clearly confused. “You see, I can count on one hand the number of people I’ve ever been able to draw from memory, without any sort of reference, so as soon as I realized that I knew.”

“Knew you were screwed?” Tony jokes. “By the way,” he adds, “we were watching Toy Story that day.” Because of course, of course he remembers that moment, remembers the odd look that had crossed Steve’s face, the way his own heart had jumped to his throat.

Steve chuckles, “You asked me if I was sick. You thought I’d gotten food poisoning from the Thai food we’d eaten that night.”

“You looked sick,” Tony says, slightly offended, “You got all red in the face and everything. I thought you had a fever.”

“Love sick is a kind of sick,” Steve whispers against Tony’s ear, and Tony shivers at both the sound and the feeling.

“Sap,” he scolds.

OoOoOoOoOoO

Bruce bounces a ball off the ceiling from where he lays on the couch, legs swung over the back and his head nearly touching the carpet. “I don’t think that he’s stubborn—” he starts.

“Oh, he’s definitely stubborn,” Natasha interrupts shortly.

“What I mean is that I’m pretty sure that’s not the reason,” Bruce continues, “this time.”

Natasha raises a thin eyebrow and moves to sit beside him on the sofa. “Then what is it?”

“Who knows. But, you know, it is sort of a big deal,” he glances at her, “It’s sort of in the same boat as marriage.” Natasha makes a face and Bruce grins in return. “You know what I mean. It’s the same level of commitment.”

“Hardly,” Natasha says lowly. “And I can tell you that from experience.”

Bruce frowns at the inference, “Right. I’d actually almost forgotten.” He tosses the ball in the air again, bouncing it off the ceiling and sending it right back into his hand. “That’s probably it, though.”

“What is?”

“You and Bucky,” Bruce says softly. “If I had to make a list of reasons Clint won’t move in, that would be number one.”

She narrows her eyes, “I could have sworn we’d untangled that mess.”

Bruce can’t help but let out a disagreeing snort, “Seeing as you’re still married to him, we really
haven’t.”

“Bruce,” she warns.

“Nat,” he says in return, tone bordering dangerous, “You know that’s why. It bugs him. Not that it
doesn’t bug me, too, but Clint is . . . Clint is Clint.”

Natasha quirks a small smile, “How accurate.”

“Quite,” Bruce agrees. “But that’s beside the point.”

“And the point would be, what, exactly?” Natasha prompts.

Bruce sighs, “I’m pretty sure the point is that Clint is going to keep saying no until you’re done with
Bucky.” He throws the ball towards the ceiling again, eyes widening when Natasha catches it as it
rebounds back down.

“It’s a mission, Bruce. We’ve already talked about this.”

He frowns, “It’s a mission to you, Natasha. Not to us.”

OoOoOoOoOoOoOo

Tony nearly jumps out of his skin when Steve sneaks up on him and grabs him from behind, arms
curling over Tony’s chest. “Too early,” Tony groans as Steve leans bodily against him, almost
sending him careening into the coffee maker he’s currently standing in front of, “Need coffee.”

Steve settles his chin on Tony’s shoulder, “Are you ever going to tell me?”


Steve laughs, “Tell me the moment.”

“Buh?” Tony mumbles, clearly not comprehending.

“I told you mine, so it’s only fair you tell me yours,” Steve says, and promptly swipes Tony’s coffee
mug off the coffee maker. Tony blinks at him, caught between confusion and annoyance that he’s
being denied his morning sustenance.

“Coffee,” Tony whines, “Need.”

Steve relents and gives Tony his coffee, sitting with him on the couch watching crappy morning
television until Tony has ingested enough caffeine to get his brain started. “What was this about a
moment?” He asks once his thought process catches up with the rising sun.

It takes a second, but Steve turns to look at him with the smallest of smiles, “The moment when you
realized you loved me.”

Tony lets out a rather nervous sounding laugh, “Aha, that . . . I can’t say I can pinpoint an exact
moment in time.” He can tell immediately that Steve knows he’s lying by the way the blonde’s
shoulders seem to set and how his eyes almost dim behind his smile. It’s a rather shattered sort of
look, and Tony swallows his guilt down. If he shares that moment, if he describes the breathless,
bitter cold in the seconds he’d come to know how he felt, and the dizzying speed at which Steve had
been driving the motorcycle, fast enough to blur the lines between reality and otherwise, then that
moment is no longer Tony’s alone. He’ll be giving it away, like spoiling the climactic scene of a film,
and once it’s out there he can’t take it back. Keeping that moment for himself isn’t selfish, so much
as it’s necessary, at least for him. Maybe it’s because Tony plans to keep it for that later, that
foreboding, eventual later.

If he shares that moment in time then that later is full of nothing but tarnished bits of silver.

Those seconds, minutes that dragged and seemed to turn into hours, are for now his alone. As a
whole the memory is a bright pinpoint of light that can’t be touched, and he can’t quite put into
words why it should remain that way.

It might be because it hasn’t sunk in yet, that idea that later will never be anything different than now,
that later is just another spot on the timeline where it’s still Steve and Tony. “What happens later?”
he whispers suddenly, and watches the subtle, understanding look cross over Steve’s face.

“That would spoil the surprise,” Steve smiles.

OoOoOoOoOo

It starts because Bruce hits Clint on the back of the head with the ball with the words, “We need to
talk.” Except there’s not so much talking as there is chucking said ball back and forth as hard as they
can with every intention of bodily harm.

“You have no aim!” Clint yells when Bruce sends the ball careening towards Clint’s stomach rather
than his hands for the third time.

Bruce gives him a sly smile from across the room, “Or maybe I do have aim and I’m just using it to
cause you pain.”

“You are a terrible, cruel human being,” Clint says seriously. “Also, do you realize we’ve been
throwing this ball for almost an hour? Without dropping it?”

“Uh . . . That’s actually really awesome?”

Clint grins, “I know, right?”

Bruce makes an affirming noise, “Yes. Impressive, considering that I didn’t come over here to throw
this ball around.”

There’s a pause before Clint grimaces, “Er . . .”

“Seeing as I’m as enthusiastic about this conversation as you are,” Bruce decides while Clint’s
shifting from foot to foot like he’s about to make a break for it, “We can either talk, or see how long
we can toss this ball around.”

“Let’s do the ball thing,” Clint decides immediately.

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

There’s a thing about being friends with Pepper Potts, a rule of sorts, which basically says that if you
don’t keep in touch with her she’ll hunt you down and make you keep in touch with her.

And that’s exactly how Tony finds himself trapped in Coulson’s coffee shop at two in the afternoon.
Pepper sips at her coffee with a level of nonchalance that unnerves Tony immensely, and Tony
slumps in his seat. It’s a rather foreboding situation, if he says so himself, especially considering that
Pepper has paid Coulson to lock the door. Again. “I didn’t do anything,” he whines while Pepper
stares him down. “I swear!”
“Exactly,” Pepper says coolly, and Tony purses his lips. “Don’t give me that look, Tony Stark, you know what this is about.”

“It’s about me doing nothing, apparently,” Tony gripes.

“It’s about you refusing to be an actual functioning part of a relationship once things start to get serious,” Pepper corrects. “So, yes, basically it’s about you doing nothing.” She takes a pointed sip of her coffee and Tony tries his hardest not to roll his eyes. “You’re doing the guarded thing again, Tony.”

Tony sinks lower into his seat, “I am not.”

Pepper smirks, “You do realize you just contradicted what you were trying to deny, don’t you?” She waves a hand at him when he opens his mouth to protest, “Anyways, I’m just saying that it wouldn’t hurt, you know, to open up to him.” Tony lets out a long, overdramatic sigh, and Pepper reaches out to take his hand across the table, “Tony, come on, is it really that hard?”

“Yes, Pepper, yes it is. You don’t get it because you’re happy with, uh, Happy. Do you know how weird that sentence is? Every time I say it I have to stop and think. It hurts my head.” Pepper squeezes his hand, and Tony tries to get back on topic, “But yes, okay, it’s hard. It’s hard because you and Happy are all cute and lovey-dovey or whatever and you had all these plans. You had this future that was planned out and you talked about where you wanted to be in five years, blah blah. And I’ve never had those kinds of plans, never ever. It was mostly just stuff like ‘Oh, hey, I really hope I haven’t died of alcohol poisoning in five years.’ I’m not cut out for that long term deal thing, and I know Steve is. He won’t tell me what he wants for the future but it’s obvious he wants something. What if I don’t live up to that, Pep? What if later is just another word for breakup?” He digs his fingers into his hair, “I’m just not . . . Good at this.”

Pepper covers her mouth, stifling a laugh, and Tony frowns. “You don’t have to be, Tony, that’s kind of the point. If people were good at relationships then we’d all be married or paired off or whatever right out of high school.” Tony makes a face and Pepper decides she can’t hold her laughter in any longer.

“I’m glad my life is so amusing to you,” Tony deadpans.

“Just tell him,” Pepper says between giggles, “That’s it. That’s all. If he asks you a question you answer him. Honestly. And vise-versa. And if you’re scared of this ‘Later’ then tell him that too, there’s nothing wrong with that.”

“But . . . He loves me . . .”

“Isn’t that sort of the whole point, Tony?”

Tony shakes his head, “I mean, he loves me now. There’s no contract anywhere in this relationship that guarantees a later.”

Pepper squeezes his hand again, “Oh, Tony . . . You are making a mountain out of a molehill.”

“I have no idea what that means,” Tony says, “But I get the feeling I’m being insulted.”

“It means your fear is just a little bit irrational,” Pepper defines. “Because Steve loves you.”

OoOoOoOoOoO

“Three hours and counting,” Bruce announces, and Clint nearly drops the ball as he takes a moment.
to jump into the air with a victorious whoop.

And, really, people should stop saying things like this aloud, because every time someone does the rain promptly decides to pour down on their parade. In this case, the rain comes in the form of one Bucky Barnes, who walks right in to Steve’s apartment without knocking. “I need to borrow-” he starts, only to be interrupted by Clint whipping the ball at his face as hard as he can. Bucky catches it on reflex alone.

Bruce throws his hands in the air, “Great, Clint. Now he’s touched the ball. He has to play.”

“That’s not a rule,” Clint snaps.

Bucky, appearing mildly intrigued, asks, “Play what?”

Bruce barely spares him a glance, “We’ve been throwing that ball around for over three hours.”

“Cool,” Bucky says lightly, “So I guess I’m playing too now, right?”

Clint groans in protest, “What, seriously?”

“Seriously,” Bruce deadpans, “And while we’re at it, I guess it’s time for that talk.”

Bucky chucks the ball at Clint, who nearly misses catching it because he’s too busy hiding his face in his hands. “What is my life?” Clint asks the room at large as he fumbles to catch the ball.

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

“You could pick him up from work,” Pepper urges as they do that typical half jog, half trip across the street away from the coffee shop. “Little things like that, you know. Movie nights-”

Tony sighs, “We do movie nights with the whole gang. You know that.”

“That doesn’t mean you can’t watch movies with just the two of you. Take him out to dinner, hell, make him dinner. It doesn’t matter.”

Tony stares at her, “Excuse me, have we met? I’m Tony Stark and I burn omelets.”

Pepper shoots him a glare, “I just said it doesn’t matter, Tony. But if he asks you something, you better answer truthfully. Part of being in a relationship is sharing. And if you can’t share something as simple as the moment you fell in love with him, if you keep that all for yourself, maybe you really aren’t cut out for this.”

It’s like whiplash, the sharp bite and sting of her words and instantly the world feels like it’s stopped turning. Tony can see the glint in her eyes, the challenge in them, daring him to deny the claim. So he does. “I can say it,” He says sharply, “I tell him. And I can do all that stupid couple-y stuff, too!”

Pepper grins, “Oh, really? You’re going to pick him up from work?”

“Yes.”

“And you’ll cook him dinner?”

“I’ll damn well try.”

“And you’ll tell him the truth about whatever he wants to know?”
“Yes, yes, yes!” Tony snaps, “And if he wants me to build a fucking house for him, that too! Part the waters of the sea? Sure thing! Set fire to the rain? I think someone already did that, but I can do it too! Because I love him!”

The smile that crosses Pepper’s face is bright enough to put the sun to shame, “And there you go,” she says.

“There I go what?” Tony asks blankly. “That’s not even a complete sentence! What does that even mean?”

“It means you’ve figured it out,” Pepper says, “Congrats.”

“Figured what out?”

Pepper smacks him upside the head without another word, “Okay, so maybe you haven’t. But close enough.”

“Close enough what?”

OoOoOoOoOoO

“This is an oddly quiet game,” Bucky says as he tosses Bruce the ball. He’s trying to ignore the way Clint is glaring at him, he really is, except he’s pretty sure that in this case looks might actually kill. Considering what he knows about Clint’s former title as a marksman, he’s not about to put it past him. “And it feels kinda awkward, uh . . . Is there something I should know?”

Bruce puts a little too much force into his throw, and Clint hisses when the ball hits his hands hard enough to leave behind a pink sting across his palms. “Clint has to talk to you,” he says as lightly as possible. “Or scream at you, whichever. I’m choosing to stay out of this for the sake of my own sanity.” His smile is just a little too pasted on for Bucky’s comfort, but he shrugs it off all the same.

Might as well get right to the point, though, he decides after the ball makes its way back around to him again. “Is this about Natasha?” Bucky asks.

“Considering that I literally would have no other reason to talk to you, yes,” Clint sneers.

“Try to play nice, boys,” Bruce says calmly. “Of course if you need to yell to get things off your chest, go right ahead.”

Clint bares his teeth and whips the ball at Bucky a little too hard, smirking when Bucky lets out a huff when it collides with his stomach. “You see,” Clint goes on, “I really, really hate this predicament between us.”

“What a nice way to say I’m married to your girl,” Bucky chuckles darkly.

“Not his girl,” Bruce says under his breath as he catches the ball. “Not anybody’s girl.”

Bucky rolls his eyes, “You know what I meant.”

Clint flashes him a dangerous smile, “Oh, sure we did. Just like we knew that you guys were hitched before you blurted it out six months ago. Look at all these things we know! Isn’t it grand?”

“Don’t get sarcastic with me, Barton,” Bucky hisses. “You have no right.”

“No right? Oh, but you have the right to tell me when I can and can not be sarcastic? Make way for the fucking president, Bruce!”
“What do you even know about the mission?” Bucky asks. “And if anyone is getting high and mighty here, it’s you.”

Clint lets out a cold laugh, “I know the important part, the part where you’ve got a ring around your finger that you don’t deserve.”

“Wow, sorry,” Bucky says dryly, “I wasn’t aware that you were the marriage police. You don’t know, do you. You don’t know what the mission even is, why we have to be so undercover, so discreet. Close your mouth before you make a fool out of yourself, Barton.”

Clint cocks his head innocently and catches the ball as Bruce tosses it his way, “Do tell. I’ve been dying to know the reason I was left alone to bleed out in a hospital. And why Bruce was left to die of radiation poisoning two floors above me.”

“Maybe she’ll tell you when we’re done cutting the guy we’re after into a thousand pieces,” Bucky growls.

“Or maybe you’ll tell me right now,” Clint snaps.

Bucky narrows his eyes and barely even casts Bruce a glance as he passes the ball his way. “Natasha and I are just working on a little revenge, Barton. And that’s all I can tell you. We needed each other, needed someone to rely on and lean on, someone we could trust while we went after the source of some bullets that happened to have hurt some people we know. Now drop it.”

It takes a moment for it to hit Clint, but eventually he gets it. “What?”

“Let’s just say that certain bullets that hit certain people happened to coincidentally come from the same gun,” Bucky shrugs. “And, by the way, do you know how discrete posing as a nauseatingly in love married couple is? No one looks twice at people like that.” This time, when Clint lobs the ball at him he chucks it right back rather than sending it to Bruce. “Yes, we’re married. Yes, I care about her. And yes, we’ve played pretty much every part of being a married couple,” Bucky says, smirking when Clint’s gaze darkens at the implications, “But at the end of the day she’s doing this for you two idiots, not for me.”

“That doesn’t make me hate you any less,” Clint mutters. “How long?”

Bucky purses his lips, “Until we’re done?” He passes Bruce the ball with a wave of his hand, “Who knows. I wish I could tell you the answer was soon. In the beginning we only meant to hold on to this charade for a year, tops. Natasha took that year as a promise rather than a possibility. She came back. She stayed. I didn’t, in case you never noticed.”

“I noticed,” Clint states. “Because I was here, in the room you used to own, while Tony had to drag Steve out of bed every December Second while you were gone.”

“If you’re trying to pin some sort of blame on me, I have to say you’re doing it wrong,” Bucky snorts.

Clint raises an eyebrow, the ball continuing to circulate between the two of them and a stone faced Bruce. “Blame? Hardly. Reality is more like it. I wouldn’t have been so peeved off about this whole thing if you’d been someone else, hell, anyone else practically. But to find out that the secret Nat had been keeping was you, the same guy who wasn’t around when his best friend needed him, well . . .”

“I wasn’t around because I was trying to protect him!”

“If you were really trying to help anyone, you would have cut all of this out after that year,” Clint
barks, “And you know it. I don’t really care if you catch the guy, I’m pretty sure Steve doesn’t either. This isn’t a life for a life game, Barnes. It never was. It was war, and sometimes you lose.” He touches a hand to the inside of his wrist, rubbing a thumb over the scar, “Sometimes you lose a lot. Let it go. The Director won’t let you two null that marriage bullshit until you give up the chase.”

Bucky’s tone is harsh as he spits out a solid, unwavering, “No.”

Bruce, who hasn’t spoken in ages, looks taken aback, “Why?”

Bucky squares his shoulders and stares them both down, “Because I’m shipping out again in a month, whether Natasha’s coming along or not. I need her. I need the cover that the marriage provides, or I’ll never get this guy.”

Clint snarls, “Fine then! But she won’t go, you know she won’t. It happened four years ago, Barnes!”

“So what? Four years isn’t going to break a promise, Barton. I told Steve everything was going to be alright, that the three of us would get through whatever the world threw our way. I told him it would be alright, but it wasn’t! And it won’t be until we’ve finished this. Natasha knows it, too.”

Clint hurls the ball at Bucky and misses, watches it bounce off the slowly opening door and roll onto the floor. “You can’t,” he hisses, chest heaving like he’s fighting for breath. “You can’t make her go.”

“He doesn’t have to.” The door creaks open fully. “I’m already going,” Natasha says as she steps into the apartment. She picks up the ball from the floor as she passes, dropping it in Bruce’s waiting hands before she moves to stand between Clint and Bucky. “It’s just for a month, Clint, and then we’re done.”

“With everything?” Clint doesn’t look her in the eye when he speaks, and keeps his gaze fixed on a spot over Bruce’s shoulder.

“Everything,” Natasha confirms. “Bucky and I made a deal. If we can’t finish this in a month, it’s over. He has to give up and he has to sign the annulment papers. And when I get back, you’ll move in.”

Clint sputters, “But - what? How is that part of the agreement? I never agreed to that.”

Bruce cracks a wavering smile, “That’s the reason, isn’t it? The reason you keep refusing to move in with us?”

Clint folds his arms over his chest, “Maybe. Part of it, at least.”

Natasha nods, “So Bucky and I will wrap things up, and when we’re done you won’t have a problem packing up and shifting your butt across the street.”

“Nat . . .” Clint sighs. “That’s not . . . Fine. But he is not invited,” he points a warning finger at Bucky, who flashes him an innocent smile. “We’re still not friends. He’s not part of this,” he waves a hand between Natasha, Bruce, and himself, “whatever it is. And also, you have to let me destroy the rings. I’ll take great pleasure in it.”

Bucky rolls his eyes.

OoOoOoOoOoOoO
It’s dark by the time Steve gets off of his shift at SHIELD Coffee. Besides Coulson, he’s the last one there, and the bell above the door lets out a lonely little chime when he leaves. It takes a second for him to notice Tony standing on the sidewalk, if only because it’s such an unusual sight, and he starts a bit when Tony falls into step beside him. “What are you doing here?”

Tony shrugs, “Picking you up.”

Steve laughs softly, “Tony, I live right upstairs.”

“Which is such a long way to walk alone,” Tony deadpans. He holds out a hand and waits for Steve to take it, face reddening slightly when he does. “Look, I . . . I’m sorry about this morning.”

Steve blinks, “Why?”

“Because you shared something with me and I should have done the same. I was being stupid.”

“And that’s different from normal how, exactly?” Steve teases.

Tony punches him lightly on the arm in response, “Do you want to hear it or not?”

“Only if you want to tell me,” Steve says, and Tony stills in mild surprise.

“Oh. Well, okay. Um . . .” Tony draws off with a nervous little laugh, “It’s a pretty dumb story, you know. It was on Christmas, you know when I gave you the bike? I mean, I knew I had feelings for you before then, but when I was riding on the back of the motorcycle, leaning against you and thinking of all the reasons that we wouldn’t work everything just sort of . . . Clicked, I guess. I realized that that was why it hurt so much, and that Pepper had been wrong to call it puppy love.”

Steve smiles at the term and Tony shuffles his feet a bit. “And we were standing here,” he points just a ways away from where they are now, a few feet down the sidewalk in front of the coffee shop, “When I decided that I would rather have you be happy than be pulled down into this mess with me. So I watched you go back up to your apartment where Sharon was waiting and I thought . . . I thought, ‘This is good. It’s better this way, because he’s happy.’” He huffs out a soft, surprised sound when Steve leans against him turns him around so they’re face to face, until Tony has no choice to look him in the eye. “But now . . .”

Steve smiles, “More than you will ever know, Tony.”

“Good,” Tony sighs in relief, “That’s good.”

“Still worried about that later?” Steve asks.

“Not so much,” Tony confesses. “But give it a few weeks and I’m sure that I’ll find some other reason to freak out about it.”

Steve laughs, “Or you could just give up and admit you’re stuck with me.”

“That, too.”
When you miss someone the silence that lingers where they should be is deafening.

If all the world was quiet then there would be no way of knowing it. No one would be around to hear the stillness, the unnerving calm of it all. And if it was merely the soft lull before the storm then the it would be all the more unsettling. The dip in the sky that exists between open blue and roiling clouds is more of a terror than a beautiful thing to be admired. It’s the space between a warm, peaceful day and a destructive torrent. Above it all, however, is the silence.

Thor hasn’t spoken for days.

“He’ll be back,” Tony says when he notices, but Thor doesn’t respond. “Darcy’s with him. He’ll be fine.” The look Thor gives him makes him stop talking, and that’s the last either of them say about the matter to each other for a long time.

After a week, Thor stops coming down the coffee shop, stops joining them for movie nights and meals, stops everything. Tony tries his best, attempts to coax him out of the apartment, but Thor barely looks at him. When Tony finds that nearly fourteen days have passed he takes drastic measures.

Drastic measures, in this case, is defined as calling Jane.

“He won’t talk to me either, Tony,” Jane sighs over the phone, “He won’t answer his cell. Or the door,” she adds after a pause.

Tony pinches the bridge of his nose, “That’s fine. I’ll let you in. I’m not asking for a miracle, but . . . Jesus. I don’t know what to do. I usually have enough trouble untangling my own messes, so god knows I’m just going to make things worse at this rate.”

Jane lets out a soft, sympathetic laugh, “It’s alright, it’s not your fault.”

“Isn’t it?” Tony asks quietly. “One of us should have noticed before this happened. One of us should have stopped Loki from—”

“I think,” Jane interrupts, “that would be like trying to stop the tide, Tony. And someone did notice, even if it wasn’t you or Thor. You shouldn’t take it so hard.”

Tony sniffs, “Obviously I’m not the one doing anything of the sort. I’m just . . .”

“Guilty?” Jane supplies, and Tony can’t help but groan in response. “Don’t be. What would you have done? Locked him up? Loki left because he wanted to, Tony, and it is through no fault of yours.”

“You sound like Thor,” Tony says.
“Good,” Jane hums, and hangs up.

OoOoOoOoOoO

“Looking for something?” Coulson asks as he peers over Steve’s shoulder at the newspaper the blond is currently scouring. His eyes narrow slightly when Steve picks out the classified section. “Do I need to make an official rule about looking for other jobs while you’re on break?” he mutters.

Steve shoots him a innocent little smile, “I’m not quitting.”

Coulson folds his arms over his chest, “Good,” he says shortly, and Steve laughs.

“It never hurts to look, though,” Steve clarifies, “I was actually more interested in the volunteer jobs.”

Coulson raises an eyebrow, “Soup kitchens?”

“Maybe,” Steve shrugs. “Summer’s over, and places like that need more help once the weather starts getting colder.”

“You’re a good man,” Coulson says grimly, giving Steve a sound pat on the shoulder. “And I’d say that I’d join you, except I have a coffee shop to run where I already have to clean the bathrooms almost every day because Clint is too chicken to do so. That’s more than enough volunteer work for me.”

From the back room Clint yells, “I am not a chicken!” Coulson barely refrains from rolling his eyes, if only because Clint isn’t in a place where he could see the reaction.

“Anyways,” Coulson continues, “Soup kitchen?”

“Something like that,” Steve smiles.

OoOoOoOoOoO

Jane arrives a little before noon, and Tony waves her in with a hand before wandering across the hall to give her some space. She finds Thor sitting in the middle of the living room with Chick and Duck in his lap. He’s whispering something to them, too low and too hushed for Jane to hear, and when he notices her in the room he stops. “You’re being ridiculous,” is the first thing she says, and Thor stiffens in surprise. “Completely ridiculous. How long has it been since you’ve gone out? A week? Get in the shower.”

It should be noted here that while Jane is, at first glance, a fairly small woman, she’s not weak by any classification of the word. It takes her less than twelve seconds to haul Thor to his feet and shove him into the bathroom, which is a feat to be admired considering that it’s Thor. She waits about two minutes, and when she fails to hear any running water she marches in there to make sure things get done, even if she has to do them herself.

In the end it takes about an hour for Thor to get washed, dressed, and decent. “Are you going to grow it out?” Jane asks him as she runs a pick through his hair. It’s shorter now, after Loki had cut it, short enough to run her fingers through and not snag, as they sometimes used to when Thor wore his hair long enough to tie it up. “I think,” she says, “it would be a good marker.” Thor says nothing, but the bemused look in his eyes is enough of a question. Jane smiles. “You know, a marker, something to show the passage of time. When I was little my mother used to measure how tall I was against a doorframe, and put my age next to the mark she’d make. If you don’t cut your hair again it can serve as a marker for how long he’s gone.” She threads a strand between her fingers, “And by the time he
gets back it will be long again.”

Thor’s head falls to her shoulder and she curls an arm around him, “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. He probably won’t be gone that long.” Thor doesn’t reply and she sighs, “How long are you going to play this mute game with us, Thor? Your friends are worried. We’re all worried.” Again, Thor says nothing. Jane steps back to lift his head from her shoulder with her hands on either side of his face, forcing him to meet her eyes, “Let’s go. That’s enough of your moping inside. Loki didn’t leave so that you could spend your days sulking, you know.”

It takes a moment, a long, eerily quiet moment, for Thor to do anything. And that’s the thing, really, isn’t it. It’s the silence that’s the problem. Usually Thor is the loudest in the group, his voice comes in booms and exclamations rather than normal tones, it can be heard across streets and through doors. The only sound now is the quiet hush of air when he breathes. A nod is not a word, a spoken affirmation of any kind, but it’s enough for now.

“Right,” Jane says, “Let’s go then.” The questioning look he gives her makes her make her smile, “Where? I don’t know. Let’s make it an adventure. Okay?”

They take Jane’s car. The fact that she has a car in a city where it’s easier to use public transportation, or even walk, than it is to get anywhere by driving is notable in and of itself. She clears some of Darcy’s things out of the passenger side while Thor waits on the sidewalk, ever patient. “She always leaves so much stuff in here,” Jane says as she shoves a coat and some old fast food wrappers in the back seat. “She could have at least thrown some of this away.” She stills as Thor puts a hand on her shoulder, “You don’t have to help,” she says, “It’s fine.” He doesn’t budge, however, and Jane turns to look up at him in understanding. “I miss them too,” she whispers.

They drive to the park, or rather around it. Thor rolls down the window and leans against the open frame, eyes watching the flicker of yellow and white lines on the blacktopped street as they go. Jane makes a few laps around the park just because, waiting until Thor’s interest is caught before she stops.

“Where do you think they are?” she asks when they start down the paths leading deeper into the park. “If you don’t tell me I’m just going to make something up.” Thor casts her an intrigued glance and she shrugs, “Right. Well then, I bet they went to the countryside first. You know, with Loki’s love of animals. And Darcy’s always wanted to go horse riding. I bet they’re off riding horses. Meanwhile I have to work, so that’s hardly fair.”

Thor snorts and Jane shoves at him, “Hey! I do to have to work! Don’t look at me like that!” He dodges around her, a half skip of a step to the side, and catches her with one arm when she stumbles when her hands hit empty air.

“Careful,” he says, and it’s the first thing he’s said for days. His voice sounds hoarse, tired, and he closes his mouth again as soon as the word slips out.

It’s a small step, a careful start, and Jane takes it as something positive. She can’t, won’t force him to say anything. Sometimes all that’s needed is patience and time. “Let’s keep going,” she says, and takes his hand in hers as they continue down the path.

OoOoOoOoOoO

Steve barely has time to hide his stack of classified ads before the door opens, and ends up shoving them under the couch at the last minute. Technically, no one is meant to be home except for him. Even if Clint wasn’t working at the coffee shop this afternoon he’s been spending every night this month across the street with Bruce. Which, honestly, Steve has no problem with, although he does
wish Clint would quit stealing all the food out of the fridge before he leaves. Seriously. And besides that, Tony’s supposed to be at a meeting. Supposed being the key word here, since when Steve looks up Tony is clearly not at a meeting.

“You’re back early,” Steve says from the sofa, eyeing Tony as he shuts the door behind him and lets out a rather loud sniffle. Instantly, Steve jumps to his feet and vaults over the back of the couch to stand in front of the other man, hands going to Tony’s shoulders to steady him, “What-”

Tony sniffs again, “Pepper sent me back because she says I’m sick,” he interrupts. “But obviously she’s confused, so I’m just going to work on some designs on my iPad, if you don’t mind.” He huffs as Steve puts a hand over his forehead, “Oh, god, not you too. I’m not sick.”

“You have a fever,” Steve says with a frown.


Steve can’t help but smile, “If you say so. Now lay down so I can call Bruce.”

Tony struggles a bit but eventually lets Steve push him down onto the couch. “Bruce isn’t a doctor,” he says, “and even if he was I don’t need a doctor because I’m perfectly healthy.” He scowls as Steve gives him a rather condescending pat on the knee.

“Bruce is too a doctor,” Steve tells him as he picks up the cordless phone from the end table.

Tony coughs and Steve dials with a little more haste than necessary. “He’s not a doctor doctor though,” Tony grumbles.

Steve chuckles, “I dare you to tell him that when he gets here.”

Which of course means that Tony doesn’t. He might be sick, but he’s not stupid. Wait, no, he’s not sick either. Not at all. Steve is just a worry wart. Really. “I’m not sick!” he yells when Bruce and Clint enter the apartment.

Clint raises an eyebrow and skirts around where Bruce is already leaning down to look at Tony, who just sinks further in the couch in a very poor attempt to get away. “You sure look sick,” Clint comments, peering over Bruce’s shoulder. “Your nose is all red and everything.”

“Christmas spirit,” Tony mutters.

“It’s September,” Bruce reminds. Tony opens his mouth to retort but Bruce merely catches his jaw in one hand and pries it open to shine a flashlight down Tony’s throat. “Sore throat, obvious sinus issues, fever,” he lists while Tony licks the end of the flashlight purely out of spite. “It’s probably just a cold, but it could be an early case of the flu.” Steve looks rather horrified at this idea, and Clint takes half a step back. “Vaccinations aren’t public ‘till next week, so I’d say it’s not your fault except that I know you haven’t gotten a flu vaccine in at least three years.”

“Tony . . .” Steve sighs.

Tony sticks his tongue out at him too, “Shots are stupid. And I’m not sick. I’m perfectly healthy.” He starts to stand as if he means to prove it, but Steve intervenes and shoves him back down onto the couch.

Bruce gives Steve an approving nod, “Make sure he gets lost of rest and fluids.”
“Right,” Steve says.

“And no alcohol,” Bruce adds as he starts towards the door. “Or Poptarts. Or pizza. Or anything unhealthy. Soup. Soup is good.”

“If I get sick your ass is grass,” Clint warns Tony as he follows Bruce back out of the apartment.

“I’m not sick!” Tony yells after them.

OoOoOoOoO

They end up at a playground. By four in the afternoon it’s mostly deserted except for a few straggling children who aren’t heading their parents calls that it’s time to go home. Jane says nothing as Thor approaches the empty swing set, and watches as he runs his hands up the chains with a faraway look in his eyes. “You told me that story,” she says after a moment. “About . . .”

“He doesn’t remember,” Thor murmurs.

Jane approaches and takes him by the hand, turning him around until his back is to the swing. “Let’s play,” she says, and gives him a gentle push so that he falls back onto the swing. “It won’t do you any good to keep thinking about it.”

She takes a seat on the swing to his left, kicking at the sand to get a good start. Thor mimics her movements until they’re both drifting lazily back and forth to the sound of creaking swing chains. “How long has it been,” she asks, “since you were apart for this long?”

“Years,” Thor replies. “I went to school, but I came home every two weeks. So even then it wasn’t . . . Like this. It must have been before that. Before everything. We haven’t been apart like this since before.” He tightens his fingers around the chain and Jane nods in understanding.

“Maybe this is a good thing then,” she whispers. “You’ve been brothers for so long you’ve forgotten how to be separate people.”

Thor frowns, “That’s not true.”

“Yes it is,” Jane says, “Not to the extent that you’re thinking, I’m sure. You have very separate personalities. I’m not saying that you’re the same person, just that you’ve forgotten how to be separate people. You allowed him to be dependent on you, and so in a way you were dependant on him, too.”

There’s a long breath of silence, and for a heartbeat Jane fears she’s said something wrong, until Thor lets out a soft, strangled, “Aye.”

Jane jumps off the swing then and wanders over towards the trees. Thor watches with confusion as she returns with a stick and crouches in the sand a few feet away, drawing something in the grains. “It’s like this,” she says when Thor moves to hover over her shoulder. “You’re family, right? So this is the family tree.” She’s etched a rather crude impression of a tree in the sand, and Thor smiles at it before nodding. “And you’re this branch,” she explains as she pokes the stick into one of the taller branches. “And this one is Loki,” she prods the branch just to the right, following the line of it down to where it connects with Thor’s branch. “They split apart, see, but at the base they merge into the same branch, the same tree. So . . .” She laughs nervously. “I don’t really know where I was going with that, but yeah. It’s Like that.”

“I understand,” Thor says. “At the top of the branch they seem so far away, especially in the winter when there’s no leaves. But when spring comes around the leaves cover the tree again and you can’t
tell where one branch ends and another begins.”

Jane blinks, “That’s slightly deeper than what I was going for.” Thor grins in return, and she laughs again, startled by the smile she hasn’t seen in days.

OoOoOoOoOoO

“I don’t need soup.” Tony whines when Steve brings him a bowl. “I’m not sick.” He’s huddled in the corner of the couch with half the blankets from Steve’s bed covering him and a cold patch pasted to his forehead. “I haven’t been sick in years.”

“Which is probably why you’re sick now. All the germs finally caught up with you,” Steve reprimands as he sets the bowl down on the coffee table. He pushes a pillow behind Tony’s head when Tony tries to list over onto the arm of the couch, “It’s either eat something or sleep, your choice.”

Tony narrows his eyes, “Why isn’t work an option? I have things to do.”

“I locked down your iPad for forty-eight hours,” Steve says briskly, and Tony lets out a little, pained sound at the news. “So no work for you.” He sits on the other side of the couch and pulls out his sketchbook. “Eat or sleep,” he repeats.

Tony groans, “I’m not sick. You’re a terrible person for not believing me.” Steve snorts and Tony scoots closer to him. “Well I can think of one other thing to do since I don’t have to work.” He’s practically on top of Steve at this point, to which Steve just incredulously side-eyes him. “Come on, Steve, you know what I mean. A little of this,” he starts to slide a hand up under Steve’s shirt.

Steve smacks the hand away and loops an arm around Tony’s shoulders, pulling him down until the back of Tony’s head meets his lap. “Sleep,” he says sternly. Tony coughs in some sort of protest, and Steve can’t help but smile. “If you sleep then maybe I’ll let you have some ice-cream when you wake up.”

“I’m not five,” Tony mutters. He grows silent for a moment, stretching out along the length of the couch with his head in Steve’s lap. “What kind of ice-cream?”

“Chocolate swirl,” Steve says.

“Fine.”

OoOoOoOoOoO

“Do you think she’s okay?”

Bruce looks up from where he’s typing on his laptop to see Clint standing over him. He pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose and sets his computer aside. Clint’s whole body screams tired, so much so that if Bruce didn’t know better he’d think Clint was sick too. There are dark circles starting to form under his eyes, his posture is slumped, and his knuckles are white where he clenches his hands against his sides. Bruce knows for a fact that he didn’t sleep last night, and he can’t be certain if he slept the night before that either. It’s not hard to fake being asleep. He reaches out and curls his fingers around Clint’s fists, slides them into the spaces between them and slowly works Clint’s hands open, kneading his thumb over Clint’s palm. “She’s fine,” he says softly as he pulls Clint down to him, “I know she is.”

But that’s a lie, isn’t it. Whenever Natasha’s away, be it a mission or simple recon, she doesn’t contact them. They all know it’s safer that way, more secure, but it sets Clint on edge. Bruce, too,
just not to the same extent. Clint tends to worry and worry until he wears a hole in the carpet, whereas Bruce clings to the memory and the fact that she came back the first time, the one time they thought she wouldn’t. “She’ll be okay,” he reiterates, dragging his fingers over the back of Clint’s hands, his palms, his left wrist where the scar still shines a shade paler than the rest of his skin.

“What if . . .” Clint says, but he can’t finish the sentence, can’t voice aloud the hundred, the thousand what ifs that roil through his head whenever she’s gone. “Bucky will cover her back, right? I’ve never seen him fight, but . . . Someone has to. Sometimes she gets so focused on what’s in front of her, and if the enemy is . . .” He shakes his head and Bruce pulls him closer. “What if . . .”

And Bruce knows this what if, remembers it, recalls the glaring spot of red light on Natasha’s back with terrifying clarity. If it had been anything else, any solid enemy sneaking up on her, it wouldn’t have been a problem, it wouldn’t have gone as wrong as it had, but how can you defend yourself from a dot of light? “She can handle herself,” Bruce murmurs, and he takes a moment to trail his hands down Clint’s front, ghosting under the hem of the other man’s shirt to find the other scar just a few inches up and to the right of his navel. “She’d kick you in the balls if she could hear you right now.”

Clint lets out a quiet, hollow sounding laugh, “I know.”

It’s funny, really, how quiet things can get when a home is minus one occupant. Every surface suddenly feels much colder, every breath a little thinner, and every menial sound a little louder. The ticking of a clock, the creak of a floorboard, suddenly echoes in a way it never did before, unbearably deafening in the uneasy silence. Eventually, even the people left grow quiet too, aware of every strike of their heartbeat and hush of air through their lungs, lonely sounds they never dared to notice before.

“I miss,” Clint starts and falters. There’s no use saying it, really, because emotions can’t ripple across distances like so many wish they could, and hardly anything can be changed by feelings alone.

“Me, too,” Bruce whispers. “It seems almost everyone is missing someone lately.”

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

There’s an idea that no one really talks about, or discusses in any depth, because it’s too strange to voice aloud. How, exactly, can you explain the concept of missing someone while you’re lying right beside them?

When Tony finally drifts off to sleep Steve slips off the couch and retrieves the classified ads from where he stuffed them hours before. He continues to circle and underline things, but he’s already chosen what he’ll apply for. Steve tucks that article away in his back pocket for safe keeping, and when he finally puts his pen down the only sound that can be heard is Tony’s light, congested breathing as he sleeps. It takes less than twenty minutes for Steve to locate an old vaporizer and set it up, and another ten for him to put his pen to use again and doodle a penguin on the cold patch on Tony’s forehead. For awhile he sits on the edge of the coffee table next to the vaporizer and simply watches, eyes following the rise and fall of Tony’s chest as he breathes and the flicker of his eyelids while he dreams.

“You asked me,” he says softly, far too quiet for Tony to hear even if he was awake, “what I had planned for us, and I didn’t give you an answer because I know you’ll panic, or claim that you’re not cut out for the long haul, or tell me you’re not worth it. But all of that’s just baloney, and you know it.” Steve folds his hands underneath his chin and closes his eyes, letting the silence sink in around him.
After a pause he stands and maneuvers Tony over as close to the inside of the sofa as he can before laying down beside him. It’s a tight fit, and Steve’s couch wasn’t exactly made to hold two grown men, but it works. Steve pulls the blanket tight over both of them and they become a tangle of limbs, legs and arms and hearts all jumbled together until Steve can’t figure out where one body ends and another begins.

And this, this is what it’s like to miss someone when they’re right beside you. Steve threads his fingers through Tony’s hair and finds that even after just a few hours he misses the light in Tony’s eyes when he starts talking about the things he’s working on. He misses the sound off his voice and his laugh, the way he rests his hand on the small of Steve’s back whenever he can, the furrow of his eyebrows when his face betrays the concern he hates letting anyone know he feels, and the way his breath stutters when Steve catches him off guard with a kiss. It’s silly, Steve thinks, to miss things like that when you know you’ll have them again soon. In the end the day blows over and it will be a barely remembered passing cold, but for one moment in time Steve misses Tony so much he physically aches.

“I’m not going anywhere, you know,” he murmurs while Tony sleeps. “There’s never going to be a later where we aren’t together, okay? So don’t worry about that anymore.”

Tony doesn’t stir until Steve kisses him a few minutes later, his eyes cracking open when Steve’s lips flutter over his own. “Urgh,” he groans, “Don’t kiss me, I’m sick.”

Steve smiles, “Really? Because just a couple hours ago you were insisting you were healthy.”

“Obviously that was a lie,” Tony scowls. “Can I have ice-cream now?”

Chapter End Notes

The very first paragraph is an extremely vague reference to a Jack London quote. Just an FYI.
Chapter Summary

Tony and Steve take a weekend vacation, Clint causes problems at Bruce's work, Natasha comes home, and three words end up being more morbid than they're meant to be.

“Let’s get away,” Tony says.

And that’s how it starts on a typical Wednesday in a typical week. It’s not even nine in the morning when he says it, and he's hanging off of Steve as he does every morning before (and sometimes after) he’s had his coffee. Steve’s trying, and somehow magically succeeding, to make pancakes with very little trouble despite the way Tony is leeching onto his back. “Away where?” he asks when Tony presses his face between his shoulder blades and lets out a muffled yawn. “Anywhere?”

“Anywhere,” Tony echoes. “That works. I mean seeing how our last trip ended up being quite the group fiasco.”

Steve snorts out a soft laugh and Tony presses closer, leaning heavily against him while he pours more pancake batter into the pan. “So just the two of us?”

Tony groans, “Uh, yeah? Work with me here, Steve. I’m trying.”

“Is this because Clint said you ‘Don’t have a romantic bone in your body’ yesterday?” Steve questions with thinly veiled amusement.

“No,” Tony mutters, “Because clearly Clint is wrong. You of all people should know that I have a very skilled romantic bo-”

“Tony,” Steve scolds before Tony can finish, a smile quirking at the corners of his mouth. Tony sighs and buries his face against Steve’s back again. “This weekend, then?”

Tony lets out a contented hum, “Sure. Do have anything special in mind? Because I was just thinking we’d get a nice suite or something out of town and spend some quality time together.”

Steve smiles, “And by quality time you actually mean what, exactly?” he prompts, already suspecting what the answer is.

“Quality time naked between the sheets,” Tony confirms.

“For a whole weekend?” Steve asks as he tries not to laugh. “That’s a lot of naked.”

“Well we won’t spend the whole weekend between the sheets,” Tony relents. “The place I’m thinking of has a Jacuzzi tub in the suite. And I’m always game for some good old-fashioned wall sex.” He grins when Steve fumbles while trying to flip a pancake. “So how about it? Wanna get away for awhile?”

“I don’t know,” Steve teases, “It’s such a hard decision, and I have so much to do here.”
Tony huffs, “Don’t mess with me, mister. I know where you sleep.”

Steve laughs, “I’d be very concerned if you didn’t.”

So they make plans. And it’s weird, Tony thinks, how easy it is to do that. Because Tony Stark has never been one for plans of any sort. He doesn’t even make proper plans when he’s working. It’s a lot more like, “I was making a toaster but then, oops, a robot?” Which is fine since more often than not it works out for the better. But with Steve he’s making plans, actual honest to god plans, and he’s not freaking out about it.

The fact that he doesn’t freak out about making plans is what makes him freak out just a little, actually. He literally freaks out because he’s not freaking out. “I’m the world’s biggest commitment-phobe,” he says to Bruce, Clint, and Thor at the coffee shop on Thursday morning. “Why am I not freaking out about this?”

“It’s called becoming a mature adult,” Bruce says flatly.

“Or you’ve just short-circuited a bit,” Clint supplies unhelpfully.

“It is love,” Thor says, and they all take a moment to stare at him before they each take a long, very pointed sip of their coffee.

“I think Clint has the most likely conclusion,” Tony decides after a pause, and Clint fist pumps his victory.

Except it’s really not, and Tony spends Thursday night with Steve packing for their trip and surprisingly doesn’t flip out at all. The packing, on the other hand, is another matter entirely. Tony makes a mental note not to pack in Steve’s vicinity ever again because Steve takes every single thing out of packing that was already not fun and makes it even less fun.

“Glow-in-the-dark condoms?” he says while he’s trying to get Tony to pack some actual clothes. Tony raises an eyebrow as Steve unrolls an entire pack of the things and waves them around like a streamer. “Really?”

“They’re fun?” Tony tries. “No, really, you can like . . . I know you’ve seen Star Wars, Steve. It’s like-” He stops, takes a moment to consider his own words, and then holds out a defeated hand. “You’re right. Those are out.” Steve hands them over and Tony proceeds to slip them in his pocket while he’s not looking, because hell no glow-in-the-dark condoms are never out.

Steve proceeds to hand him four pairs of sunglasses as well. “You don’t need more than one,” he scolds, “We’re only there for a weekend. Also, you packed more sunglasses than you did actual clothes.”

Tony glances in his suitcase only to see that Steve is right. How did that happen? “Huh,” he says, “Weird.”

“Which is fine,” Steve adds while Tony’s staring at his suitcase with a bemused expression, “if you were actually planning on this weekend being a naked weekend like you’d originally suggested. But you at least need to pack enough clothes to wear to and from the hotel, because I think they’d protest if a couple of naked guys tried to check in.”

Tony grins, “Steve Rogers, are you getting cheeky with me?” Steve flashes him an innocent look and Tony laughs. “Stop it. You’re not allowed to get cheeky.”

“Why n-” Steve starts, and ends in a surprised huff as Tony tackles him over backwards onto the
bed, effectively bouncing his suitcase off the end of the mattress and onto the floor. Steve chuckles and curls an arm around Tony’s back, “I thought we were packing,” he says rather breathlessly.

“Oh, I’m definitely packing,” Tony quips with a smile, leaning in to bite at Steve’s exposed throat.

Steve can’t help but groan, “You’re terrible. We need to pack,” he reminds, but his hands are already sliding down Tony’s back.

This, of course, is the exact second Clint pokes his head into the room and says, much too loudly, “If you’re going to be disgusting please remember that there are other people here and the least you could do is shut the door.” He’s gone again before Tony can find anything to throw at him, and Steve buries his face against Tony’s neck, torn between laughing and being mortifyingly embarrassed.

OoOoOoOoOoO

Clint crosses the days off on the calendar with a surprising amount of patience. He counts how many days there are left from the moment Natasha leaves, and circles the date that’s exactly thirty days away so that he can mark off every day in between. It’s surprising, really, at least it is from Bruce’s standpoint. During the few missions Natasha had taken since their ill-fated one a few years back Clint made a point to rip the calendar right off the wall. He told Bruce it was in an effort to forget how long they would be without her, and that time would pass more quickly when they couldn’t remember what day it was. Except that was a lie, and Bruce knows it just as well as Clint does. He knows Clint kept track of the days anyways, the hours, the minutes, in much the same way he himself had.

“I’m bored,” Clint says into Bruce’s shoulder on Friday morning. “Steve and Tony are going away on a cheesy romantic weekend and I’m bored.”

Bruce shakes his head with fond amusement, “I’m not sure what that has to do with being bored.”

Clint’s silent for a moment, mulling that over, before he replies, “If they’re away then almost everyone is gone.”

“Thor’s still here,” Bruce reminds, but he understands full well what Clint means.

“That’s what the ‘almost’ was for,” Clint mutters. “What are you doing this weekend?”

Bruce pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose and casts Clint a considering look, “I have a meeting tonight, but-”

“A science geek meeting?” Clint interrupts. Bruce frowns.

“It will be a meeting of the other teachers and professors in the school’s science division, yes.”

Clint claps his hands together, “Sounds dull, but I’m in.”

Bruce stares at him, “Huh?”

“Me,” Clint points at himself, “Go,” he makes a walking motion with his index and middle finger, “To meeting,” he pronounces “Meeting” very slowly, and it takes a lot of willpower for Bruce to resist the urge to smack him.

“Why would you even think for one second that I’d let you go?” Bruce asks seriously, and only feels slightly bad about it when Clint visibly wilts. Slightly, however, is unfortunately enough to make him
eat his words. “You have to behave-”

He doesn’t even get to finish that sentence because Clint promptly jumps on him with a whoop.
“Field trip!” Clint yells right in Bruce’s ear, and Bruce really, really wishes that Natasha would come home soon, if only because she’s the only one between them that can effectively tell Clint no.

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

Tony finds Steve’s reaction to realizing the hotel they’re staying at is just inside of New Jersey state limits far too funny. So funny, in fact, that he has to pull over the car because he’s laughing so hard they almost swerve off the road. It’s only logical that things should go uphill from there, right? Right.

Once Steve stops being overly offended by the entirety of New Jersey (and they’re never going to discuss the fact that he actually refused to get out of the car for awhile), everything goes “Swimmingly.” And, yes, Steve actually says swimmingly at one point, somewhere between checking in and failing to properly protest when Tony kisses him out of his mind in a public elevator (they’re also not going to discuss that they didn’t know there was a bellhop in the elevator until after they left).

And it’s nice, really, not to worry about nosey people like Clint barging in on them at any point, or not be too concerned with being loud, or, hell, be fretting about anything at all. Ever. At least that’s how Tony sees it once they’re lying side by side on the bed. They haven’t even taken their clothes off yet and Tony almost wouldn’t even have it any other way. Steve’s propped up on one elbow, his hand roaming over Tony’s side as he talks about going out to lunch in awhile, wondering whether he’s more in the mood for pasta or hamburgers, and Tony feels like he could drown in the level of affection that washes over him in that moment. It’s a rather belated insight, actually, when he thinks that he could spend many weekends like this, that he’d be content to spend far more time than that like this. Weekends and weekdays, months, years, a lifetime. And surprisingly, that idea isn’t as alarming as he thought it would be.

“Hey,” he says quietly, halting Steve’s babble about lunch with a hand to the back of Steve’s neck. And there’s a pause, a calm and quiet hush where Tony tries to find a way to say what he’s thinking, to express that he wouldn’t mind being there for the long haul, but he forgets whatever he meant to say when Steve leans in and kisses the words right off his lips before he can speak them.

That’s fine, though. Because there are going to be a hundred more chances to say those sorts of things, maybe even a thousand. So it’s okay if he doesn’t say them now, or even anytime soon.

It’s okay.

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

Clint regrets asking to go to the meeting as soon as Bruce drags him into said meeting room. Well, mostly regrets. There’s only so much science he can tolerate, after all, and while Bruce habitually starts ranting about crap Clint doesn’t care about a lot, it’s Bruce so it’s cute. And no, Clint will never say that aloud because he knows Bruce wouldn’t exactly take it as a compliment. Probably. Natasha could get away with it but Clint’s pretty sure he’d get a punch in the arm.

But anyways, somehow when Bruce said he had to attend a meeting with some other science-y dudes, Clint’s mental picture had been Bruce sitting at a table with a lot of . . . Well, other Bruces. No, seriously. Just Bruce and a lot of Bruce clones. Or something. Except logically that makes absolutely no sense whatsoever, and Clint’s really beginning to think that Natasha’s absence is starting to get to him in a mental way, but that’s what he thought. Obviously this is not what the meeting actually looks like, however, which is why it takes Clint approximately three and a half
seconds to flip out and decide he’d rather be anywhere else. Bruce catches him by the back of his shirt collar before he can even think about bolting though, and that’s not surprising at all.

“They’re just people,” Bruce hisses in his ear, and Clint tries not to squirm.

“People who are staring at me like I’m from Mars and are clearly judging me,” Clint snaps in return. “Judging me,” he repeats for good measure, because even Bruce can’t disagree that all the eyes in the room are staring at Clint, although the reason for that is debatable. It’s far more likely that they’re staring at him because he’s a stranger rather than because they’re critiquing him.

Clint takes a hasty look around the room when he finds that Bruce’s grip on his shirt is pretty much rendering him immobile, and curses himself for thinking this was a good idea. There’s a man sitting at the table who’s giving him an annoyed look over a file he was only just showing to the guy to his right, who in turn looks about as impressed with Clint as his companion does. A coffee maker sits in the corner and another man with glasses and a rather alarmingly natural looking shock of blue in his hair who merely stares at Clint with something closer to curiosity than anything else as he pours himself a cup. He’s paused in the middle of a conversation with the man beside him, who gives Clint an amused smile when Clint catches his eye, which is probably the worst moment of them all. Partly because Clint’s not the biggest fan of eye contact with strangers unless he’s trying to be intimidating, and partly because of course it’s the guy in the wheelchair that he locks eyes with. And that’s the awkward bit, isn’t it, not even noticing or minding something like that until you make accidental eye contact and you can’t help but wonder if they think you’re being an asshole or a moron. Or both.

Bruce slaps him on the back a second later, effectively severing any further eye contact as he starts to introduce him to the room at large. “Clint,” he says, a mildly dangerous tone in the way he says Clint’s name, “These are some of my colleagues, Reed,” he gestures to the man holding the file and Clint refrains from sticking his tongue out when the guy continues to look peeved off by his presence, “Hank,” he motions to the guy to Reed’s right, “Also Hank,” he points to the man with the strange hair by the coffee machine, who mouths the word “Also” like he’s wondering if it’s part of his name, “And Charles,” Bruce finishes with a wave to the man in the wheelchair, who gives Clint an enthusiastic wave in return. “And guys, this is my . . .”

Clint sees more than hears the falter, and smirks at the slightly constipated look that crosses Bruce’s face. It’s always Bruce who forgets that typical relationship terms don’t exactly apply to them, seeing as words like “Boyfriend” and “Significant other” imply that there’s only one, and that clearly isn’t the case. “I’m his Clint,” Clint supplies before Bruce can freak out any more than he already is.

Seemingly satisfied with that description, Bruce nods, “Uh, yeah. That.”

“What happened to Natasha?” Reed asks with the subtlety of a crashing train, and Clint decides right then and there that he would greatly enjoy punching him. In the face. A couple of times.

“She’s working today,” Clint says airily, “I mean I’m sure she’d have loved to have joined us, but she’s busy,” he makes sure to put as much oomph into the word “Us” as possible, if only to watch Reed and Hank but not Also Hank’s eyes widen. Also Hank just blinks and goes back to his coffee and Charles smiles, which is almost as weird as the look Reed is giving Bruce. And that’s a definite “I’m judging you so hard,” look if Clint ever saw one. Bruce better not leave him alone with this guy, because if he does he and Clint are going to have words. Words with fists.

As if sensing his irritation, however, Bruce just steers him towards an empty pair of chairs at the table. “Well, if someone would like to begin we’re all ears,” he says weakly, and Clint flops down in his chair like it’s the throne at the round table.

OoOoOoOoOoO
When people take a moment to think about things, really think about them, it’s common for them to completely overthink them. And that’s exactly what Tony does when he finds the slip of newspaper in Steve’s back pocket. If he says he found it by accident later then it wouldn’t be a lie, no matter how unlikely that sounds. But an accident it was, in this case an accident mostly due to the fact that Steve is fond of completely zonking out after sex and Tony and insomnia are good friends.

The sun is still high in the sky when Steve dozes off, and Tony’s flipping through the endless number of cable channels while trying to carefully dislodge Steve’s arm from around his waist. It’s quite a feat, actually, when he manages to slip away without waking Steve. Usually he either wakes Steve up or forfeits. Not that Tony’s not one for cuddling, but his iPad is still in his suitcase and he’s never had the taste for idiotic cable TV shows. Toddlers in Tiaras is on the screen at the moment, and Tony’s just fine with measuring the stupidity of the competitors simply by the fact that the show is even on the air at all. So he fetches his iPad and is halfway back across the room to get back into bed with Steve when he notices that they more or less destroyed the hotel suite in record time.

There are clothes everywhere. And Tony’s pretty sure that neither of them were actually wearing that much clothes, but the evidence speaks against that assumption. Besides that, somehow a vase of flowers appears to have been knocked over at some point, and then proceeded to spontaneously combust as seen by the scattering of flower petals all over the carpet. While Tony is all for letting the cleaning staff at the place do their job by taking care of those things, he knows that Steve will give him that disappointed look if he does. “We don’t need to make their jobs any harder, Tony,” he’ll say and Tony will try to point out that if they clean everything then they won’t have any job to do at all, but it’s an argument he’s doomed to lose from the start.

So he picks up every single flower petal and dumps them back into the vase, because he’s not going to do everything, geeze, and then proceeds to retrieve every article of clothing that’s been flung around the room and stuff it back into the suitcases. (There will be no folding done by Tony Stark, no siree.) And since he doesn’t fold them, he ends up dumping out the contents of Steve’s pockets entirely by accident.

For a moment he curses as a handful of change, probably left over from their lunch, and a couple of wrinkled bits of paper fall to the carpet. Tony starts to put them all back, smiling a little when he discovers a ticket stub from a movie they saw last weekend before picking up the thin newspaper clipping. Without even reading it he mockingly decides that it’s some sap story from the lifestyle section, or something, and starts to slide it into the back pocket of the pants when three bold words catch his eye.

Apartment for lease.

It takes a second, or a few seconds, or maybe even a good couple of minutes before Tony remembers how to breathe, and then he promptly sits down on the floor because remembering how to breathe means losing the ability to stand, apparently. He tells himself that it could be anything, that maybe it’s just some piece of litter Steve picked up off the ground because that’s just the sort of thing Steve does. But rational thought has never been something Tony Stark was good at. His thoughts always jump right to the irrational, the unlikely, the panic inducing.

His first coherent thought, however, isn’t to panic. It’s to get back into bed.

So he does. Tony crawls back under the sheets and fits himself against Steve’s side like he belongs there, which he likes to think he does, and curls an arm underneath one of Steve’s. The little slip of newspaper is still clutched tightly in one hand, slowly being balled up against his palm, but Tony tries not to think about it, tries not to contemplate what it means because that will only lead to bad thoughts and bad things. Instead he tucks his chin between Steve’s shoulder and collarbone and just
breathe. Long, steady, calm breaths because there’s no need to go off the deep end for something that’s probably just going to be yet another misunderstanding.

Right?

OoOoOoOoOoO

It turns out that Clint gets along with Bruce’s colleagues surprisingly well. Which means he gets along with half of them, and elects to completely ignore the other half because the likelihood that he’ll lose his shit and bitch slap them is so high. Basically, he gets along fantastically with Also Hank and Charles, and Reed and Hank can go fuck themselves for all he cares. He doesn’t say that last bit out loud, of course, but it’s implied by the way he casually flicks on the lightsaber app on his phone every time either of them argues or interrupts anything Bruce is trying to say.

He’s just being a good . . . Whatever the fuck he is. For Bruce. Yeah.

Anyways, Also Hank and Charles are great. Clint has yet to get around to asking what’s up with Hank’s hair, but it’s on his to-do list. It’s right under getting Charles to explain how he knows what number Clint is thinking of every single time. And really, that part is very important. He’d asked Bruce to pick a number between one and ten because that was the number of M&M bags he was going to buy from the vending machine in the hall when Charles had casually said, “Why don’t you just get six, since that’s the number you’re hoping he’ll choose anyways.”

So yeah, that’s extra weird, and Clint is determined to figure out the trick to it somehow because he has plans to use it for evil, obviously. Evil meaning he totally wants to freak Thor out with it, but whatever.

“So what do you study?” he asks because Bruce had told him (at least sixteen times) before they left to try and be polite. Asking questions is polite, right? “Or, uh, teach. Whatever,” Clint amends after a moment of thought.

“Biochemistry,” Also Hank pipes up, “With an emphasis in genetics.” As far as Clint can tell he’s the youngest of his colleagues, younger than Bruce at least, and probably younger than Charles, and he seems shy but eager to speak when Clint asks. “And, uh, Charles-”

“Genetics,” Charles finishes for Also Hank with an amused wave of his hand towards the younger man. “In particular I focus on the study of evolution.”

Clint makes an “Aha!” sort of gesture, “So, like, dinosaurs and chickens, right?”

The look Charles gives him speaks a thousand words, none of them good, and Bruce sighs on Clint’s other side. “Tell me,” Bruce says slowly, “Why you care what they do, but you can never remember what I do for work?”

“You teach,” Clint says.

“Teach what, exactly?” Bruce prompts, eyes narrowed.

“Science!” Clint exclaims proudly. Charles and Also Hank stifle abrupt laughter behind their hands while Bruce pinches the bridge of his nose and tries not to be too disappointed.

The rest of the meeting proceeds in much of the same way, with Clint having Charles guess what number he’s thinking of (and really, when Charles easily says, “1,472,” and turns out to be right, even Bruce is suspicious), Also Hank looking on with vague amusement, Bruce contemplating whether Natasha would be upset if he killed Clint, and Reed and Hank glaring at the four of them at
an intensity that would make someone who actually cares cower in fear. By the end of the meeting they get absolutely nothing done other than assure that Bruce is definitely no longer on Reed’s good side (he’s pretty sure he never was, though), and Hank will give him the eye in the halls for the rest of his career. He’s extremely glad neither of the two have any influence on whether or not he gets his next Tenure. And Charles and Clint have somehow become fast friends, which is unsurprising seeing as Bruce is pretty sure Charles makes friends with everyone.

“So,” Clint says brightly to Also Hank as they start to leave the meeting room, “You dated Charles’ sister”

Also Hank runs a nervous hand over the back of his neck, “For awhile.”

“It didn’t end well,” Charles hums, and Clint glances at Bruce with a raised eyebrow.

“She’s kinda scary,” Bruce mumbles, and Also Hank nods vigorously in agreement. “And Hank kinda offended her because he doesn’t think before he speaks,” he adds, and Also Hank looks away with a huff.

“Natasha scary or Sharon scary?” Clint prompts.

“Sharon scary,” Bruce decides after a pause.

Charles is struggling to figure out where to put his briefcase as they talk, finding it difficult to put the strap over one of the handles on the back until Also Hank absentmindedly takes it from him and places it in the little space underneath. Charles thanks him and Clint’s attention is momentarily diverted as he watches the interaction.

And because Clint has apparently never heard of curiosity killing the cat, he asks, “You weren’t born that way?” and Bruce smacks the back of his head.

Charles, however, only smiles, “Yes. I was born with wheels, Mr. Barton. It’s a rare evolutionary condition.” When Clint’s eyes widen he laughs, “Joking, of course, but you are correct. It’s going to take more than a few years to get used to this, after all.”

Hesitantly, Clint pries, “Accident?”

“Of a sort. I’d rather keep that private, though, if you don’t mind,” Charles says lightly, and waves Clint over with a hand, “Since you’re here and nosey, though, you could wheel me out into the hall.”

Clint smirks, “Because you’re tired, or because you’re lazy?”

“The latter, of course, silly mind tricks don’t tire me.”

“So you are a telepath?” Clint gasps.

Charles merely smiles, unnervingly innocent, while Bruce and Also Hank shake their heads. “If I tell you,” Charles says slyly, “I’ll have to kill you.”

“With your telepath powers?” Clint gushes, not alarmed or thrown off in the slightest.

They make their way down the hall, Clint (unconsciously) making racecar noises as he pushes Charles and chattering on about how he thinks Natasha is psychic too because she always knows when he uses her shampoo, but that she’d never reveal to him if she was. He also wants to know how Charles does the trick with the numbers, but Charles makes a lip-zip motion in response that causes Clint shut up instantly. Bruce is actually starting to wonder if Charles really is a telepath of
some sort, because even if Bruce yells at Clint to be quiet, Clint acts as if he’d rather die than shut up. Maybe he needs to learn the number trick himself if that’s what it takes to command Clint’s attention. He’s thinking much too hard about this idea when he glances up to see Clint watching him, and Clint flashes him a smile when he catches Bruce’s eyes. Okay, so he probably doesn’t need the number trick.

They’re halfway down the hall when the elevator opens a ways away and three children come screeching out of it and race towards them. Literally screeching. Also Hank and Bruce sidestep them as they barrel past and launch themselves at Charles, shouting and wiggling as they perch on the sides of his chair and his lap. Clint backs up when the smallest, a redhead, smacks at his hand where he has it wrapped around one of the handles of Charles’ wheelchair.

“I can push daddy,” the tiny ginger announces, and he proceeds to try to help Charles, succeeding in only moving the chair an inch or so across the carpet. The other two children, a surly looking blond and an excited, bright eyed and dark skinned boy, balance on the sides of Charles’ chair as they fight for who gets to sit in his lap.

“I assume these are all yours,” Clint says with a raised eyebrow, and Bruce can’t tell if his expression is one of amusement or annoyance as the redhead continues to try and push Charles’ chair on his own with no success.

Charles smiles, “You assume correctly, my friend.” He pats the blond on the head, “This is Alex,” he does the same for the bright-eyed boy, “Armando-”

“Darwin!” Armando, er, Darwin corrects loudly, and Charles laughs.

“Darwin,” Charles echoes, and Darwin looks pleased. “And the little terror trying to move my chair is Sean.”

Sean yells at the sound of his name and Also Hank covers his ears and rolls his eyes, clearly not overly fond of the noise Sean is making. Clint chuckles, “Biological, or-” Clint pauses as the question answers itself when a tall gentleman emerges from the elevator and scoops Alex up off of Charles’ lap. “Well there you go,” Clint finishes lamely.

Alex struggles a bit until the man says, “It’s Darwin’s turn today and you know it,” and Alex sighs and goes limp in the man’s grip. “Ready to go?” he asks Charles, barely sparing a glance at any of the others.

“Don’t be rude, Erik,” Charles teases, and Erik waves an obviously sarcastic hand at Also Hank, Bruce, and Clint. “Right,” Charles says, pleased, and makes a similar but more heartfelt motion, “It was good to meet you, Mr. Barton, and I hope you won’t mind being absent from the next meeting seeing as we didn’t accomplish anything this time due to your presence.” Clint makes an offended sound and Bruce snorts before Erik picks up Sean as well and starts wheeling Charles towards the elevator, Alex held against one hip and Sean sitting on his shoulders. Also Hank bids them farewell and follows close behind.

Clint huffs. “Cute kids, weird parents,” he concludes. Bruce nods and Clint casts him a fleeting, wary glance, carefully watching the for the flash of fondness as Bruce gazes after the children. There it is. Clint inhales slowly as the swift, almost shy smile makes its way across Bruce’s face. It’s not an unfamiliar expression, and Clint’s heart sinks a little every time he sees it. He nudges Bruce, “Hey, uh, do you . . . Want some?”

Bruce gives him an incredulous look, “Some what?”
Clint gestures vaguely to where Charles and his family are disappearing into the elevator. “Those,” he says as dismissively as possible.

“Does it matter?” Bruce asks, and Clint knows it doesn’t, knows that he should stop asking because he’s already asked a hundred, a thousand times. Even if it doesn’t matter, it never hurts to ask because he has yet to get a straight answer from Bruce. “It doesn’t matter,” Bruce repeats.

“You sure?” Clint whispers.

Bruce shrugs, “Even if I wasn’t, you know . . . I’m not . . .”

Clint wraps an arm around Bruce’s shoulders, “Yeah.”

“Plus you know Natasha doesn’t-” Bruce starts.

“I know,” Clint says, a small smile on his face. “Speaking of, shouldn’t we get going? Her flight comes in in about an hour.”

Tony keeps quiet about it for too long, lets the words he read on the slip of newspaper float around in his mind and stew there until they drain him, take away every bit of panic and morose regret until all that’s left is a dull, achy feeling. That’s the point where Steve notices, and leans against Tony where they sit in the bed with the mountains of room service Tony had treated them to. “Something wrong?” Steve asks quietly.

“No,” Tony whispers. “You gonna eat that?” he picks a piece of crab off of one of Steve’s plates and pops it in his mouth in an effort to cease all further conversation. He doesn’t want to talk about it.

“Tony,” Steve presses, and moves all the plates out of the way so Tony can’t pull the same stunt again. “Tell me,” he says. “Are you sick?”

If fruitless hoping was a sickness, then yes, Tony supposes he would be. “I’m fine,” he says, but he’s already pulling the scrap of newspaper out of his pocket, crushing it against his palm as he does so. The noise of crinkling paper catches Steve’s attention, and he pries Tony’s hand apart and snatches the thing away. Tony doesn’t protest.

“Where did you find this?” Steve asks, and there’s no remorse in his tone, no edge betraying that he’s surprised or concerned that Tony got a hold of it. “Did you read it? What do you thi-”

“I think you could have told me before you made plans to move across the freaking city,” Tony snaps, unnerved by how excited Steve sounds. “I mean the place looks nice, sure, I googled it. One and a half baths, living the dream,” he spits, and no, he’s not bitter at all. “But you should have told me. God, what does this even mean for us? That’s an hour’s drive at best, Steve. Probably more considering the typical traffic. I thought part of being in a relationship was about deciding stupid shit like this together.”

Steve’s eyes widen, “What? What are you talking about?”

Tony jabs a finger at the cut of newspaper, “Apartment for rent. It says so right there!”

Steve flips the paper over and his eyes skim across the short article. “Oh. Tony, no-”

“That’s what it says!” Tony bites out, “And you had it in your pocket!”
“Tony I wanted the article on the other side,” he flashes the opposite side of the of the paper at Tony, “The classified. Here, see?”

Tony frowns and peers at it, and an even worse feeling of dread sinks into his stomach as he does so. “Volunteer firefighters needed,” he reads aloud, and if his heart could stop he’s sure it would because of those three words alone.

“Yeah,” Steve says, “I wanted to do some sort of volunteer work with some of my free time and this is perfect, right?”

And then Tony’s on his feet, “Are you crazy?” he yells, and he’s thinking too far ahead, drawing up all the maybes and possibilities and the worst scenarios he’s only thought up in his darkest nightmares. “You could get hurt! What if you get hurt, Steve?” And how is he supposed to explain that, really, besides stating the obvious? It’s not just house fires, though he wouldn’t be too fond of Steve dashing into those, either. They live in one of the most well known cities in the world, and Tony knows full well what the wrong kind of people do with that knowledge, with lighters and gasoline and planes and bombs and terrible things that Tony used to make. He knows what creates fires, he knows what starts them, and he knows that people have died because of them. Lots of people, good people. And he hasn’t told Steve those bits yet, about the year he spent dismantling and destroying ever piece of the things he’d built, things his father and built before him, all because he’d never taken the moment to realize what the real price of such things was.

“Tony-” Steve starts, and Tony doesn’t want to hear it, doesn’t need the reassurances that “Everything will be fine,” because he knows better.

“What if you die?!” he shouts before Steve can finish. “What am I supposed to do if you-” He can’t find the breath to speak it more than once, to ask aloud what his mind and heart are screaming at him to ask. He can’t bear it.

And then he’s storming out of the room, because if he can’t face up to the fact that Steve was a soldier, is a soldier still, and wants to do this, then he can’t stay. Steve reaches for him and Tony shakes him off with a dismissive, “Go. If that’s what you want then I won’t stop you. I just . . . I need some room to breathe.” He shuts the door behind him and is gone.

OoOoOoOoO

The truth is that Natasha has forever forbidden Clint and Bruce from picking her up at the airport. Not because she doesn’t want to see them, but because she knows what they’ll do. And that’s exactly why they come to pick her up every single time.

Thus, as usual, when Natasha leaves the baggage claim she’s greeted by a brightly colored sign with her name on it surrounded by a nauseating halo of little red hearts. Mentally, she makes a list of other valid reasons to kill them both, and concludes that she’s too tired to do any such thing. “Look at these morons,” she says to Bucky as he approaches and laughs at the sight of Bruce and Clint waving the obnoxious sign around. “They’re going to get us killed.”

“Super Spies Winter Soldier and Black Widow,” Bucky says, swiping a hand through the air like he’s reading it from the front page of a newspaper, “Killed By Terrorists Because of Idiots Waving Stupid Sign.”

“My idiots,” Natasha amends as they walk towards Bruce and Clint. “Make sure that part gets included if I’m shot and you live.”

“Will do,” Bucky promises, and then steps back as Natasha rips the sign out of Bruce and Clint’s
hands and stomps on it with her heel, effectively tearing it in half, before slinging an arm around each of their waists.

“Miss me?” she asks smoothly, and Bruce and Clint lean into her with matching grins.

“Clint sulked the whole time,” Bruce says.

Clint scowls over Natasha’s head at him, “Did not.”

“I would hope that you both sulked,” Natasha warns.

“We were the mopiest,” Clint says resolutely, glaring at Bruce.

Bruce frowns, “That’s not even a word.”

“Mopiest: Those who are the most mopey,” Clint defines.

“Mopey isn’t a word either,” Bruce mutters.

Natasha doesn’t laugh, but the light in her eyes tells both of them enough for a lifetime. Clint opens his mouth to prove Bruce wrong when Bucky taps him on the shoulder and he directs his glare at him instead. “What do you want? Your month is over. Time’s up,” he growls. Natasha pinches him.

Bucky rolls his eyes, “I’m well aware of that. But I think you wanted these.” He drops two identical silver banded rings into Clint’s hand. “Do with them what you will, Barton.”

“I will be tossing them into the fires of Mount Doom without hesitation,” Clint says seriously, and Bucky quirks a small smile. “So you finished it, then? It’s done?”

“No,” Bucky says, “But that’s fine. I’m through wasting my life on it.” He pats Clint on the back as he passes, making his way towards the door that leads out of the airport. “Oh, and Barton?” he calls over his shoulder, “Take care of her, okay? You too, Banner.”

He salutes them as he goes and Natasha shouts, “I don’t need looking after, asshole!” but there’s no malice behind the words. When he’s gone she leans against Clint and Bruce again in the slightest betrayal of how tired she really is. “Home?” she asks, and Clint shakes his head vigorously.

“I’m sorry,” Clint says, “did you miss the part where I said I was going to destroy these in the fires of Mount Doom?” He jingles the rings in his fist and Natasha and Bruce roll their eyes.

OoOoOoOoOoO

When Tony gets back Steve’s still sitting on the edge of the bed, and he can’t help but wonder if he’s been waiting there the whole time. He shrugs the idea off and moves past him to grab his suitcase off the floor, ignoring Steve’s confused look.

“Where are you going with that?” Steve asks, and Tony grits his teeth.

“Leaving, what’s it look like?”

Steve raises an eyebrow, “Because I want to volunteer-”

“Because we broke up,” Tony snaps.

Steve stiffens, “What?”
“We fought. That means we broke up,” Tony mutters, shoving his things into his suitcase as he speaks. He tenses when Steve laughs.

“What? Tony, that was a fight, we didn’t . . . It was a fight. If people broke up every time they had a fight then their relationships wouldn’t last much longer than . . .” He pauses as his own words sink in, slipping off the bed to grab Tony and turn him so they’re standing face to face. “Oh. Geeze, Tony.”

Tony sniffs, “Stop that. I don’t want your pity. I’ll just be on my way if you don’t mind.”

“It’s not pity. And we didn’t break up.” Steve says slowly, and Tony eyes him suspiciously. “It was just a fight. It’s not a big deal. Unless, uh, you wanted to break up . . .” He takes half a step back and Tony lunges for him.

“No, no, nope. That’s not what I want,” Tony insists, fingers tangling into the front of Steve’s shirt. Steve smiles.

“Good. So now we talk.”

Tony makes a face, “If we break up for a half hour can we skip that part?”

“No, Tony,” Steve huffs fondly. “Sit,” he leads Tony back towards the bed, taking a seat beside him on the end of the mattress. “I really want to do this, you know,” he begins once Tony has stopped fidgeting.

“I know,” Tony says dully. “I just . . . I freaked out. A lot. I didn’t mean to but all the bad things that could happen just,” he waves a hand towards his head, “I thought of them all at once and I panicked.”

“I’ll be fine,” Steve assures softly. “And it won’t be very often, just whenever they need an extra set of hands. Nothing is going to happen to me.”

“You can’t promise that,” Tony mutters, but his heart isn’t in it.

“No,” Steve agrees, and Tony stares at him, surprised by that admittance. “But I can come home every day and tell you that I’m alright.”

Tony narrows his eyes, confused, “So you’re going to come back all soot stained and walk across the hall every day just to tell me you didn’t catch fire. That sounds like a bit more effort than it’s worth.”

Steve smiles, “I’m pretty sure it’s worth it.” Tony blinks at the implications behind the statement, and flushes slightly under Steve’s steady gaze. “Besides, um, about that across the hall thing . . . Er, it sure would save me a lot of trouble if you were already sitting on my couch every day.”

“Why would I be on your couch every day?” Tony asks. “Not that I’m not already, but-”

“Or on my bed,” Steve adds, “or even in the kitchen, on the balcony, in whatever we turn the other bedroom into-”

Tony stops him with a hand on his shoulder, “Uh, what?”

Steve chuckles nervously and catches the hand on his shoulder, “I’m asking you to move in with me.”
Chapter Summary

Clint moves out. Tony moves in.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“What if you die?! What am I supposed to do if you—"

In the end those are the words that made Steve freeze, that make his whole world stop and stand still as they sink into his heart like a heavy stone. They are the words that linger in his mind when Tony leaves the hotel, and that stick to the tip of his tongue when he returns, because that question, that fear is a two-way street. One he knows far too well. So all the while as he sits there and calms Tony’s worries, soothes away his frets with a proposition of living together from here on out, they ring in his ears like a fading, distant scream. So he doesn’t ask, doesn’t repeat them to let Tony know that no matter what he volunteers for, no matter what he does in his life, that question goes both ways.

“What if you die?”

It’s an irrational fear at best, really, and Steve knows it. He’s not on the battlefield anymore, Tony doesn’t dodge bullets for a living. They’re safe, they’re sound, they’re secure. They’re living and breathing and alive. And when Tony dozes off that night, still talking about what they could do with Clint’s room once they move in together, Steve rests his palm over the left side of Tony’s chest to reassure himself of that. His fingers press over skin, fanning out over the steady rhythm of Tony’s heart as he too drifts off to sleep.

Later, Tony asks, “Isn’t this a bit fast?” but he does so jokingly, hands tapping out a beat against the steering wheel of his car on their way back to New York.

Steve shakes his head, “No. I don’t think so.”

And, see, here’s the thing. Tony was right when he said Steve was a planner. He likes organization in everything from grocery lists to relationships. Or, at least, he did. There’s only so many times you can plan something out, times where you can push it aside and say, “Later,” as if you know what the future will hold. Steve went into war with a hundred laters in his head, and left without a single one fulfilled.

Tony isn’t a later person. He’s scared of plans, scared of every later Steve could ever throw his way. To him plans are just expectations he can’t, or has no desire to fulfill. So when he realizes that Steve tosses all the laters into the trash and wipes his hands of them. There’s a difference, really, between someday and tomorrow. While both are days that never come, not exactly, Steve knows he can wake up and find that it’s tomorrow, but he’ll never open his eyes to someday.

Someday is where wishes and dreams that are never meant to be reality live, but tomorrow always turns into today.
Tony’s lived with someone before, that someone being Pepper, of course. From what Steve knows of the situation they worked out for about two more months after moving in together, at which point Pepper threw a bag of flour at him and that was that. Steve’s not sure why it ended up being flour, of all things, but he’s seen the pictures of Tony, completely covered in white powder from head to toe, so he’s not going to argue with Pepper’s logic.

Steve, on the other hand, has never co-inhabited a space with anyone other than Bucky or Clint. Truthfully, as Tony tries to convince him that they should get one of Steve’s paintings framed for the living room after he moves in, Steve finds he’s probably more nervous about the whole situation than Tony is. He’s used to saving up all the laters in his mind and never getting the chance to cash them in. Some of them, many of them, are still sitting there, gathering dust because they were the laters that fell short, that didn’t account for the harshness of reality.

Because the reality is that later is just another word for too late. And Steve knows this better than most people.

When he and Tony start packing, Tony boxing up all his things and Steve making room for them, he packs the unused laters away, too.

“Really? You’ll teach me to dance?”

Later.

“We’ll get a house. Between the two of us I bet we could afford a nice, small place outside the city.”

Later.

“I’ve always liked dogs.”

Later.

“I’m thinking I’ll pick up my art again after we’re done here. Make a name for myself. What about you?”

Later.

“What do you think about kids, Peggy?”

Later.

“I was going to propose. I know you would have hated the idea, poofy white dresses and too many flowers but . . . God, Peggy, please. Not like this. Please, you can’t - You were going to teach me to dance, remember? I would have stepped on your feet. Peggy? Peggy?”

Too late.

He dusts them off, all the laters that became too lates, and he packs them away. And when Tony leans against him, kisses the back of his neck and whispers something into his ear that makes Steve’s whole body feel weak, he knows it’s okay. He’s not packing them to discard them, to forget them and everything, everyone that comes with them, he’s storing them. He’s saving them, preserving them out of the way because he’s come to realize that he doesn’t think about them so much anymore. Why would he? His thoughts are occupied by his life in the here and now, and there’s no use clinging to what he’s already lost.

Peggy would agree with him, he thinks. Actually, she’d probably have slapped him for lingering too
long in the first place.

“We’re going to have to get a new bed,” Steve says while he helps Tony pack, watching as Tony grins at him in response.

This time there’s no such thing as later, or too late, because Steve knows that now is a much better place to be.

OoOoOoOoOoO

It turns out that Clint is literally the worst person at packing ever. And this is in comparison to Tony Stark, who just shoves his things in boxes willy-nilly, so that’s saying a lot. Natasha kicks him out of bed every morning in an effort to make him pack, and every morning Clint manages to avoid packing altogether. He’s the worst packer because he actually doesn’t pack anything. Which is how Bruce and Natasha find themselves standing over his bed at dawn of the final day before Tony moves in, and discover that the only thing Clint has packed are his socks, which are tossed haphazardly into a duffle bag on the floor. And for all either of them know that might just be a duffle that Clint keeps his socks in for some god-unknown reason, and he actually hasn’t packed jack shit.

It wouldn’t be surprising.

“I don’t think he’s taking this seriously,” Bruce mutters to Natasha while Clint snores under a mound of blankets. “I mean, we can’t really force him to move in with us.”

Natasha lifts an eyebrow, “Can’t we?” she asks, far too calm, and Bruce shrugs, which as close to a “Go for it” as Natasha knows she’ll get from him.

In the kitchen, Steve tries not to feel too concerned when he hears Clint shriek, and he continues fixing his breakfast as if he didn’t hear anything at all.

By eight in the morning Clint has packed a total of two boxes, which consist of the surprising amount of videogames, DVDs, and a few dusty VCR tapes (Who the hell owns a VCR anymore, anyways?) Bruce digs out from under the bed. Natasha is sorting through his closet and sorting things into piles for Bruce to box up while Clint watches with an oddly dismayed expression.

“Guys,” he says, far too quietly, “I promised Steve I’d go jogging with him today, so . . .”

Natasha waves at him with a hand, and Bruce casts him a questioning, worried look. “Go ahead,” Natasha dismisses, “But if you’re not back to help in two hours I’ll have to hunt you down.” Her tone softens slightly before she says, “No more running.”

And she’s not talking about his morning jog in the park. Clint tenses at the words, feels every muscle in his body coil up as if he means to instantly disobey her.

“I won’t,” he mutters before he leaves, grabbing his coat from where Bruce is trying to pack it and all but slamming the door behind him.

Bruce blinks at Natasha in the silent wake left behind, a slow, askance sort of movement that makes Natasha let out a strained sounding sigh. “Harsh,” Bruce comments after a moment.

“Reality always is,” Natasha mutters, swiping a hand over her face. “He has to stop being afraid and chickening out. It’s been years, Bruce.”

“No everything fades with time,” Bruce whispers.

“Obviously,” Natasha says, gesturing between them and at the door Clint had only just left through.
“But I would think it’s been long enough for him to understand that we’re here to stay.”

Bruce rests his chin on a hand contemplatively, “Since when has anything in Clint’s life ever held this sort of permanence, though?” Natasha narrows her eyes, but doesn’t respond before Bruce continues. “He’s afraid, I think, to let himself get too comfortable in case it all falls apart.”

The flash of uncertainty that crosses through Natasha’s eyes then is what makes Bruce move a little closer, sit side by side with her as they start to shift through Clint’s closet again. “Nothing is going to fall apart,” she says softly, but her words waver with uncertainty, so slight Bruce barely catches it.

“I know,” he says.

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

It’s been a long time since they’ve gone jogging together. Too long. In the end it comes down to nothing more than the fact that they’re moving forward. Steve sleeps in a little later now because he’s often in bed with Tony, and Clint is hardly ever at the apartment in the mornings anymore as it is.

“How’s the packing going?” Steve asks as he laces up his shoes.

“Like crap,” Clint confesses, and Steve smiles. “You?”

“Just dandy.”

Keeping pace with a running partner can be surprisingly difficult for many reasons. The main reason, of course, is that everyone runs as differently as they speak or laugh. Tony, for example, only ever runs if he has something to run from, as anything else is just a needless waste of time and energy. Thor doesn’t run, but rather charges ahead like the invisible finish line is just feet away. Natasha runs with calculation, keeping a completely steady and even pace for the entire duration of time, and hardly even breaks a sweat let alone finds herself out of breath. Steve is a classic jogger, fluctuating between pacing himself and pushing himself until every muscle aches, always making sure to finish his goal for that day. Clint, however, is a speedster. Even on Steve’s best days he can outmatch him in the speed category. Stamina, however, is another matter entirely, and where Steve can keep going for what seems like years, Clint usually calls their jogging trips quits fairly quickly. He’s just not built the way Steve is, and he lacks the patience to put his momentum aside in favor of a calmer rate.

Today he keeps up with Steve step for step, reigning in his instinct to run ahead if only to prove that he doesn’t consider their camaraderie activity a competition.

“Big step,” Steve says, rather out of the blue, and for a second Clint has to pause and make sure he’s not getting ahead. “I mean moving in with someone,” Steve clarifies with a small smile when he sees the way Clint stares at his feet in confusion.

Clint swallows, “Uh, yeah. A bit. You ever done it before?”

Steve pauses, as if thinking about it, “Not with, uh-”

“Me neither,” Clint interrupts. “I mean I’ve lived with people, but . . . Not with people that . . .”

“Yeah,” Steve mumbles. “Which is kinda why it’s a big step.”

“Big step on the staircase leading up to the biggest step,” Clint agrees. “Or at least it is for you.” They’ve stopped running now and are slowly meandering along the path instead. It’s rather hard to have a conversation and try to maintain steady breathing while jogging, after all. Clint raises an inquiring eyebrow when Steve glances at him in confusion. “You know, the big one. Is it the look in
your eyes or this dancing juice.” Steve continues to look bemused and Clint sighs, “Oh my god. How you survive in a world full of slang and pop culture references, I’ll never know. It’s like we’re speaking Klingon to you, isn’t it.”

Steve frowns, “I know what Klingon is, Clint.”

“Congrats. But that wasn’t the point. I was talking about you and Tony. Do you think you’re in it for the long haul?”

Clint watches the expression on Steve’s face shift from soft bewilderment to a broad and bright smile that makes Clint glad he’s wearing sunglasses. It’s rather blinding, to say the least. “So is that a yes?” Clint asks, just to be obnoxious.

Surprisingly, Steve shrugs. “I don’t know, actually,” he says, and Clint gapes at him. “Tony doesn’t want that kind of thing.”

“And . . . You know that for certain?”

Steve winces, “He’s made it clear a couple of times.”

“A hundred bucks says he changes his mind,” Clint states and holds out a hand, which Steve willingly shakes. “And I want it in pennies,” Clint adds, “on your wedding day. Also I swear to god I will fight Bucky to be your best man.”

Steve laughs, long and loud, and Clint grins in return. “I’m still going to crash on your couch all the time, you know.”

“Really? You’re not going to use the couch that you, Bruce, and Natasha so lovingly dragged up the stairs?” Steve asks, a teasing edge in his voice.


OoOoOoOoOoO

Tony’s still digging things out from under his bed. The funny thing is that the more he digs, the more he packs, the more he realizes that most of the stuff in his room, in this apartment, isn’t actually his. He finds clothes under the bed, in the back of the closet, in corners of the room he didn’t even know existed that are clearly too small for him. They belong to a thinner frame, and Tony is quickly discovering that there are more shades of green in the world than he’d previously thought because of them. He finds odd knickknacks and toys, including an entire drawer full of what he’s sure is McDonalds Happy Meal toys that he didn’t know existed. He leaves everything where he finds it.

He leaves all of Loki’s things where they’ve been since Loki left.

In the end he only has about half a dozen boxes of things to take over to Steve’s, and he’s not sure whether or not that’s because he simply doesn’t own that many important things or because ever since he moved in with Thor he’s stopped buying thing he doesn’t need. It’s probably a little bit of both.

“Hey,” he says when Bucky and Thor walk in to grab the last box from them, “I was going to leave this under the bed but they kinda smell like fish and seaweed. You should probably rinse them out.”

Tony holds up a large pickle jar full of seashells and Bucky makes a face.

“Ugh. The beach,” he says in a tone that makes Tony narrow his eyes in suspicion. “You take them, Thor.”
Thor gladly does so, although Tony notes that he shares a rather similar look to the one Bucky is sporting as he goes. “Alright,” Tony says as he follows Bucky back out into the living room. “What happened at the beach?”

The way the room goes deathly silent can only be the work of some miracle. Thor pauses at the sink where he’s washing the shells off one by one, Bucky freezes, and Jane and Sharon (who had been folding Tony’s clothes after he haphazardly tossed them into a box) stop chattering immediately. This is either going to be very good, Tony decides, or very very bad. “What?” he huffs incredulously, “I have a right to know. It was my beach house you were all at. Assuming that Bucky’s disgusted tone over the word ‘beach’ was referring to the trip we took during the summer.”

“Different trip,” Sharon mumbles. Totally different trip.

Tony starts pointing fingers, “Really? So you all went on another trip together even though I know for a fact that you’ve only been acquainted for less than a year? You’re worse at lying than I am.”

“It was nothing,” Jane says hastily.

“Nothing important,” Bucky adds.

And then, of course, because he’s Thor, Thor booms, “Ah. But every mighty act of bravery is important, noble Bucky.”

Tony takes a moment to enjoy the trapped and horrified look that echoes around the room before saying, “Come on then. I won’t tell anyone.”

It’s a total freaking lie, obviously, but Bucky sighs in defeat and Sharon mimics him with an added shake of her head. “Well,” Sharon starts, “There was this jellyfish.”

“Jellymonster,” Jane corrects. “Because it still haunts my nightmares.”

“Jellymonster, whatever,” Sharon dismisses. “Anyways, it stung me. It hurt.”

“-On a serious crazy level considering how much complaining she was doing,” Bucky interrupts.

Sharon silences him with a glare. “I was not complaining any more than you would have been, Bucky.”

“I’m tough stuff,” Bucky protests.

“I think you mean ‘Tough fluff,’” Jane whispers, and Sharon high fives her before continuing her story.

“I didn’t think I could walk back to the beach house, so some . . . Drastic measures had to be taken.”

“Of the most drastic sort,” Thor says solemnly. “The lady Jane had an idea about something she’d seen on the Channel of Discovery.”

Tony gapes as he realizes where this tale is going, because, hell, Loki’s addiction to animal documentaries did in fact teach him a thing or two about this and that. And he definitely remembers what it taught him about jellyfish. “Oh, ew, really?” he gasps, looking between the four of them with far too gleeful an expression on his face. “She peed on it?”

Sharon scowls, “Good to know you think I’m that flexible, but I’m really not.”

Thor raises a tentative hand, “I offered my services, but I could not . . .” Tony tries not to laugh,
really does, and thus the noise comes out as more of a choking snort before he turns expectantly to a nervous looking Bucky.

Bucky puffs out his chest, “Yeah. That’s right, Stark. I did it. It had to be done and I stepped up the plate. And I’d do it again for any one of my friends.”

“You peed on her,” Tony snorts, “It’s not like you pulled a sword out of a stone, Bucky. You peed on her.”

Sharon makes a face, “Can we please stop talking about it? Seriously?”

“Of course,” Tony nods, being completely unserious for contrast purposes alone. “Right after I send out this mass text.”

And, really, they all should have noticed the phone in his hand a whole lot sooner.

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

Clint doesn’t have as much stamina as Steve does, and seriously he doesn’t doubt that if he wanted to Steve could run the length of Central Park a dozen times and not even break a sweat. He doesn’t feel like testing that theory, however, on the off chance that he’s mistaken and he has to flee the country because if Steve collapses trying to prove some stupid idea in Clint’s head, Tony will definitely murder him. So sometime around nine-thirty in the morning he decides it’s better for his own health to stop while he still has the legs to stand on, and waves Steve ahead with a breathless jumble of words that was supposed to be, “I’ll catch up,” but ends up coming out sounding like, “Ibbhhhhhh aaaaaaaaaabbbbaaah.”

Sometimes he wonders how he ever survived that idiotic mission at all, seeing as he’s pretty sure Natasha’s first ever words to him were, “Can’t talk. Gotta run. Let’s go,” in that order. God even knows how Bruce survived, considering that since they moved here Clint hasn’t seen him run once. Except for that time when he dropped a dime in the subway station and vaulted over a turnstile to chase after it, but considering that that event lead to he and Clint being escorted out of the station they try not to mention it.

At the moment he can’t tell if he’s breathing hard because he’s been running for over an hour, or if the sheer panic is finally starting to set in. At this moment in time he knows that Bruce and Natasha are packing up his things to move them across the street, and that by the end of the night he will no longer be a resident of the apartment he’s been living in for almost four years. Instead, he’ll finally be living with Natasha and Bruce in a situation that is starting to, shockingly, appear more permanent than he’d ever hoped it to be. Yep, it’s definitely the latter. He’s halfway to a full blown freak out in the middle of the park when he fumbles to his phone and scrolls to the contact that has been labeled “For Emergencies Only” for the past four months.

“Tell me I’m not insane,” he says in a rush as soon as the person on the other side picks up.

There’s a long, heavy pause before an amused voice says, “What did you do this time?”

Clint heaves out an exasperated sigh and staggers over to a bench where he can sit, “Why do you always think I’ve done something, huh? I am a perfectly upstanding citizen.”

“I’m sorry, hold on, I think I just heard that echoing down Lie Canyon all the way from here.”

“Your sarcasm is much appreciated in this time of need,” Clint mutters. “Thanks, Darcy.”

Darcy snickers appropriately, and Clint can practically hear her smug smile through the phone. “Are
you going to answer my question, or are you just going to giggle at my misfortune,” he mutters.

“I’m not allowed to do both?” Darcy asks innocently. Clint groans. “Right, right, times of crisis and whatnot. What’s the problem again?”

Clint bites his lip as he replies, “I, uh, I’m moving in with Natasha and Bruce.”

“Stop the boat,” Darcy says, “What now? Last I checked you were so against that your stubbornness could raise mountains and part seas. What changed your mind?”

“Made a deal with Nat,” Clint mumbles, “And also Tony’s moving in with Steve so-”

“Lobsters,” Darcy says suddenly, and Clint has to run that word through his head a few times before he’s certain he hasn’t misheard.

“Uh, what?”

Darcy inhales like she’s about to give him a very weird, very strange bit of Darcy-logic. Which is exactly what she does. “Come on, Clint, I know you watched that documentary with me. Lobsters. They fall in love and mate for life and then the little old lobster couples walk around their tank holding claws and it’s adorable.”

Clint blinks, “You’re comparing Steve and Tony to crustacean?”

“Adorable crustacean.”

He puts his head into his hands, “That’s great, Darcy, really. But this isn’t- I need to know I’m making the right choice here.”

“Do you love them?” she asks, and really, it shouldn’t be any more simple than that.

“Obviously,” Clint huffs, mildly offended at the accusation that he might feel otherwise. “If I didn’t I wouldn’t be flipping out.”

“Exactly,” Darcy says with satisfaction. “Problem solved.”

Clint laughs, and it really was that simple, that easy, to get the confirmation he needed not to back out. “You realize that this is the most committed I can get, right?” he asks her and Darcy huffs.

“Duh. Unless polygamy has become legal since I left.”

Clint sits up a bit, “What, you’re not in the states anymore?”

“I have been forbidden from revealing my location,” Darcy replies in a mock-hushed whisper.

“You’re okay though, right?”

“Fabulous,” she hums.

“Even though Loki’s a dick?”

Even without seeing her, Clint knows she’s making a disapproving face at him all the same. “Rude,” she scolds, “but yes. I’m fine. We’re fine.”

“Tap that?” Clint asks with no hint of shame whatsoever.
“Considering I’m not his type, as I happen to be minus one phallus, no,” Darcy states.

“I can’t believe you know the word phallus,” Clint mocks, “also, I knew it.”

“Bravo, Sherlock,” she says, and Clint can hear her sarcastic clapping on the other end of the phone. Clint chuckles, “You going to come home anytime soon?”

There’s a long stretch of silence, and Clint strains his ear as he hears the muffled sound of Darcy placing her hand over the receiver and conversing with someone else on the other end. After a moment the sound clears again, and Clint can make out Loki’s dull, quiet tones before Darcy replies with a short, “I don’t think so,” that makes him close his eyes and sigh, a lingering, weighted sound.

“Tell him . . . Tell him Thor’s been calling him. I know I shouldn’t know that, so don’t lecture me, but when he checks phone a hundred times a day it’s not hard to guess why.”

“He knows,” Darcy whispers.

“Then what is he waiting for?” Clint snaps. “He’s not helping anything. I may not like Loki but Thor isn’t going to take Tony’s moving out well, especially without his stupid brother there.”

“He says your loyalty to your friends is moving, but he’s not doing this for Thor.”

Clint stiffens, “Then what’s he doing it for?”

“Himself?” It comes out as a question, and Darcy hesitates for a second before adding, “Sometimes people need to be a little selfish.”

OoOoOoOoOo

Tony is fine with moving out of his apartment he shares with Thor and moving into Steve’s apartment. No, really, he’s so fine with it that even Steve has to stop him a few times just to double check. “Are you sure you’re okay with this? It’s not too fast? Really?” and so on.

Or at least he is until Thor tries to give him back the recliners. Then he loses his shit just a little bit.

“Thor, buddy, friend, those are yours,” Tony explains while Bucky drags his last box across the hall (it’s full of all the weird electronic bits and bobbles they found in one of the cabinets that were obviously belonged to neither Thor nor Loki).

“But you purchased them,” Thor protests.

“For you. Because you were using lawn furniture when I moved in. Also you had no television or microwave when I moved in,” Tony reminds, “So those are yours as well.”

Thor frowns, “I can not accept your charity.”

“It’s not charity,” Tony insists, “It’s- Jesus, Thor, don’t you realize how much I owe you? Think of it as a gift.”

First of all, Tony’s pretty sure that “Jesus, Thor” is an oxymoron, but that’s extremely off topic. Second of all, the befuddled look Thor gives him expresses the fact that Thor actually didn’t know. Tony sits down in one of the recliners, gesturing for Thor to follow suit with the matching one.

“You took me in when I had no where else to go, remember? You just walked up to me in the coffee shop and asked if I wanted to ‘Share quarters’ with you,” Tony explicates. “I’d never lived outside of
my family’s money, let alone their style of living, and Pepper had given me a thousand bucks to get through the month with. You saved my butt. And then you introduced me to your neighbors, who I thought were buttmunches at first but then again they probably thought the same of me. Thor, you *introduced me to Steve.*”

The words hang in the air, loaded with gratitude in a way that could never be properly expressed, and Thor merely smiles in the face of them. “I believe that your paths would have eventually crossed without my assistance,” he says matter-of-factly.

“I think they crossed at just the right time,” Tony grins. “The chairs, the TV, anything I bought that we shared is yours, Thor. You don’t have to accept it, of course, but it would be less of a hassle if you did. Also Steve will kill me if I bring these recliners over to his, uh, our place. Because they don’t match the loveseat he already has.”

Thor laughs.

OoOoOoOoOoO

Typically, when people are moving out and moving in and moving up they take their things and leave, and that’s that. That’s not how it works with them, that’s not how it will ever work for any of them. So maybe Tony is just moving across the hall, maybe Clint is just resettling across the street, and maybe there’s one apartment that’s suddenly a little more empty while another is a little more full. None of that matters at the end of the day when they all crowd around Steve’s old TV (no, seriously, the thing was made in the late 90s. Tony isn’t sure how it’s still functioning and he may or may not whisper, “*Skynet,*” to the thing when he passes it).

They haven’t had a proper movie night in awhile, not since before Loki and Darcy left. There are still empty spaces where they should be, but on nights like this they hardly notice. Natasha, Bruce, and Clint squish onto the sofa together while Steve and Tony curl up on the loveseat that is rather appropriately named. They miss half the movie because Sharon and Bucky are constructing an epic pillow fort with Thor and Jane and arguing on whether or not all of them will fit inside it, and by the end of the night even Steve can’t remember what they were actually watching, but the movie was never the point.

The point was making a mess and being noisy to celebrate their changing lives. And when everyone has gone home Tony and Steve vacuum up the popcorn that ends up all over the carpet, do the dishes that Clint and Thor’s pizza cemented onto, and go to sleep in their bed, in their room, in their apartment.

Chapter End Notes

I’m soooo sorry this chapter took for freaking ever. I pulled or strained or IDK sprained my wrist or something and for four or five days writing actually HURT. So this took awhile.
The One With The Racecar Bed

Chapter Summary

Of permanent things and permanent people.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It doesn’t happen often, or at least it doesn’t anymore. But once in a blue moon Bruce wakes up, and doesn’t. He doesn’t actually wake up. For a few seconds he stares at the bedroom ceiling, eyes wide open, and breathes. It only takes two breaths for the fear to set in, for the nightmare to catch up to him with every sound, every image, every memory his mind had already insisted on drudging up to replay again and again.

And he can’t escape it. As with every night terror he’s ever had Bruce finds himself immobilized, held down by an unseen force while he struggles to breathe. The sounds are the worst part, like echoes through time that ring in his ears. The loud bloom and boom of explosions resounds like the debris is ricocheting off the other side of the closed bedroom door. He can make out the squealing of tires, the wail of sirens, and he can’t recall if there had originally been sirens or whether he’d just been praying for the sound of them when everything had gone wrong.

There’s a scream, and he regains his mobility, struggling with the covers because he can’t tell if he’s awake or asleep anymore, can’t discern reality from nightmare and memory. For a moment he thinks it’s his scream. It usually is. But it sounds too far away, too pained and broken and hoarse and he knows that scream, remembers it as if the bullet had cut through his own skin. And then he really is screaming, clawing out of the blankets as he tries to fight his way to a stable point between the past and the present. Through the haze of panic he can make out Natasha, watches her pin his arms to his sides and wonders how she can manage that every time this happens, how she can find the strength to hold down a fully grown man and keep him there until the breath catches in his throat and his heartbeat starts to slow.

“Breathe,” she says to him, breaking through the clouded memories and the distant scream that’s still reverberating in his ears. Not his scream. Not his.

Bruce gulps down air, whole body heaving off the bed as he still tries, uselessly, to escape her relentless grip on him. “Clint,” he gasps, the name grating in his too-dry mouth. Clint had been screaming. He knows it, remembers it, recalls the blood with such a harsh clarity that it makes him feel sick. Natasha releases one of his arms and he fumbles along the other side of the mattress only to feel long-cold sheets beneath his fingers. “Where is he?” he pleads, and Natasha shakes her head.

This is the third night out of eight they’ve woken to find him gone.

After a pause Bruce sighs and presses his palms to his face, rubbing at his eyes, “What time is it?” he asks.

For a moment he relaxes as Natasha leans over him to grab her phone off the bedside table, curling into her where she brushes against him and hooking an arm around her waist. “Almost five,” she says in the darkness, “Sun’s not even going to be up yet for another couple of hours.”
“Where the hell would he disappear to at this time of night? Or, uh, morning,” Bruce corrects with a glance towards the curtained window. “Why isn’t he here?”

Natasha doesn’t answer as she pushes his sweat-slicked hair back from his forehead, the smallest of frowns on her face. “Do you need some water? I’d offer something stronger but it wouldn’t really help,” she whispers and Bruce tries to offer her a wavering smile, knowing she’ll see right through it anyways.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not,” Natasha insists lowly, “How long as it been? Four months? Five?”

“Five months and thirteen days,” Bruce admits, “Don’t act like you weren’t counting as well. I was trying for six, you know.”

She purses her lips and replies with a swift, “I know,” before she murmurs, “Was it the same thing?”

Bruce snorts, “As if I’ve ever had night terrors about anything else.” He shrugs halfheartedly against the mattress, “I had hoped . . .”

Natasha raises an eyebrow at the way he falters with the words, and Bruce grows silent as she leans over him. “You thought having Clint here would help,” she finishes for him, voice dangerously low as she glances at the empty space in their bed.

“It’s okay,” Bruce insists when the look in her eyes starts to border homicidal. “It’s fine. I was stupid to think that anyways.”

“What’s stupid about thinking that you’d take greater comfort from being surrounded by people you care about?” Natasha growls, and, yep, Bruce has seen that look before. Clint is a dead man.

“Don’t,” Bruce starts when Natasha moves to get out of bed. He doesn’t beg her to stay, never would, and he doesn’t force her, instead merely sitting up a bit as he speaks.

Natasha pauses and slowly pushes him back down with a hand, “Don’t leave or don’t murder Clint?”

Bruce huffs softly, “Both? Clint will-”

“How many times are you going to insist that he’ll come around?” Natasha interrupts, and Bruce stills.

For a long moment an uneasy silence settles between them, and Bruce sucks in a breath before he speaks again. “Until he comes around,” he says as evenly as possible.

“And if he doesn’t?”

Bruce does sit up then so that he can properly look Natasha in the eye, “He said the same thing about you, you know. When you left us. He said it over and over and over again until I became convinced that you were gone for good, like he said.” Bruce watches as her gaze narrows, watches the way she straightens up so that she appears larger, taller, than she really is, defensive. “But you came back,” he murmurs in her ear, one hand on the back of her neck as he urges her down towards him, “And Clint will get over whatever hang up he has about us living together.”

Natasha quirks a tiny, strained looking smile, “You are either very wise, or very stupid.”
“Probably a bit of both,” Bruce sighs.

They stay in bed until well after the sun rises, halfway between dozing off again and full wakefulness. Or at least Bruce is in that state. He knows that Natasha, however sleepy she may look, is on full alert until Clint comes back. For awhile Bruce thinks about asking if she’d checked to see if he was just out in the living room on the couch again, but he knows the answer anyways. There’s no sound of movement outside their bedroom door, no sound of life, and while Clint can be alarmingly quiet when he wants to be, he’s not quiet enough that Natasha would ever miss his presence. So Bruce knows that Clint’s not just outside the door, knows he’s not anywhere in the apartment, and understands Natasha’s subtle tension that lingers even after the sun starts to peek over the horizon.

It’s obvious when Clint finally comes back, if not by the way Natasha shifts against Bruce’s side, eyes on the door, then definitely by the loud and obnoxious music that suddenly fills the apartment. It’s just after eight, and although they’ve been laying in bed for a few hours it only takes Natasha a heartbeat to roll out of bed and stalk towards the door with utter rage in her eyes. Bruce, honestly, has no intention of stopping her, and simply sits up enough to get a good glimpse of the living room as she kicks the door open and prepares to maim Clint.

Clint, oblivious, is cranking the stereo up and lip synching the words to Call Me Maybe as he starts to carry what appears to be a couple bags of groceries towards the kitchen. Bruce makes a note to permanently erase this song off of Clint’s playlists and block it from ever being downloaded to any device in their apartment ever again. But the matter as a whole is just a side note as he watches Natasha storm towards where Clint is pulling out boxes of pancake mix from his bags and switches the music off as she goes.

“Asshole,” Natasha hisses as she draws up beside him.

Clint makes an affronted face, “Excuse me? Is it illegal to have a good morning?” He waves the box of pancake mix in front of her and jumps when she promptly smacks it out of his hand. Bruce bites his lip to keep from laughing as the thing hits the floor and explodes, sending creamy-white powder poofing up into the air. He wants to laugh because, at the moment, it’s pretty funny, but he refrains from doing so because he knows it’s about to get really ugly. The growing look of realization on Clint’s face is proof enough of that. With a muffled sigh, Bruce gets out of bed so he can prepare to play the peacekeeper.

“What the fuck?” Clint snaps, and makes a movement to pick up the smashed box that’s quickly aborted when Natasha shoots him a rather nasty warning glare. “Sorry,” he says sharply, “Did I miss something?”

“Only Bruce screaming for you,” Natasha hisses, and Clint’s face goes ashen in an instant.

“Night terror?” Clint breathes, and Bruce is slowly inching towards them, trying to make his presence known in the hope that they won’t start yelling. “I didn’t-”

“Of course you didn’t know,” Natasha bites out, “But that’s no excuse for sneaking out in the middle of the night! You live here now, Clint, start acting like it!”

“I went to get some pancakes!”

Bruce pushes his hands in between them, “Stop,” he orders, and they both grow silent. Natasha’s eyes are blazing, dangerous, and Clint still stands tall in the face of them, unrelenting. “I’m not upset,” he tells Natasha, and she narrows her eyes in disbelief. Clint starts to brighten until Bruce adds, “Just . . . Disappointed.”
It’s rather unsettling how quickly Clint withers under that word, like the guilt is physically crashing down on him. “Bruce,” he starts, falters, “I-”

Bruce swallows, “Natasha’s right though. You can’t . . . Clint, do you even want this?”

Clint stiffens, “What kind of question is that? I’m the one who - I made this,” he waves a hand between the three of them, “what it is! Neither of you would be here without me! Of course I want this!”

“Then start acting like it,” Natasha growls. “Be there when we wake up. Sleep in the same bed with us. It’s not that hard, Clint. I can get you a dictionary if you’re unsure of what the word ‘commitment’ actually means.”

Clint reels as if he’s been slapped, “That’s rich, coming from the one who ran out on us.”

“I came back!”

“Stop!” Bruce shouts, proud when they both fall quiet, startled at his raised voice. “Please, just stop.”

Natasha grits her teeth, “This wouldn’t even be an issue if-”

“Don’t even start,” Clint interjects. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Really?” Natasha sneers.

Bruce groans and tries to shove them apart again, to little avail.

“You have no idea,” Clint repeats. “Everything I’ve ever worked for has eventually been ripped away from me.” He rubs at his left wrist as he speaks, thumb pressing into the pale scar there. “So forgive me for being wary about getting too comfortable here. Especially since this is something that’s already fallen through once before.”

“You can’t let that go, can you,” Natasha says, and Bruce’s eyes widen as he notices the subtle crack and tremble in her voice. “I’m tired of trying to prove that I’m not leaving, especially when you’re the one who keeps trying to do just that.”

“I’m not trying to leave!” Clint snarls. “I just need to have a place to run to! That’s what Steve’s apartment was for me, a place to go when I started to freak out!” He inhales sharply, harshly, before he continues, “I’ve never had a permanent place to live, Nat, let alone the idea of people around me who gave enough of a shit about me to stay. Or let me stay. Do you know that every time I ended up in a new foster home I asked my foster parents for a racecar bed? Somehow I thought that if they cared about me enough to spend money on something like that for me then they’d eventually love me enough to keep me. I never got a racecar bed.”

Natasha doesn’t reply for a long moment, instead watching Clint with a calculating gaze. “This isn’t the same thing,” she says finally.

Clint scoffs, “Isn’t it?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Natasha hisses. “Because I swear to god if you’re going to bring up that shit from three years ago again I’m-”

“The shit three years ago wouldn’t matter so much to me if you actually said ‘I love you’ once in awhile!” Clint cuts her off, and the room grows cold.
Bruce’s eyes widen as Clint’s words settle between the three of them, weighed down with startling truth. He racks his mind for an instance to prove Clint wrong, maybe even something that was said when Clint wasn’t there, but he falls short and he feels a lump rise in his throat as he realizes the brutal truth.

Natasha has never told them she loves them. Not once. Sometimes, Bruce remembers, she’ll give them a nod when he or Clint says it, or she’ll utter something like, “Same,” or “Me, too,” but she’s never actually said the three words herself. Bruce wants to tell Clint that he doesn’t need a confirmation through words, that Natasha’s actions alone are enough. Like how she helps him make lunch before he goes to work, their shoulders bumping together in the kitchen. Or how she stays with him through his worst nightmares and night terrors, making sure he doesn’t hurt himself and calming him down when it’s over. Or simply how close she tends to sit when they have nothing better to do than curl up on the couch together and read. But he knows it won’t do any good, because Clint is the sort of person who seeks confirmation, who needs to be told just as much as shown. And besides, although Bruce is sure that Natasha loves them, as the reality that she’s never told them so sinks in the uncomfortable feeling of doubt follows close behind.

“I-” Natasha tries to explain, but she can’t find the words. Her posture is defensive, arms clenched at her sides like she’s expecting a fight. Bruce waits, wondering if she’ll say it just to prove Clint wrong. He almost wants her to, even though the words would be bitter and forced because it’s supposed to be something people say naturally. In the end she doesn’t say anything.

Clint’s gaze shutters as Natasha fails to reply, and he bends to pick the battered box of pancake mix off the floor. “That’s okay,” he mutters coldly, “It’s not like I haven’t been let down like this before.” He stalks towards the door and Natasha reaches for him, falling short as he brushes past her with a stiff shrug of his shoulders.

“Clint-” she starts again, but Clint’s already gone, the door slamming behind him. Concerned, Bruce starts to follow until Natasha catches him by the arm, holding him back. “Please don’t go,” she whispers, and Bruce freezes at the sound of the words, the actual plea in them.

“If someone doesn’t bring him back he might not return at all,” Bruce says quietly, but Natasha shakes her head.

“Stay,” she pleads.

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

Thor doesn’t understand the difference between empty rooms and an empty world. He knows, because he’s been told, that as a human being he’s supposed to care about the whole world. He’s meant to tear up at heartbreaking pictures of events that happened in other countries to people he’ll never know. He’s meant to feel the weight of what others before him have done, both good and bad, and bear it. He’s meant to take care not to overstep the boundaries placed around him, to act accordingly so that he does not reflect badly on those around him.

The reality is that he doesn’t really care. He still feels a pang of grief when being shown photos of terrible things he never witnessed, but that’s human nature. He still stands and bears what his family had done, has done, on his shoulders, though he’s unsure whether to feel pride or shame from it. He’s careful not to harm others around him with either actions or words, but these are all second nature by now. Almost instinctual but not quite.

Instinct is the gnawing ache in his gut when he wakes up in an apartment where he’s the sole occupant. Instinct is how he checks every room in the mornings on the off chance that he’s not as alone as he thinks. But the rooms are empty, the apartment is empty, the world is empty. If the world
is something he is meant to care about, then it should only consist of the people he cares about. Or at least that’s how it goes in his head.

And in reality, Thor’s world filled with people is very small.

So he leans a little more on Jane and hopes she won’t leave him, too. He hopes she can hold up his weight and his troubles and problems when he can’t do it himself. It’s a selfish thing to hope for, so he doesn’t do more than that.

He doesn’t ask her to stay.

With every day that passes after Tony moves out the gaps and spaces in the apartment grow colder, more noticeable, and Thor shies away from them.

“It’s quiet in here,” Jane remarks eventually, and Thor shrugs.

“If you came by in the mornings you would say differently,” he hums, “Chick and Duck tend to cause quite a ruckus.”

They both take a moment to look at the aforementioned animals, specifically focusing attention on Chick who by now should really be renamed Fat Rooster. Jane takes an extra moment to stare at the bird before turning back to Thor, concern in her gaze. “Isn’t it lonely here?”

Thor flashes her a smile. “Lonely? Nay. My friends live just across the hall and the street. Plus I have the mighty Chick and Duck to keep me company,” he pointedly pats Duck on the back as it waddles past, and Duck lets out an agreeing quack.

“Thor,” Jane says softly, and Thor wilts a little.

“I have to make sure he has a place to return to,” Thor whispers, “If he comes back.”

It takes a second, a second too long, for Thor to realize what he’s said. Jane’s eyes widen a moment before Thor puts a hand over his mouth. His shoulders slump and he closes his eyes, eyebrows furrowing together with the anguish he’s trying not to express. “Oh, Thor,” Jane murmurs. She gently pries his hand away from his face so she can wrap her arms around his neck. Thor presses his cheek against the top of her head, his eyes still squeezed shut, and holds her close.

If.

Before it had always been when. When Loki comes back. When Darcy comes home. When the apartment isn’t so empty. When their phone calls are answered. Except they’ve both known for awhile that there might not be a when. Thor’s known it since the moment Loki left and the moment he promised he would keep his word not to follow. Because even though it is Loki who claims to be overshadowed, the shadow really only falls on the ones who are left behind. While Thor will always be more outspoken, more outgoing, he’s the one who’s chasing shadows.

And unfortunately, shadows can never be caught. Children will believe that standing and stomping on a shadow will pin it down until the moment the shadow bearer moves, slipping away and taking their shadow with them.

Thor hasn’t been a child for a long, long time.

So the Whens slowly fade into Ifs as Thor finds the shadows of Loki slipping through his fingers.

OoOoOoOoOoO
Clint bangs on Steve and Tony’s door until his fist hurts. It isn’t until he’s already slumped in the hallway that he remembers the date. Screw being rude, if they’re not going to be home all day he’ll let himself in. He does still have his key after all.

When he enters the apartment his eyes linger for a moment on the calendar pinned to wall above the sink. December second. There’re still signs of that morning’s activities throughout the apartment. Ties are laid out on the back of the sofa, stale coffee still sits in its pot on the counter, and there’re a few sad looking flower petals on the carpet near the door. Clint hesitates in the doorway, feeling like he’s intruding on a private event even though no one’s there. He wonders what time they left, if Bucky and Sharon accompanied them this year, and if Tony freaked out about being asked to come along for the first time. Really, though, Clint knows it’s not really any of his business, so he waves away his reluctance to intrude on the empty apartment and stalks towards his old room.

It only took a week for Tony to convert Clint’s former space into a makeshift workshop. The floor has been stripped of carpet, which Clint knew would happen anyways because when they took his bed out there had been some really odd stains underneath that had apparently been there since Steve’s grandmother had owned the apartment. A broad work bench sits along one entire wall, littered with tangled wires and bits of machinery Clint doesn’t even want to know about, although he’s pretty sure that the thing sitting in the corner is some sort of sentient radio, considering that when he enters it starts playing music and beeping ominously. Clint lays a hand on the thing and it quiets with a contented sounding chirp.

A part of him wishes that his bed was still here, untouched, that his room was still here as a safe place to run to. But as he looks around the temporary workspace Tony has created (and is that the remains of the Ms. Pacman game by the window?) he realizes that this fits, and works, a whole lot better. His room had been an isolated little space set apart from the rest of Steve’s apartment, but Tony’s workshop feels more like a missing part of a puzzle. As he stands there he notices how natural the whole place’s atmosphere is, despite how different it is from the other rooms. Clint’s space had been an other, an outlier in Steve’s home despite how welcome he had, and always would feel there. It wasn’t permanent. And while Clint is certain that Tony’s little workshop isn’t a permanent fixture either, he’s just as certain that Tony himself is.

He doubts Tony knows that in the same way he realizes he doubts that he himself can find a permanent space across the street with Bruce and Natasha. And isn’t there a saying, he thinks, about viewing something from the outside and focusing on the whole rather than the pieces in it? Maybe he’s just been looking too hard at the individual trees rather than appreciating the forest, noticing the snags in their bark and the twists in their branches and roots rather than appreciating the fact that together they fit and make something better than any singular, raggedy tree could ever be alone.

So Natasha hasn’t said she loves them. So what? When has Natasha ever been a words over actions person? And so he was painfully absent when Bruce needed him this morning, that doesn’t mean he can’t make up for it by being there in the future. Because that’s what he plans to do, right? To be there?

He has his phone in his hand before the thought actually crosses his mind to call, and he lifts it to his ear, half afraid no one will answer.

“We made the pancakes,” Bruce says as soon as he picks up the phone, and Clint lets himself tilt back against the nearest wall in relief, one hand swiping over his face as he releases a weary, nervous laugh. “But you didn’t get any syrup,” Bruce goes on.

“Sorry,” Clint murmurs, “I’ll pick some up on my way home.”

He hears Bruce’s shallow, surprised intake of breath and can’t help but smile. “Yeah, okay,” Bruce
all but chokes out.

*Home.*

**OoOoOoOoO**

Previously, December second had always been a quiet, solitary affair. Even the first year, when Bucky had accompanied him, Steve had stood in front of Peggy’s grave alone while his friend hung back. This year is exponentially different, if only by the fact that Steve finds himself surrounded by people he loves when he enters the too-quiet graveyard.

Bucky walks ahead with an almost trot-like gait to his step, his hands in his pockets and his face tilted up towards the dull December sun. Sharon has an arm linked with his, chatting to him as they make their way between rows of graves as easily as if they’re perusing through aisles at a grocery store. Steve, currently, can’t figure out what to do with his hands. Whenever he’d come to Peggy’s grave before he’d brought flowers. This time was no different except in the way that Tony had insisted on carrying the bouquet. So Steve fidgets a bit as they draw closer to their destination, slipping his hands in and out of his pockets as he tries not to feel so nervous about something he’s done before.

“Hey, I’m the one who should be freaking out here,” Tony says from where he walks at Steve’s side, flowers clutched tightly in one hand. “It’s like going to meet the parents except, uh, not? Okay that was a terrible metaphor and now I really am freaking out.” He holds up his free hand in a way that’s more of a demand than an invitation and Steve can’t help but laugh as he takes it.

“Peggy will be glad you came,” he smiles.

Ahead of them Sharon and Bucky have already reached the grave and are clearing some dead leaves from around it. Bucky’s having a full one-sided conversation with the headstone while Sharon looks on with borderline amusement. “And I mean, I was a heroic guy there, Peggy. I saved her from excruciating pain and she still just laughs at me.”

Sharon snorts, “He peed on me, Aunt Peggy, it’s not as great of a feat as it sounds.”

Bucky scowls, “She doesn’t like me, Peggy. If you were here you’d knock some sense into her, right? I mean obviously your amazingly beautiful niece and the world’s most handsome man should date.”

“I think you and your ego are in a fine relationship already,” Sharon says evenly.

They move aside as Steve and Tony join them, and Tony sets the flowers down at the base of the headstone in silence while Steve clears his throat. “Remember when I said I wanted to introduce you to Tony, Peggy?” he starts, and Tony shuffles a little closer to him. Steve chuckles and draws him in with an arm around Tony’s waist. “I know you’re probably thinking it’s about time but-”

“I think you mean ‘About damn time,’” Sharon deadpans.

“Yeah, Peggy would put that damn in there,” Bucky agrees seriously. Tony groans and hides his face against Steve’s shoulder while Steve just grins.

“I think you mean ‘About damn time,’” Sharon deadpans.

“Yeah, Peggy would put that damn in there,” Bucky agrees seriously. Tony groans and hides his face against Steve’s shoulder while Steve just grins.

“About damn time then, I guess,” he continues, “And I know it’s taken me awhile, Peggy, and if you had been here I know you would have kicked my butt by now for being too sentimental, but . . .” He pauses, inhaling deeply as if to assure himself of his own words. Tony looks up as he does so, eyebrows furrowed together in worry. “I’m happy,” Steve says finally. “I really, really am.”
“Me, too,” Tony whispers.

“Same,” Bucky affirms with a salute.

“I’m good here, too,” Sharon adds.

And then Steve laughs, really and truly laughs. His shoulders shake and his breath comes in small, strangled gasps as he laughs for the first time at Peggy Carter’s graveside. He thinks, somewhere in the back of his mind, that if she were here she’d be laughing too.

OoOoOoOoOoO

Clint kicks the door shut behind him when he returns, arms laden with grocery bags containing too many kinds of syrup to count. “I got the normal kind,” he says as he starts to unload the bags on the kitchen counter, “but then I wondered if you guys liked any of the super awesome ones. Like blueberry or strawberry or, hey, they have this honey flavored one? Which I don’t see the point of because, you know, if I wanted honey on pancakes I would put some honey on pancakes but maybe this stuff has less, uh, viscosity? What’s the word for how thick a liquid is? Bruce you’re a science dude what’s.” He stops as he realizes he’s talking to an empty room.

Normally it wouldn’t be so unnerving to become aware of something like that, except that Clint just talked to Bruce on the phone an hour ago. The pancakes are still steaming on a large plate placed on the kitchen table, and the stove is still warm from where they were cooked, so Clint knows that there should be someone here.

He checks the bathroom first, seeing as it is still rather early in the day and group showers are a thing that happens in this apartment, but he comes up empty handed. Similar results are obtained from Bruce’s office and the main bedroom, and a minute later Clint finds himself standing in front of the closed door of the guest bedroom wishing his left hand and wrist were still in a condition to pull back arrows.

When he opens the door, however, he freezes in surprise rather than horror (who could blame him for suspecting the worst considering Natasha’s line of work). The room, which had previously contained a queen sized bed reserved for guests they never had now bore a single twin bed encased in a bright red, plastic, racecar border. Natasha and Bruce are curled up together on top of the bed, snuggled down on the plastic mattress cover that has yet to be removed, and Clint gapes.

“What the hell?” he gasps, and Bruce lifts his head to shoot a pleased smile in Clint’s direction.

“Natasha got it for you,” Bruce says, and Natasha sits up a bit to look Clint defiantly in the eye. There’s a long, heart-stopping pause where they both just stare at each other, Natasha daring him to say something and Clint daring her to explain. Meanwhile, Bruce patiently tries not to scream at the both of them.

“I know why you run away,” Natasha says finally, and Clint stiffens, bracing himself to dispute whatever she has to say. “It’s because you think that leaving behind is easier than being left behind,” Natasha continues. “I . . . I used to think that, too.”

And then it all comes crashing down. Clint bites his lip as her words sink in, swallows hard and rubs a hand over his eyes before he launches himself onto the bed in between her and Bruce. They both yell, startled as he makes space for himself between them, with them, around them, clinging to the both of them in the cramped space of the flashy racecar bed. After he gets himself settled Bruce starts to laugh, a broken breathy sound of relief, and Natasha digs a hand into Clint’s ribs until he’s
laughing as well.

“Do I need to say it?” Natasha whispers once their laughter dies down, a wary smile working its way into the corners of her mouth.

“Nah,” Clint murmurs against her neck, “I’m pretty sure getting me a racecar bed is close enough.”

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

“This is Loki’s phone, I’m not answering because I don’t want to talk to you right now. Leave a message after the beep and I might consider calling you back.”

Jane sighs into the receiver and waits patiently for the tone before saying, “Right then, I’m sure I’m one of the last people you want to hear from but you listen to me right now, Loki. If you don’t call your brother back I’m scared he’s going to break. It’s been four months. He’s worried sick about you. I’m not saying you have to talk to him, or come home, just leave him a message even. Let him know you’re okay. Please. I don’t know what to do for him anymore.”

OoOoOoOoOoO

“Can I have a moment?” Tony asks when they’re getting ready to leave. Steve blinks at him, stunned for a second before he nods, squeezes Tony’s hand, and leaves him alone at the graveside.

For a minute Tony doesn’t know what to say. He must look odd, he thinks, standing in front of a grave belonging to someone he never even knew. “So,” he says, because that’s always a good place to start, “I guess I’m probably not what you expected. Um . . .” He draws off with a nervous cough, hands clenching awkwardly at his sides as he searches for something to say. “I know how lucky I am,” he tries. “Believe me, I know. I’m also well aware of the fact that if you were still here I wouldn’t be where I am today. Well, physically obviously because, uh, I’m standing in front of a grave but also, wow sorry that was rude, also . . . You know what I mean, right?” He swallows, “And I know. Okay? I know that if certain things hadn’t happened, if there wasn’t a headstone here for me to stand in front of, I wouldn’t . . . Steve wouldn’t . . . But that’s okay, right? Because I love him a lot and I really don’t want you to hate me for standing where you should be. From what I know about you you probably wouldn’t. I thought I should get that out there anyways, though.”

He hesitates to say more, feeling as if he’s already said far too much. “I just . . . Thank you, I guess. I know what happened, what you did for him, and if things had been different Steve and I would have never met. So, even though it’s selfish, I just wanted to say that. Thank you.”

Tony only lingers for a moment or two longer before hurrying to catch up with the others, flinging an arm around Steve’s shoulders when he reaches them and kissing him hard.

Steve sputters a bit, surprised. “What was that for?” he asks, because while Tony is a big fan of PDA a kiss with that much gusto in the middle of a graveyard is a little odd even for him.

“Nothing,” Tony smirks, “Just an I Love You Kiss.”

Steve smiles, warm and fond, “I love you, too.”

“Stop being gross!” Bucky yells.

Chapter End Notes
Sorry this chapter took awhile. Busy busy. And if the next chapter takes awhile too feel free to blame Pokemon Conquest.
The One With All The Resolutions

Chapter Summary

It's time to end the year in style.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Somehow it falls to Pepper to gather everyone up for New Years, although it’s actually not that much a mystery how she ends up planning a party at the last minute. It probably went something like this.

Thor mentioned loving New Years “festivities” to Jane who passed the information on to Natasha who suggested to Steve that they all do something as a group for the holiday who in turn gave Tony puppy eyes about coming up with ideas who promptly forgot about it until December 30th and then got down on his knees to plead for help from Pepper.

Yeah. Something like that.

Which is the short version of how Pepper coerces Coulson into letting her rent out the entire coffee shop for a night of glorious festivity insanity.

There are conditions, of course, which Tony pitches an absolute fit about when Pepper tells him. But, really, if he wanted a party with no strings attached then he should have planned one himself. Or at least that’s what Pepper says when she scolds him about it. The first condition is that Coulson will cater the event. Tony’s protests against this are fairly weak seeing as he’s a little scared that Coulson will croissant boomerang him if he says no. Besides, Coulson’s food is actually really good. Tony’s just worried that they’ll be drinking coffee all night instead of champagne and other alcoholic beverages. The second condition is the one Tony is vehemently against, seeing as condition number two is that their downstairs neighbor, Nick Fury, be allowed to attend.

“He always yells at us for how loud we are on movie nights, Pepper,” Tony whines. “The guy won’t even want to go to a party. And if he does go he’s just going to spend it hating us and glaring at me with his one eye!”

Pepper frowns, “Maybe he complains about your noisy movie nights because he’s lonely.”

Tony sputters, “What? He has like six cats why would he be lonely?”

“He has one cat, Tony,” Pepper corrects evenly.

“I think he secretly spies on us. With his spying single eyeball that scares the crap out of me. He spies and he knows all our deepest darkest secrets and he doesn’t laugh at my jokes.”

Pepper raises a thin eyebrow, “None of these are valid reasons not to invite him.”

“Why invite a dude who’s just gonna say no?” Tony points out.

“How do you know what he’s going to say when you won’t even ask him?” Pepper snaps.
And that’s pretty much the end of the matter seeing as ten minutes later finds Tony being shoved down the hallway of the next floor down towards Nick Fury’s door, kicking and screaming as quietly as possible (he is in enemy territory after all). Apparently, however, he’s not nearly quiet enough because the door opens before Pepper even has a chance to knock on it. Tony nearly falls over in an attempt to back up, saved only by Pepper’s firm hand in the collar of his shirt.

Nick Fury, despite whatever bravery Tony claims, is a rather intimidating man to say the least, so Tony’s stiff stance (once he realizes Pepper isn’t going to let him run) and set frown aren’t really fooling anyone. His sass though seems to be in full force despite. “I’d look you in the eye,” Tony says smoothly, “but I’m not sure which one to look in.”

The elbow to the stomach Pepper gives him leaves Tony breathless for a second. Fury barely spares him a glance before focusing on Pepper. “Is this important?” he asks, his tone edging towards bored even though most people would find the sight of Tony Stark doubled over and gasping for air quite comical.

“Tomorrow is New Year’s Eve,” Pepper announces, which is supposed to be Tony’s cue except that Tony is currently wheezing. She pats Tony on the back and pushes him forward again, “And Tony has something to ask you,” she prompts.

Tony coughs and straightens a bit, putting on his best and totally not sarcastic as hell smile. “Yeah. New Years. We-” Pepper pinches his arm and Tony corrects himself with a grumble, “-I . . . Was wondering if you’d be interested in attending our New Year’s Party at Coulson’s coffee shop downstairs.”

Fury’s lip curls in what is probably a smile but is a lot closer to the look a shark gives a seal before it eats it. “And you decided to invite me all by yourself, did you?” he muses.

“Uh, yes?” Tony tries.

Fury lets out an amused an knowing huff, shaking his head, “What, exactly, makes you assume that I don’t already have plans?”

“Couls-” Tony starts, “I mean I was just wondering. Yeah. Something like that.”

It’s blatantly obvious that Tony’s being put up to this, and Nick Fury leans against his doorframe with an expression that clearly shows he knows that full well. “Are you paying for everything?” he inquires after a pause where he stares Tony down in a way that’s not unnerving at all nosiree.

Tony snorts, “What? Of course. As if anyone else would. Why, do I have too serve you hundreds on a platter to get you to come?”

Fury sneers, “No thank you, Stark. I was just making sure that someone with finer tastes than Clint Barton would be picking out the wine list for the evening. I like my drink well matured.”

With that, he closes the door and leaves Tony and Pepper standing in the hallway with matching looks of stunned bemusement on their faces. “That wasn’t an answer!” Tony yells at the door. “Are you coming or not?!”

Pepper shakes her head, “I think he likes you.”

“I think he’s a dick,” Tony mutters. “And if he brings the cat we are going to have words. Angry words, Pepper.”

OoOoOoOoOoOoO
The cat arrives to the party on a throw pillow. No, really. And Tony is not allowed to touch the cat or comment because it’s pretty obvious that Fury did it just to piss him off. Or at least that’s what Pepper says when Tony tries to launch himself at Fury in a manner which will clearly not lead to any sort of exchange of words (fists, however, are another matter). Instead, Tony greets Fury with a stony, “Glad you could make it,” that makes Coulson roll his eyes and Pepper sigh. And Tony says nothing about being forced to invite him because Steve keeps giving him the “You’re such a good guy” look and Tony can’t bear to correct him.

In all honesty, Tony should have taken the cat’s arrival as the first sign that the party was about to go horrendously bad.

The second sign is when Thor and Clint start fighting for no discernable reason.

“You have insulted the mighty house of Odin!” Thor yells, and across the room Tony takes a languid sip of his cocktail because oh yes, this is going to be good.

Clint throws his hands in the air, “I said that I’m surprised that you came here in a clean shirt because all this week you’ve shown up with feathers all over you! That’s not an insult, it’s the truth!”

“It was a claim that I am unkempt!” Thor growls.

“Duh,” Clint affirms, “You live with a couple of freaking birds.”

“And you insult my fine feathered friends,” Thor says through his teeth. “How dare you do such a thing when you are one of their own!”

For a second Clint just stares, mouth open, before he blurts out, “Are you calling me a fucking bird?!”

Thor smirks, “Have you not called yourself a bird in the past, oh man with the eyes of a hawk?”

Clint screeches, literally, grabbing Thor by the front of his shirt as he shouts, “WHO TOLD YOU THAT?!” at the top of his lungs.

This is, of course, when Steve steps in and forces them apart. Tony boos at them all from where he sits, which in turn causes Steve to glare at him and Tony to give his biggest “Who, me?” grin in response. He likes to think that the way Steve frowns at him is more affectionate than annoyed, and he’s not wrong in doing so.

“Children,” Steve says calmly, “we’re supposed to be having a party here, not tearing out each other’s throats for no good reason.”

“Bu- No,” Clint sputters, “No, okay. No. This is a good reason because this freaking space cadet here knows information that no one outside of the people allowed in my pants should know!”

Natasha and Bruce, who are busy talking to Coulson, give Clint matching, very sarcastic salutes at this, which Steve elects to ignore in favor of his own sanity. “Thor-” he starts.

“I only know such things because we are, or were, neighbors. And friends as well, of course. Friends know these things about one another,” Thor explains in a far too casual air. “Just as I know that sometimes Tony calls Steve ‘Baby’ while-”

Steve flushes a furious shade of red, “Stop,” he whispers warningly, and Thor gives him a bewildered smile.
“That’s not really a secret,” Tony says, standing at the sound of his name being drawn into the conversation. He slings an arm around Steve’s shoulders, “We are kinda loud.”

“You’re loud,” Steve hisses. He’s still the color of a tomato, and Tony leans against him with a pleased expression at the sight.

“Can this conversation stop?” Clint pleads, “Because I didn’t need any of those mental images ever. And it’s barely even on topic with what we were talking about.”

“Ah, yes,” Thor agrees, “We were discussing the fact that I know more about my comrades than you are comfortable with.”

Clint glowers, “Wow, no, that’s not what we were talking about at all. And, seriously, you know more about people? I know more about people. I see more shit in a day than you do in a week.”

Thor folds his arms over his chest, clearly amused at this proclamation, “Oh? Prove it.”

“Tony uses lavender shampoo,” Clint snaps.

“Steve takes showers in under five minutes,” Thor counters.

“You still have your old letter jacket from high school.”

“And you still keep ammunition for a weapon you are no longer capable of using.”

“Low blow. I can go lower,” Clint snarls, “Tony and Pepper broke up because he forgot her birthday.”

“Hey!” Tony gasps, outraged, “You’re supposed to deal low blows on one another, not on me!”

“Steve still keeps a gun in the apartment,” Thor bites out.

“Guys,” Steve begs, nervous, “Don’t-” but Tony puts a hand on his shoulder, shaking his head.

Thor and Clint are staring each other down now, practically nose to nose. “You have a stuffed penguin named Hugsie!” Clint declares.

“Once a month you wear women’s underwear because you know your bedfellows like it!” Thor booms.

Natasha proceeds to lead Bruce in a slow, rather astounded round of clapping for that one.

“You-”

“ENOUGH!” Tony screams, causing the whole room to fall silent. “First of all, I don’t care if you guys want to have a contest of who knows more about who. Fine by me. What’s not fine is dragging me into it, and what’s really not fine is dragging Steve into it.” He glances at Steve, who’s fiddling with the sleeves of his sweater with a vaguely upset look about him that makes both Thor and Clint wilt. “So if you’re going to do this you need to do it clean. No digging up shit that obviously isn’t meant to be public information,” He looks at Thor here, seeing as the personal remarks had technically started with him. “No stabbing each other, or any of the rest of us, in the back,” he continues, this time focusing his gaze on Clint.

Clint tilts his head to the side considering, “So if we make it a game . . .”

“Then we can decide who is more knowledgeable in a sport of wit?” Thor finishes.
Tony blinks, “That’s not exactly what I was going for but I guess-”

“Steve’s on my team,” Clint declares, dragging Steve over to stand beside him.

Thor laughs, “It’s only fair that way, former neighbors against each other. Then Tony is on mine.”

“Wha- what-” Steve tries to protest, stalling when Natasha’s hand lands on his shoulder.

“I get to make up the trivia questions,” she announces.

And then everything gets crazy.

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

Natasha takes forever to get the trivia questions ready, even when Bruce and Jane start helping. And really, they should all be mildly concerned that Natasha knows enough about all of them to make a stack of note cards about their weirdest and lesser known little life details. Or at least more concerned than they currently are.

“She better not be bias about this crap just because you sleep with her,” Tony says with a finger pointed in Clint’s direction. “They better be fair questions.”

“Considering that Thor is apparently aware of the fucking codename I used while working with her, I really don’t think they can get more personal or more unfair, to be honest,” Clint mutters.

“So she is a super spy,” Tony whispers, “Tell me the truth, Barton.”

Clint flips him off.

There’s a tension hanging in the air, sharp and noticeable to all of them, and Steve’s shoulders slump under the weight of it. Information that was never meant to be shared (or at least not yet) is out in the open, and the knowledge of it prickles along everyone’s spines as they wait for Natasha to finish compiling the questions. Steve would be more concerned if it weren’t for the fact that Tony was sitting right beside him, leaning against his shoulder as he banters lightheartedly with a less than amused Clint. It’s almost as if he hadn’t even heard what Thor had said about Steve.

“Steve still keeps a gun in the apartment.”

“Tony,” Steve says quietly, and Tony’s attention is on him instantly. “I-”

Tony interrupts him with a hand on Steve’s thigh, warm and reassuring, “Make it your resolution,” he whispers.

Steve blinks, “What?”

“You don’t have to tell me about it right now,” Tony murmurs, “I’m not going to bring it up. But if you want to tell me then make it your New Years resolution. And I’ll listen whenever you want to talk.” Steve stares, too stunned to reply until Tony leans a little closer, eyebrows furrowing together. “Just tell me one thing,” Tony says against the shell of his ear, “Tell me it’s been a long time since you’ve thought about using it.” The nod Steve gives him is slow, and Tony acknowledges it with a tiny smile, “Good.”

It takes a second for Steve to realize it, to run the words through his head again before he comes to the conclusion that Tony didn’t ask if he’d never thought about it, only if he hadn’t considered it recently. He turns this over in his mind a few times, trying to find the words to ask Tony how he’d
known, and he shivers when Tony slips an arm behind him to curl his fingers against Steve’s side.

“You’re going to give yourself a migraine if you keep scrunching your face up like that,” Tony hums. “Also, I’m seriously questioning your intelligence if you thought the guy living with you wouldn’t notice something like a gun in the second drawer of your bedside table. Except I’ve known about it for like two or three years so that’s beside the point.” Tony waves a flippant hand and Steve sighs.

“Tony—”

“Resolution,” Tony insists.

It’s at about that time that Natasha finishes off the questions, which are all written on SHIELD Coffee napkins no less, and marches over to them with Jane and Bruce flanking her as if the questions are a thing to be heavily guarded. Which they are, apparently, because the first thing Clint does upon seeing them is try to slyly sidle up beside Natasha and look over her shoulder, only to be batted away by a very persistent Bruce.

“Bad,” Natasha scolds Clint, who slumps back into the armchair he was previously perched upon with an annoyed groan. “Gentlemen, I have arrived with questions to test your levels of stupidity,” she announces to the rest of them.

Thor stands, “I though this was a match of wit and—”

Tony shushes him, “Sit down before she guts you, man. Stupidity in Natasha terms is genius level intellect to the rest of the world.” Thor doesn’t look very convinced by this, but sits anyways, if only because Natasha is glaring at him in a way that would make most men faint.

Natasha takes a seat across from them in one of the many arm chairs, systematically laying out her stack of napkins face down on the coffee table. “The ones on the left are questions about Steve and Thor for Tony and Clint’s team to answer,” she explains, “And then the ones on the right are the questions about Tony and Clint for Steve and Thor to answer. Pick a napkin and that’s the question you get. Whichever team gets the most questions right is the winner.”

“Simple simple,” Jane adds, hands in the air like balances on a scale.

“A fair game,” Bruce agrees.

Clint gives the three of them a side-eye and mutters, “I swear to god if you guys put weird sex questions in there we will have words.”


With a roll of his eyes Clint puts a finger on the napkin closest to him, “Read away, Vanna White.”

Natasha purses her lips, “I think you mean Alex Trebek.”

“Vanna White just stands there, looks pretty, and touches the squares that light up,” Bruce concurs, “Trebek reads the questions.”

“And those are two totally different shows, by the way,” Natasha inputs.

“Tony and Thor’s darkest secrets for two hundred, Trebek!” Clint snaps, clearly not amused.

Natasha flips the napkin over with a wave of her hand, “What is Thor’s biggest pet peeve?”
Clint jumps to his feet. “Socks!” he exclaims, “Socks with big seams on the toes!”

“Correct,” Natasha grins.

Tony raises an eyebrow in Thor’s direction and Thor shrugs, “I dislike the way they rub against my skin.”

Tony snorts, “Sure. Okay, our turn.” He points to a napkin and Natasha gladly flips it to read aloud.

“What color were the panties Darcy made Clint wear in high school.”

Clint lets out a dismayed shriek while Thor grins and announces, “Black satin with a lace trim.”

“Scarily specific,” Bruce says, “But you are correct.”

“You said no really personal questions, Nat,” Clint whines.

“I promised no questions that involved what wasn’t public information,” Natasha declares. “And considering that Darcy has told everyone that story, that tidbit is definitely not that private.”

Clint groans and flops over the arm of the couch, Steve giving him a sympathetic pat on the back as he goes. “I guess I’ll choose the next question,” Steve says when Clint doesn’t move from his dead fish impression. He motions towards the napkin furthest away from him, which Natasha passes over to Bruce to read.

Bruce clears his throat, “Uh, okay. According to Tony, what phenomena scares the bejeezus out of him?”

“When he can’t remember if he turned on the coffee pot or whether it turned on by itself because he can’t recall if he installed an AI in it during his many nights of inventing with insomnia,” Steve replies without a pause. Tony claps.

“Correct.”

“Our turn,” Thor scowls, flicking a napkin in Natasha’s direction.

“The TV guide was delivered to Steve and Clint’s apartment every week. What was the name on the TV guide?” Natasha reads.

“Ah, an easy inquiry!” Thor says brightly, “The name on the item is Steve Rogers!”

“NO!” Tony shouts, horrified, “It’s-”

“Bzzt,” Natasha buzzes, “Thor already guessed, and the answer is incorrect.”

“But I know it!” Tony complains, “It’s Stove Roodgers.”

“Also incorrect,” Steve grins, “That’s Mrs. Stove Roodgers to you.” Clint raises a hand for a mandatory high-five, which Steve graciously rewards him with.

“Winning!” Clint whoops. Thor narrows his eyes at them, “On the next question!” He smacks a hand down on one of the napkins decisively, “This one. This one.”

OoOoOoOoOoO

“Sooooooooo,” Bucky says over the rim of his glass, “What do you do?”
Across from him Nick Fury sits at one of the small tables near the window, Coulson standing at his shoulder with the cat (throw pillow included) in his arms. Sharon is perched to Bucky’s right, stirring her martini with an amused expression. Slowly, Fury raises a challenging eyebrow. Bucky gives him a mockingly innocent smile in response. “I’m rich beyond your wildest dreams, Barnes,” Fury says coolly.

“Great story,” Bucky muses, “But I’m not impressed.”

“Were you hoping to hear about how I lost my eye? Again?” Fury asks with an alarming level of sereneness in his tone.

Sharon blinks, “You know him?” she whispers to Bucky, surprised.

“Never met him,” Bucky hums, “Right, sir?” Fury responds with a curt nod.

“Mr. Fury owns the entire street this coffee shop sits on,” Coulson chimes in.

“Huh?” Sharon gapes.

“Block,” Fury corrects.

“Trying to keep an eye on all the hooligans in the area?” Bucky smiles.

“If I was attempting to do any such thing I would have purchased the strip of street your building sits on, Barnes,” Fury intones.

Sharon practically inhales her drink through her nose when she laughs.

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

“Ladies,” Natasha says smoothly, “we have a tie. Jane,” she holds out a hand, “the emergency napkins if you’d please.”

Jane, who up until this point had watched the proceedings without comment, produces a completely new stack of napkins from her pocket. “The lightning round,” she announces dramatically.

Clint whoops, “Yes! I am the lightning round master!”

“You?” Tony scoffs, “Don’t even joke, Barton. The speed of my intellect far exceeds yours.”


Clint shifts in his seat, eyeing Tony with a sudden scheming look about him. “Really now, Stark? Wanna bet?”

“A hundred sound good?” Tony jeers, rubbing his hands together.

“You’re on,” Clint accepts.

Natasha barely refrains from sighing. She takes the new set of napkins from Jane. “Calm down, boys, keep your pants on.” Clint frowns and Tony reclines back where he sits, two hundred dollar bills already in one hand that he teasingly waves about a few inches away from Clint’s nose. “Thirty seconds to answer as many questions as possible,” Natasha explains. “Who wants to go first?”

“We shall take the challenge,” Thor booms, smacking his open palm down on the table. “Proceed.”
Bruce whips out a stopwatch while Natasha splits her deck of napkins in half. “Thirty seconds starting now,” she hums. “And go. What was Steve’s nickname in the army?”

“Star Spangled Man With A Plan!” Tony exclaims instantly, pumping his fists in the air.

“Correct. Clint claims that this is his favorite movie-”


“- But his favorite movie is actually-”

“Ferris Bueller’s Day Off,” Thor finishes.

“Correct,” Natasha praises. Clint sinks a bit lower in his seat. “Steve makes apple pies but his favorite pie filling is . . .”

“Blueberries. But he makes more apple pies because they’re my favorite,” Tony says gleefully. Steve ducks his head and mumbles something under his breath that makes Tony chuckle.

“Correct again,” Natasha smirks. “Last question. Clint has slippers with what on them?”

Thor opens his mouth and shuts it again, “. . . Bunnies?” he hedges just as Natasha proclaims, “Time’s up.”

Clint shouts and leaps to his feet, “WRONG! It’s monkeys! Monkey slippers! In your face, Stark!”

Tony frowns, “Don’t get too ahead of yourself there, you haven’t even played the lightning round yet.”

Natasha shoos Clint back into his seat, “He’s right. Four for Tony and Thor’s team. You guys are up next. Ready?”

“Duh,” Clint beams.

Bruce clicks the stopwatch, “Thirty seconds starting now.”

“What is Thor’s favorite food?” Natasha asks, breathlessly fast.

“Poptarts,” Clint replies easily.

Natasha nods, “Correct. The Stark residence had a butler when Tony was young. His name was?”

“Jarvis,” Steve answers, smiling slightly.

“Correct. Thor had an imaginary friend when he was six. What was that friend’s species?”

Clint fumbles for a second, “Toa- no, frog! It was a frog!”

“Correct again.”

Tony glances at Thor incredulously, “A frog? Really?”

“They have mighty voices,” Thor states.

“Fifteen seconds left,” Natasha warns, “Next question. What is Tony’s job?”

Steve sits forward a little, mouth open to answer before he pauses, eyebrows furrowing together, “He
Invents things... Is there another title for it besides an inventor?” Beside him Tony fidgets warily, putting an almost unnoticeable space between him and Steve on the sofa.

Clint flails at him, “No no, he like, he’s a businessman too. A CEO? No that’s not right.”

“Eight seconds,” Natasha inputs.

“He works with math and science,” Clint goes on, “He trans...”

Tony points, “If you’re going for transvestite you’re way off.”

“Transpon... Transponster!” Clint exclaims.

Steve balks, “What? That’s not even a word!”

“Time,” Natasha declares smoothly. “And Clint, that is incorrect.”

Clint howls in dismay and proceeds to fall to the floor. Tony grins from ear to ear, “Time to pay the piper, Barton. A hundred bucks. Fork it over.” Clint just whines petulantly into the café carpet.

At some point, Bucky seems to have gathered a crowd.

That point was probably somewhere between having a semi-civilized discussion with Nick Fury and challenging him to beer pong.

Currently, Bucky is questioning his own fairly decent (in Natasha’s words) and amazing (in his own words) marksman skills (assassin, marksman, same shit) because he has yet to land more than one ball in any of Fury’s cups. Fury, however, has succeeded in eliminating all of Bucky’s cups so that only one remains full and standing. Sharon looks on with feigned sympathy.

“I hope you’re not driving tonight,” she says airily, “because Fury is going to make you chug that last cup.”

Bucky snorts, “He has to get the ball in first. Besides, I am a master-”

“A master moron?” Sharon supplies.

“A master of beer pong,” Bucky insists. “The only person who has ever beat me is Steve, which he did on sheer ‘I Will Forever Be Sober’ power.”

Sharon chuckles, “Now that I believe.”

“College must have been the highlight of your pathetic life,” Fury surmises from across the table. He’s rolling his Ping-Pong ball between the heels of his palms, watching Bucky with a calculating eye.

Bucky scowls, “Hell yeah it was. Now throw the ball so I can die in peace.” He turns to Sharon with a bemused look, “By the way, shouldn’t we be questioning the rather scary accuracy this guy has? I mean I thought lacking an eye meant your aim and depth perception were crap.”

Fury smiles wryly, “You know what also makes your aim and depth perception crap, Barnes? Alcohol.” He flicks his wrist, an almost lazy motion, and Bucky sighs as he watches the ball hit the table once and bounce straight into his last cup.
“My life,” Bucky relents ambiguously as he plucks the ball out of the drink.

OoOoOooOoOo

Tony slinks away into the more crowded areas of the party before Steve has a chance to bring it up. He sneaks past Bruce, who’s trying to carry three drinks back to the sofa at once, past where Thor and Jane are talking in low voices as the clock slowly ticks closer to midnight, past Coulson and Fury who are gloating over a tipsy looking Bucky, and finally edges his way up to Pepper’s side at the far end of the room.

Pepper raises an eyebrow when he approaches, instantly on alert. “What happened?” she asks as calmly as possible, and Tony slumps into the seat beside her with a groan.

“I think Steve’s realized,” Tony whispers, voice so low that Pepper barely hears him over the music and chatter filling the coffee house.

“Realized what?”

The look Tony gives her is heartbreaking, eyes wide and downcast as he hunches into himself a bit, like he’s trying to disappear. “That I haven’t . . . Pepper, I haven’t told him about my work. Or, more specifically, what my job used to be . . . Before.”

Pepper inhales, “Tony-”

“Don’t scold me,” Tony pleads, “You know why I haven’t told him. It’s the last thing I ever wanted to explain. ‘Oh hey, Steve, I’m a totally fuck up and I used to design weapons for a living, weapons which, due to,’” he hesitates until Pepper places a hand own his shoulder, “Well, you know how the story goes, Pep. I’ll tell him about Obie’s under the table deals, and I won’t even have to elaborate. Steve’s not stupid, he’ll understand what sort of hands my weapons fell into. He’ll understand what they . . . What I did to him.”

“Tony, it wasn’t your fault,” Pepper soothes, squeezing his shoulder. She’s said it a hundred times before, a thousand maybe. She hopes one of these days Tony will actually believe her. “And he’ll tell you the same,” she adds after some thought.

“Or he’ll kick me out,” Tony mutters. “I might as well have been holding the gun with my own hand, Pep, I-”

Pepper cuts him off with a hand over his mouth, “Don’t even finish that sentence, Tony Stark,” she hisses, “You are many things, but a murderer isn’t one of them. Now answer me so that you can remind yourself of the truth. Did you know about Obie’s underhanded dealings?”

“No,” Tony mumbles against her hand.

“And did you personally design any weapons intended to harm American citizens?”

“No, but-”

“Shut up,” Pepper snaps. “Last question. How old were you when all this happened?”

“Twenty-six? Twenty-seven?” Tony guesses, because he honestly can’t remember.

“Close enough,” Pepper says with a quirk of a smile forming in the corners of her mouth. “You’d only been in charge of the company for a few years. Obadiah didn’t expect you to catch on at such a young age, but you did. And he’d been selling Stark weapons out long before you took over. It’s not
your fault.”

Tony nods, clearly still unconvinced, but Pepper removes her hand all the same. “I still have to tell him,” he reminds her.

“They then do so, but try not to wallow in your own self pity when you do so,” Pepper advises.

Tony laughs.

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

They start making resolutions a half hour before midnight. Steve already has his, but he tells everyone he resolves to impress his volunteer firefighter trainer as a more public resolution.

“I resolve to not make any more bets with Tony,” Clint decides after awhile.

“That’s more of a common sense thing than a resolution,” Bruce says, “but sure. And I guess I’ll resolve to stop being so lazy about grading my students’ tests.”

Natasha leans over his shoulder with a knowing smirk, “You mean you’ll stop using scantrons?”

Bruce laughs, “No. I mean I’ll start actually hand feeding the scantrons into the machine myself instead of having one of the teaching assistants do it. Any resolutions, Natasha?”

Natasha hums, “Not any new ones. Just the usual.”

“Is the usual ‘Make everyone’s lives miserable’?” Bucky mumbles into his drink.

“Yes.”

Bucky rolls his eyes, “Well my resolution is to get as many women’s numbers as possible, since we’re going for borderline crazy and stupid here.”

“I guess my resolution is to not give Bucky my number,” Sharon speaks up.

“I already have your number,” Bucky says, “And, in case you haven’t noticed, I haven’t hit on you in almost a month. So there.”

“Trying to prove a point?” Sharon inquires.

“Trying to respect yours,” Bucky shoots back.

Jane clears her throat before an awkward silence can settle around the group, “Er, I have a resolution too, I guess. I want to get published in Scientific America.”

Tony leans over the table to clink his glass against hers, “Now that’s an actual resolution. What was yours from last year, Clint? To be more awesome?” Clint sticks his tongue out and Tony laughs. “Whatever, my resolution is to make it through the year. It’s simple.”

“A fine resolution!” Thor agrees, smashing his tumbler against Tony’s hard enough that for a moment Tony’s sure he’s about to have wine and bits of glass all down his front. “I have a resolution to make as well!” Thor continues while Tony checks his glass for cracks. “I wish to for Duck and Chick to sire a beautiful offspring!”

Clint inhales part of his beer when he snorts out a laugh. “It’s not a birthday wish, Thor,” he chokes.
Jane shushes him with a frantic wave of her hand before turning back to Thor, “That’s a nice resolution, Thor, but, uh, I don’t think chickens and waterfowl can breed . . .”

The rest of the group starts to crowd around Thor in an attempt to explain, while Tony leans against Steve’s side, hand over his face as he tries to contain his own hiccupping laughter. “You know,” he says when he has his breath back, “I do have a real resolution.”

Steve blinks, “Oh?”

“A serious one,” Tony insists. “Since I insisted you make a pretty serious one yourself. So, uh . . . I’m going to resolve to tell you about my job.”

“I already know about your job, Tony,” Steve says, “You invent things.”

“That’s what I do now,” Tony corrects, “But I’m going to tell you about, well, about what I used to do. What I used to invent.” He puts a finger to Steve’s lips before Steve can question him. “Nuh-uh, not right this second. Maybe not even this week, or this month. Soon, though, I promise.”

When it strikes midnight everyone cheers, party hats are tossed into the air, noise makers and air horns are blown, and confetti is let loose from god knows where.

“Somebody kiss me, somebody kiss me!” Clint begs, jumping up and down between Natasha and Bruce as the final countdown ends, earning a kiss on the cheek from both of them simultaneously.

“That was the longest year of my life,” Tony sighs against Steve’s mouth.

“Good long or bad long?” Steve smiles.

“A little of both,” Tony admits. “But I do have to say that the last six or so months were my favorite.”

In the midst of the lively, loud, joyful celebrating a phone goes off, ringing and buzzing in a pocket. It almost goes unnoticed, unanswered until Thor’s hand catches against it on the last ring, fingers fumbling.

“Hello?” he says into the receiver over the roar and roil of noise around him, the last seconds of the old year already starting to bleed into the new.

“Happy New Year, brother.”

Click.

Thor stands there for a minute, a reply on the tip of his tongue that won’t be heard because the caller has already hung up. He drops his phone back into his pocket, free hand scrubbing once, twice over his eyes before he returns to celebrating with the rest of his friends, his voice suddenly twice as loud, and his eyes twice as bright as he sweeps Jane into his embrace.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this one took so long. I had a lot of work shifts this week + a mild Motorcity obsession. I apologize.
Confessions are made, some deep rooted secrets are revealed, and Thor buys a bike with lighting bolts on it.

Tony knows the probability of it, has been running the numbers over and over in his head practically since the day he and Steve met. He knows that the odds against him are high, and he staggers under the weight of them, the weight of knowing what his mistakes most likely brought about. It’s an almost crippling knowledge. And he can run the numbers again, a hundred more times, a thousand, and nothing would change what was done and has been done. If he could build a time machine, he would, take it back half a dozen years and smack his past self upside the head for being so blind.

“Obie’s not your friend,” he’d say to himself. “He’s double crossing you. Quit kissing his ass and realize it.”

Except that Obadiah Stane had been going behind a Stark’s back for longer than Tony had been in charge of the company. He wonders, sometimes, if Howard had known, or if he’d been as ignorant if Tony had been.

A sinking, sick and guilty part of him thinks that Howard might have been letting Obie’s actions slide.

But Tony was not his father. He took and tore down every last bit of what the weapons manufacturing of Stark Enterprises used to be, decimating it until all he had left was his own money to fix it with, to fix the world with. His name is no longer branded on missiles, handguns, bullets, or tanks. He’s wiped the Stark logo off of almost everything, selling the bits and pieces he had left of his company to those who could use it.

Stark batteries are common in most flashlights now. Stark Enterprises creates the best memory cards for everything from cell phones to computers. Tony himself designs the best and brightest new features for most of Apple’s products.

He’s still working on that time machine. Or, rather, he’s sort of waiting for it to show up outside the apartment making a VWORP VWORP noise because now that Tony Stark actually finds that he has a life outside of the workshop, he’s not too inclined to spending the time it would make to create a time machine. These days he finds enough to be busy with at it is.

Busy working. Busy going to meetings with Pepper and what’s left of his company. Busy relaxing at SHIELD Coffee. Busy planning and attending movie nights with his friends. Busy soaking up every minute of Steve’s free time as he can. And now that he actually lives with Steve, busy making sure he remembers to use a freaking coaster for his drinks is pretty much at the top of his daily schedule.

The day Steve found a water ring on his kitchen table was not one to be forgotten or taken lightly, and Tony would rather not have to sit through the lecture about how bad it is for any sort of liquid to be on a classic oak table ever again. Although the part after that where he’d said, “Any liquid?” like the sarcastic turd he is and Steve had tackled him down onto the table had been a lot of fun.
He’s too busy for time machines these days, too busy to dwell on his past mistakes more than he needs to, and too busy to keep clinging to his guilt about something he can’t fix.

Tony Stark has calculated the chances too many times to count, and the odds are ultimately against him every time.

64.3%

It doesn’t take much to burn the number into his mind, to light it up in flashing neon to remind himself every time he catches Steve looking distant (it happens less and less these days), or when the winters grow a little chillier and Steve rubs an absent hand over his right shoulder.

Pepper says that it doesn’t matter, that everyone makes mistakes, but Tony knows better. Yes, everyone makes mistakes, everyone at some point will place their trust in the wrong person, but the fact that Tony’s mistakes and Tony’s misplaced trust had the results that they did are not to be ignored. Or at least that’s how Tony sees it.

Before he moved out of the mansion he made a tally mark on the office wall for every point in the 64.3%.

64.3% of enemy soldiers had been in possession of Stark made weapons before Tony had discovered what Obie was doing.

If 64.3% of those soldiers each killed just one American soldier . . .

When he’d finished the entire wall had been filled with tally marks, inked in red and, when the red marker had run out, in black.

He burns that image into his mind as well.

OoOooOoOooOooOoOoO

Eventually, Thor makes a new resolution. This is, of course, after Jane sits him down and carefully diagrams why Chick and Duck aren’t going to create mutant-hybrid babies. Although Thor seems mildly unconvinced, he does decide that his previous resolution wasn’t the wisest one.

Which is exactly why he slams a stack of catalogs down on the table they’re all sitting around at SHIELD Coffee one morning.

“I wish to acquire one of these!” he proclaims to everyone in the vicinity.

Tony picks up the topmost catalogue by the corner of its cover, holding it at arms length like the thing is going to bite him. “This is a bike magazine,” he deadpans.

“Aye.”

“You want a bike,” Tony says, disbelief clear in his tone.

“No, he wants a bunch of bike magazines, moron,” Clint snorts.

“Tony is correct,” Thor affirms, missing the point of Clint’s sarcasm entirely, “I would like to own a bicycle.”

For a moment they all just stare at him, each contemplating the ridiculousness of Thor riding a bicycle. Tony, especially, makes sure that the one in his imagination is decked out in pinks with glittery tassels and a white wicker basket. Everyone else’s visions are not that much different, not
even Jane’s. Although, Jane is the one to voice aloud what they’re all thinking. “You don’t want a pink one, right?” she asks, if only because someone had to.

Thor raises an eyebrow, “I was hoping for a more crimson hue, but I am not opposed to your suggestion.”

Steve pinches the bridge of his nose, “It wasn’t a suggestion, Thor,” he says calmly. The slight tremble in his shoulders, however, betrays that he’s trying his hardest not to laugh.

“I’d definitely suggest it,” Tony grins, huffing when Steve nudges him in the side.

“Black is more his color,” Natasha muses from her seat, feet propped up in Bruce’s lap while Clint is still off daydreaming about Thor and pink bicycles on her other side.

“You think black is everyone’s color,” Jane retorts.

Natasha gestures around the table, “Imagine all the guys here in three piece suits and you’ll understand why.”

“Point,” Jane concedes. She turns back to Thor then, “So, a red bike? Any specific type of bike you’re interested in?”

Thor blinks, “There are different types of bicycles?”

Clint puts his head in his hands, “If you don’t even know what you want why are we even talking about this? Yes, there are different types of bikes, just like there are different types of horses or cars. There’s ones for mountain biking, racing, built for two-”

Jane interrupts Clint with a wave of her hand, “Ignore him. What did you want to use the bike for, Thor?”

Thor frowns, “I had not given much thought to the matter.”

“Rich kids,” Tony grumbles into his coffee.

“You’re a rich kid,” Bruce reminds absently, rifling through Thor’s bicycle magazines with thinly veiled interest.

“True,” Tony admits, “But I don’t buy things I don’t need.”

“Like that snow cone maker you came home with last week,” Steve muses, “or the special hangers for expensive suits, or that coffee maker that makes ‘Real Brazilian Coffee. Taste the rainforest.’ And don’t forget the collectors box set of every episode of Star Trek ever made even though you already own a similar set that was made only two years prior to the new one.”

“Hey,” Tony grumbles, “No one asked you. I needed all those things. They’re very important and awesome things that I totally needed.” Steve just grins in response.

Bruce hands Thor a pen and his magazines, “Don’t listen to Tony. If you want a bike then you can buy a bike. Circle the ones you like and decide from there.”

Thor takes the pen and starts circling bikes enthusiastically. “And you will accompany me to purchase one, fair friend?”

Bruce balks, “Uh . . .”
Clint leans around Natasha to slap a hand over Bruce’s mouth, “Yes, he will. And I will too.” He glares at Bruce when he tries to protest, “Dude, hush. Picture Thor riding a bike, hold that image in your mind, and try and tell me it won’t be hysterical. Just try.”

“I’ll go, too,” Jane declares. “I bought a bike to ride to work on a few months ago. I know the best shops to look for one without it being insanely overpriced.”

Tony raises his eyes to the ceiling, bemused, “There are things that are overpriced? Kidding,” he adds when he sees Steve’s eyes narrow, “Seriously, kidding. Don’t look at me like that. That’s the ‘You said something dumb so we’re not having sex tonight look.’ There it is again! Steeeeeeevveeeeee,” Tony whines.

“Are there any sorts of bicycles that come with four wheels?” Thor says over Tony’s panicked protesting.


Tony is a light sleeper. He’s always drifting on the edge between unconsciousness and waking, slipping in and out of dreams so that when an idea sparks fresh in his mind he can sit up and write it down. Usually they’re not very good ideas, as ideas thought up in the middle of the night tend to stray towards complete nonsense. The notepad Tony keeps next to his bed is littered with such nonsense ideas, sketched out designs of everything from rocket boots to baseball hats with mini fridges in the cap. Yeah, that last one is Tony’s personal favorite on the list of Shit That Makes No Sense.

He sleeps even lighter after he starts living with Steve, aware of every movement on the mattress, every twitch and roll of Steve’s body next to his in the hours between dusk and dawn. His senses are on alert while he sleeps, tense and waiting to react just in case.

Steve has only had two nightmares since Tony moved in a couple months ago, but Tony knows without asking that he used to have them more often.

They’re not violent, like Bruce’s night terrors (when Tony goes to Natasha for advice he doesn’t ask much about those), and when Steve dreams of the war he doesn’t fight it, doesn’t lash out at enemies long gone, and doesn’t reach to halt bullets that he’s years too late to stop.

Tonight, Tony sits up less than five seconds after Steve’s breath hitches, lungs starting to drag in air like he can’t get enough, sharp, ragged breaths. He knows that waking Steve is borderline dangerous (Bucky warned him when they first met, showing off a bruise under his jaw where Steve had instinctively clocked him one in his sleep), but he also knows that leaving him alone is probably worse. Carefully, he peels the blankets back from Steve’s body, wiping the sweat starting to form on his brow with a free hand. “Okay,” he whispers, pushing Steve’s hair back from his forehead, slow, cautious, gentle, “It’s okay.”

This is the part he knows how to do, how to sit at Steve’s side and pull Steve’s head into his lap, how to take his hand and hold on tight as he folds the other over Steve’s chest, fingers splayed out over a rapidly beating heart. “It’s okay,” he repeats, “It’s okay,” over and over again because what else is he supposed to say? He slides a hand under the collar of Steve’s shirt when Steve’s back arches off the bed, presses his palm over the scar on Steve’s right shoulder as if he can block the bullet that left the mark. “It’s okay.”

He almost hates the moment when Steve’s eyes finally snap open. It’s the panic there that unnerves
him more than anything, the confusion as Steve looks around the room like he doesn’t recognize it, looks at Tony like he doesn’t recognize him until he blinks and his eyes clear. That’s the moment Tony always moves away, scoots back to his side of the mattress and waits until Steve’s breathing evens and his muscles uncoil. “Was it bad?” he asks in the darkness, he always asks. It’s better to ask than to let Steve keep it bottled up inside him.

Steve shakes his head as if he’s trying to knock the dream loose from his mind. “The same,” he replies stiffly, his usual answer. “The battlefield,” he goes on after a pause, “getting cornered, Peggy . . .” He stops, fingers clenching against the hem of his t-shirt for a moment before he raises one to his face, examining the lines in his palm as if he’s looking for something. Tony knows he’s checking for blood, trying to see if he’s permanently stained with it.

There’s a beat of silence before Tony swallows, and Steve lowers his hand to glance at him. “Are you alright?” Steve murmurs, reaching for Tony through the shadows.

Tony shies away and Steve freezes, eyebrows furrowing together. “I’m supposed to be asking you that,” Tony chuckles, half-hearted and shallow.

“Tony-” Steve starts, concerned.

Tony stops him with a hand on Steve’s shoulder, “Wait. Don’t . . . I have to tell you something first.

Steve frowns, “Right now? Tony, it’s three in the morning.”

“It’s right now or never,” Tony says resolutely. “You remember what my New Year’s resolution was, right?”

Steve nods, “About your job.”

“Right,” Tony confirms, “So I’m going to tell you, and you have to be quiet until I’m done. Otherwise I’ll never finish.”

After a pause Steve sits back against the headboard, waiting, and Tony continues.

“My father built the company as a means to produce and sell his product. At first it was just little things, household items and electronics of a quality no one else could even begin to compete with. I don’t know the whole story of how he started building more than that, but I think the military got wind of his talents, and soon after that Stark Industries became known for being the forefront of American weaponry rather than for its kitchen appliances.” Tony takes a breath, casting his eyes down to the bed. He doesn’t dare look at Steve’s face as he continues. “When he died I took over the company. And my designs were better, my inventions stronger, sleeker, more deadly. I was proud of them. I built everything from guns to missiles. I thought . . . I thought I was making things to help defend my country.”

Every time he pauses for breath, ends a sentence and goes on, the silence rings in his ears, sharp and stinging. But he told Steve not to say anything until he finished. A vocal reaction, he thinks, would be worse than the silence. “There was this guy,” he goes on, “Obie- I mean, Obadiah. He was a friend of my fathers and a mentor of sorts to me. I was blind, Steve, I didn’t . . . He was dealing my inventions, my weapons, under the table to our enemies. I didn’t know.”

He waits for that to sink in, for Steve to realize where the story ends before he carries on. “I was so stupid. And by the time I’d realized what he was doing my missiles and guns were already being fired by foreign hands. When I found out of course I expelled him from the company. Even had him listed as a threat to the nation by the government. But it was too late. By then people had died, good
people, because someone I thought I could trust supplied the wrong people with my guns, my weapons. Steve . . .” Tony tries to breathe around the lump forming in his throat, tries to steady his words as he speaks, “Steve . . . There’s a 64.3% chance that I . . . That one of my guns shot you and . . . And Peggy Carter.”

If a single person could be aware of the world spinning, hurtling through space and rotating on its axis, Tony thinks that he could feel the moment it stopped. The lights of the city outside the window seem to dim, the sounds of traffic and car motors in streets that never sleep sounding dull and distant in his ears.

The phrase, “The silence was deafening” is one of the most commonly used oxymoron’s in the English language, but it is also one of the most accurate. When something deafens, it’s loud to the point where your ears start to tingle, your whole body feels numb with it. It’s the loss of a sense, it sets you off balance and turns your stomach with the disoriented, out-of-place feeling of it. You start to wonder if you’ll ever hear any sound again.

And the silence that hangs in the air after Tony finishes talking is sickeningly deafening.

“Steve,” Tony whispers, his tone almost a plea as he searches Steve’s face for a response, only to be met with a look that can only be described as shock. Steve’s eyes are wide, awake, but almost unseeing as he stares at the wall behind Tony as if Tony isn’t there at all. His features are blank, utterly devoid of any discernable emotion, and when Tony says his name again Steve barely even breathes.

For a stuttering heartbeat, Tony almost reaches for him, to shake him out of it, to make him look Tony in the eye, but he doesn’t. “Steve,” Tony whispers, “I’m sorry.”

Steve doesn’t respond. Tony all but backs his way to the edge of the bed, to the door of the bedroom and then to the one leading out of the apartment beyond. He hadn’t expected anything less, especially after he’d kept something so crucial hidden for so long. Pepper had been wrong.

When the front door clicks shut Steve blinks, once twice, and shakes his head as if to clear away the thoughts cluttering up his mind. It takes him a long moment to properly register the sound in the silence, to process the snap of the lock and the empty bed he’s sitting in. “Tony?” he says into the darkness, heart hammering in his chest.

There’s no reply.

Steve bolts out of bed, already halfway across the apartment by the time the blankets settle onto the mattress again. He doesn’t even bother to put on shoes before he tears out into the hall, taking the stairs two at a time before he stumbles out onto the street.

And this is just like the night after London, isn’t it? He made a mistake, he let his surprise and his shock take a hold of him for one second too long. His eyes scan the street, searching, glancing at every passerby who sluggishly makes their way down the sidewalk. It’s not even dawn yet. He takes off towards the right, remembering the last time he’d run after Tony, and he shoves pedestrians out of his way as he goes.

“Tony! Tony!”

This is the part, right? This is the part where the groups of lulled people part and Steve finally catches sight of Tony clearly, finally catches up and shouts, “My watch is still on London time!” because he’s desperate to hold on to him, desperate to stay at his side and never be apart from him.
There are no crowds to part, there are no spaces between people where Steve can fix Tony in his sights because, quite simply, Tony is nowhere to be seen.

He circles the block twice, three times, until his feet are sore and he finds himself picking bits of glass out of his heels outside of SHIELD Coffee with Tony still nowhere to be seen. After the sun starts to peek over the horizon he goes back upstairs for his cell phone and starts calling. He’s greeted by Tony’s voicemail, and when he tries Pepper he gets much of the same. It’s probably just too early, he thinks as he leaves a fourth message for Tony.

He knows better.

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

Coulson is usually an early riser, early to bed and early to wake, the normal coffee shop drill. He ends up running late that morning for various reasons, getting to engrossed in a book the night before, forgetting to do his paper work for Fury that week and having to rush it that morning, and testing out a new pastry recipe when he should have already been making his commute to the shop.

It’s a little after seven when he finally puts the keys into the locked door of SHIELD Coffee, an hour and a half later than he usually opens, and he’s so busy pushing the door ajar and flipping over the Closed sign that he almost doesn’t notice the man sitting against the wall just underneath the wide bay window outside.

“Steve,” he greets, mildly surprised, “Your shift doesn’t start for a few hours. Is there anything I can get you?”

It’s unusual for Steve to work the morning shifts at the shop. Steve tends to have training with his group of soon-to-be volunteer firefighters in the early hours of the day, and Coulson is about to point that out when he notices the dull look in Steve’s eyes. “Did something happen?” he asks carefully.

“I’m an idiot,” Steve mumbles into his arms where he’s folded them across his knees where he sits. “Tony told me something important, something that was hurting him, and I reacted badly. Or, more like I didn’t react at all. I was shocked and I . . . He left.”

Coulson pushes the door to the coffee shop open a little wider, “Come inside. I’ve got a new recipe I’m experimenting with.”

Steve tilts his head to the side, chin against his shoulder, “Muffins?”

“Strudels,” Coulson informs. “One of these days I’m going to give that Wagner kid and his little bakery down the block a run for their money.” He gestures inside, “Come on, you can sit by the window. From there, you’ll be able to see Tony the moment he comes back.”

“If he comes back,” Steve whispers hoarsely.

OoOoOoOoOoO

Thor gathers them all up for a trip to the bike shop at eight. As usual, it takes Clint an ungodly long time to get out of bed and get ready, and Bruce, Jane, and Thor hum out an endless repeat of the Jeopardy song until he finally emerges from the bathroom.

They walk to the store, which Clint whines about, and Thor takes in stride. Literally. When Thor walks anywhere he always ends up too far ahead, if only because his big body is only outmatched by his big footsteps. So it is that by the time the rest of them find themselves at the bike shop, Thor already has his face pressed against the window like an excited puppy.
“How much is that doggy in the wind-oof,” Clint starts and stops when Bruce elbows him in the stomach.

Thor points at the row of bikes just behind the glass, “What kind are those?”

“Racing bikes,” Jane says after a quick glance. “They’re built for speed, and are lighter with a thinner frame.”

“I’m not sure one of those would support a guy like Thor,” Bruce adds, eyeing the bikes through the window like they might fall apart just from Thor looking at them. “And you don’t plan to go mountain biking, right? So are you just planning on getting a normal street bike?”

“Aye,” Thor agrees, “Do any come with lightning bolts on them?”

“Uh . . .”

“I’m sure we can find you one,” Jane interjects.

OoOooOooOooOooOooOo

It’s well after lunch when Steve leaves the coffee shop with Coulson’s understanding reassurances behind him. He takes his motorcycle to Pepper’s place, keeping his eyes open for Tony as he goes, but by the time he reaches her building he’s still alone. Nine messages have been left on Tony’s voicemail, and Steve adds another before he buzzes Pepper’s apartment.

Pepper lets him up immediately, and for a brief moment Steve hopes it’s because Tony is hiding out there, like he suspected. When he arrives on the twelfth floor, however, Pepper opens her door to him to reveal an empty apartment.

“He told you, didn’t he,” she says, a tinge of defensiveness in her voice.

Steve nods dejectedly, “I didn’t-” he starts, fumbles when he sees Pepper’s eyes narrow, “I’m not mad. I just . . . I didn’t know what I was supposed to say. I froze. I was shocked.”

Pepper scrutinizes him for a moment before stepping back with a wave of her hand, “Come in, then. I know of a few places he might be.”

She calls around while Steve drinks his eighth cup of coffee that day, holding it tight between his hands as he watches her pace the kitchen while she goes through her contacts list.

Tony isn’t at Rhodey’s.

He’s not at Natasha’s.

Or Thor’s.

Or Luke’s.

Happy hasn’t picked him up either.

Pepper even calls some of the company chairmen, asking if Tony might have come in to work for once, but gets the answer she expected. No.

“I’m sorry, Steve,” she says when she’s done, both their phones laying between them.

Steve shakes his head, “No, I’m sorry,” he whispers over the rim of his coffee mug. “Thank you for
“Are you going to keep looking?” she asks with a glance at his helmet resting on the edge of the table. “Be careful, okay? And don’t stay out all night. You need rest.”

Steve stills, “You think he’ll still be out by the time it gets dark?”

“I don’t know,” Pepper replies honestly. “Keep leaving him messages, though. He’ll have to listen to them eventually.”

Thor’s bike is red with gold lightning bolts.

And he loves it.

He walks it down the street while they slowly make their way to the park, pushing it along at his side and steering around the passerby that are too slow and too stupid to get out of his way. “You could just ride it, you know,” Clint calls as he watches Thor swerve his bike dangerously around an old woman and her poodle, “We’ll catch up.”

Thor screeches to a halt. “Ride,” he says like he’s testing out the word for the first time.

“Uh, yeah,” Clint says, “Ride the bike. That’s what bikes are for, dude.”

“For riding,” Thor deadpans.

Bruce frowns, “Thor, do you even know how to ride a bike?”

Jane laughs, “What? Of course he-” She stops when she catches sight of Thor’s bewildered look. “Oh my god, you don’t know how to ride a bike?”

Thor grins, “Nay. But I know how to ride a horse. It is much the same sport, is it not?”

Clint smacks himself on the forehead with an open palm, “No. No it isn’t. Not even a little bit.”

Thor pouts and Jane pats him reassuringly on the arm, “Don’t worry, we’ll teach you. It’s not that hard.”

It turns out that teaching Thor how to ride a bike is not much different from teaching a five year old. Which basically means that both situations have similar amounts of whining and protesting involved.

“It’s like I’m reading old Calvin and Hobbes strips,” Bruce remarks as he watches Clint try and get Thor to pedal. “You know, the ones where Calvin is convinced that his bike is trying to maim him?”

Jane nods, “Every time Clint even tries to let go he freaks out.”

“Probably a fear of falling,” Bruce decides. “Except that he said he could ride a horse, and horses are a lot bigger than bikes, so maybe not.”

“Fear of inanimate objects?” Jane tries, eyes widening when Clint lets go of the back of Thor’s bike and Thor immediately leaps off of it again, sending the poor bike crashing to the ground.

“You said you would not let go!” Thor yells, pointing at Clint accusingly. “You have lied to me one too many times, my friend.”
“It’s a legitimate learning technique!” Clint snaps, “That’s how I was taught. That’s how everyone I know was taught! You get on the bike, someone helps steady you for your first few yards of riding, and then they let go so that you can balance on your own!”

“But you swore you wouldn’t let go,” Thor protests.

Clint throws his hands into the air with a frustrated huff.

OoOoOoOoOoOoOoO

Steve searches the entire city. He circles past SHIELD Coffee half a dozen times, makes just as many laps around the park, and even stops at the building Tony’s company owns. He’s only been a few times before, to pick Tony up from a meeting or to drop him off, never actually going inside.

For awhile Steve stands near the front desk, flipping through pamphlets describing what the company does, it’s goals and past achievements. The weapons industry it used to be is barely mentioned, if at all, and Steve curses himself for not noticing something so crucial to Tony’s life sooner. His eyes scan over the Stark logo a few times, tracing oddly familiar lines before he leaves. Tony’s not there, and there’s no point in lingering.

Steve stops by Rhodey’s place, but Rhodey gives him much the same answer Pepper had. He offers to call around, too, but Steve declines. If Pepper can’t find Tony through such a method, Rhodey certainly can’t either.

He takes the same road they drove two Christmas’s ago, slowing down at every intersection to search for Tony, hoping to catch sight of him in the corners of his vision. When the sun starts to glow red in the sky, the edges of it beginning to disappear over the horizon, he drives all the way down to the beach house in some fervent hope that Tony might have fled there. He’s greeted by nothing but sand and a few forgotten wisps of clothing left behind from Natasha and Clint’s Strip Happy Days spoils.

By the time the sun is just a bright and blurry line on the very edge of the horizon, there are 46 messages left on Tony’s voicemail.

“Where are you?”

“Tony, come home. Please.”

“Tony, I’m not upset. I was just startled. Please, Tony.”

“I’m worried about you. Please come home.”

“Tony, I will file a missing persons report if you’re not home by dark.”

“I’ve looked for you everywhere. Please come home.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I love you.”

“I love you.”

“I love you.”

“Tony, I’m going to keep leaving this message until you either call me back or come home. I love you.”
“I love you, please come home.”

OoOoOoOoOoOoOoO

It’s starting to get dark when Clint finally gives up any and all hope of teaching Thor how to ride the bike.

“Thor, I swear to god, if you don’t learn to ride this bike we are taking it back,” Clint warns, already taking a seat on the bike just to prove his point.

“I think it’s a bit too beat up for that now,” Bruce whispers to Jane. Jane sighs and gets up from the bench to stand at Clint’s side.

“He’s right, Thor. If you can’t ride the bike it should go to a better home,” she says resolutely.

Thor’s face crumples, “But I like it.”

“I don’t care if you like it,” Jane scolds, “You shouldn’t own something you can’t use. It would be like . . .” She pauses, glancing up at the sky in contemplation. “It would be like having Duck as a pet but never playing with him.” Thor gapes at her, and Jane smiles a bit as she realizes she’s found the way to get her point across. “When you play with Duck, he’s happy, right? He likes playing. It’s healthy for him. But if you don’t ride the bike the bike will get sad, like Duck does when you’re away for a long time. The bike will get sad, because you can’t ride it, and if you keep refusing to even try and learn, the bike . . .” She hesitates, “. . . The bike will die.”

Clint covers his mouth with a hand and Thor narrows his eyes.

“A fine point,” Thor concedes, “For if you cared enough to spin such folly tales then I may as well learn to ride this contraption.”

Clint snorts, “Well he didn’t buy that,” he says to Jane as he hops off the bike to allow Thor another attempt.

Jane smirks, “Oh?” She motions towards where Thor is attempting to balance on the bike again.

“Do not perish, noble steed,” Thor whispers to the bike before he promptly careens over to the side and smashes into the concrete once again.

“Maybe he should invest in training wheels,” Bruce suggests.

OoOoOoOoOoOoOoO

It’s almost midnight when Steve realizes why the Stark logo had looked so familiar, and by then he’s penciled it down in his sketchbook four or five times. He knows that if he checks the logo will be worn, faded from where he pressed it against his palm until it was barely visible anymore. So he merely draws it again, harsh lines over white paper as the minutes tick on. His phone is still silent, and the apartment is still empty.

Steve knows he should rest, knows that Pepper was right when she warned him not to push himself through this. He’s exhausted, and every part of him aches. But what if Tony calls while he’s asleep. What if he comes back, only to leave again, and Steve won’t know because he’d be curled up in bed. Doodles of the Stark logo start to swim in his vision, and Steve sets his sketchpad aside and pinches the bridge of his nose.

In reality, he knows that there’s very little point in forcing himself to stay awake, knows with a gut
wrenching feeling that there’s a high possibility that Tony might not come back at all. Ever. But he can’t take the chance.

He stands, stretching a bit as he heads towards the door. It wouldn’t hurt to go out and look one more time, make a few passes around the park and the neighboring streets. It’s not that late, right? Steve glances at the digital clock on the microwave, squinting at the numbers 12:03 for a moment before he sighs. He grabs a coat, and then another because he knows that Tony left without one, before pulling the door open with a tired shake of his head.

It’s only by quick reflex that makes him stop just before he crashes headfirst into Tony.

Tony is standing on the other side of the door, hand raised as if he’d been about to knock before Steve opened it, and he stumbles back in surprise when Steve steps into the hall. “Oh, Jesus,” he curses, taking another step back, “Sorry. I just came back to, uh, get some things. I was hoping you’d be out.” He glances at his watch and frowns, “Actually, that was a stupid idea. Forget I was ever here, and I’ll just-” He starts to edge back a bit further, ready to make a break down the hallway, until Steve catches him by the front of his shirt and tugs him forward.

And then they really do crash into each other. Steve pulls Tony forward until he collides with him, presses his face into Tony’s shoulder and wraps his arms around him so tight that Tony gasps for breath. “Where were you?” Steve chokes, and his voice breaks and wavers over the words.

Tony’s eyes widen, and he shoves uselessly against Steve for a moment, “What do you mean where was I? I left, moron! I told you I basically killed your girlfriend and then I left!”

Steve loosens his grip a bit so he can look Tony in the eye, “You’re an idiot,” he says, very seriously, and Tony balks. “I was . . . I was shocked, Tony. I didn’t . . . God, have you been blaming yourself this whole time?”

Tony purses his lips, “It’s not blame if it’s my fau-”

“It’s not your fault,” Steve snaps, “And if you’re going to go around blaming yourself for something you had no hand in, then I can do the same, right?” Tony blinks, confused, and Steve lowers his voice to barely above a whisper, “I was there, Tony. I could have saved her. If I had been a little bit faster, a little bit stronger-”

“That is ridiculous!” Tony interrupts, outraged.

“So it’s ridiculous for you to say that if only you’d realized sooner what Obadiah was doing that she would still be here?” Steve asks, serious.

Tony swallows, “Well-”

“Tony, did you fire the gun?”

“Of course not.”

“Did I fire the gun?”

“No.”

“Then neither of us are to blame,” Steve insists, “But if you’re going to persist on saying that you are, for taking responsibility for every bullet fired from one of your guns, then you should probably know that you saved more good people than you killed. Including me.”
Tony’s eyebrows furrow together, “You’re a crazy person,” he says, very seriously, and Steve smiles.

“Let me show you.”

Tony complains a bit when Steve starts to push him towards the bedroom, but Steve heard it all before. “If you just let me go your life will be so much better,” Tony whines.

“It’s better with you.”

“I’m a horrible person.”

“And I love you.”

“Steve, you’re making a mistake.”

“That’s not how you pronounce ‘great decision.’”

He sits Tony down on the side of the bed before he leans over and pulls open the second drawer on his nightstand. They haven’t talked about it since New Years, and Steve knows that Tony has never touched the thing, doesn’t dare to. “Pick it up,” he says with a flick of his wrist towards the handgun sitting in the bottom of the drawer. Tony does, cautious and slow, before he looks back up at Steve questioningly. “Turn it over,” Steve instructs.

It takes a moment as Tony flips the gun over, takes a moment for his eyes to find what Steve was trying to show him and his breath to catch. The Stark logo is all but faded away from the hilt of the gun, worn after being pressed against Steve’s palm for too many long days and nights on the battlefield, and Tony traces a finger over what remains of it with wide eyes. “This . . .”

“It saved my life more times than I can count,” Steve confesses. “I wouldn’t be here without this, Tony.” He sits down beside Tony on the edge of the mattress. “So if you’re going to insist on blaming yourself for events you weren’t even there for, you might as well take pride in some of them, too.”

Tony places the gun back in the drawer, “It almost killed you, too, though,” he says numbly. Steve raises a hand towards his right shoulder but Tony stops him with a shake of his head, “Not that one. This one,” he points to the handgun with a shaking finger. “And don’t tell me it didn’t, Steve, I’m not stupid.”

Steve sighs, “I never said you were. But-”

“If you say, ‘Guns don’t kill people. People kill people,’” so help me God, I will smack you,” Tony warns.

“Seeing as you already know it, I’ll kindly refrain,” Steve mutters. “The gun didn’t point itself at my head, Tony. I pointed it. I was broken and grieving and I was looking for a way out. But I didn’t do it. I was too scared that Peggy would rip me a new one if I did.” He laughs softly and Tony glares at him. “I’m serious. And she’ll rip you one too if you keep blaming yourself for something you had no hand in.”

Tony snorts, “I’m not scared. Unless a zombie hand pops out of the ground and grabs me by the ankle next time we go to her grave, I am not even a little bit scared.”

“You’ve given that quite a bit of thought,” Steve says.
“More than I should have,” Tony admits.

Steve loops an arm around his shoulders, drawing him closer, “I can’t force you to stop feeling guilty over something you shouldn’t,” he murmurs against Tony’s ear, “But I do think that you will, over time.”

Tony ducks his head, “How do you know?”

“I stopped feeling guilty, eventually,” Steve whispers. “So you will, too.”

They get rid of the gun together, have it dismantled and destroyed like every other weapon Tony ever designed and made, and when they stumble back to bed a few hours later Tony turns on his phone to find his voicemail completely full. “Some crazy person seems to have left me an insane amount of messages,” he says as Steve pulls him down into the bed. “Sixty four of them, to be exact.”

“One for each percentage you insisted was your fault,” Steve hums.

Tony raises an eyebrow, “What do they say?”

“Nothing you haven’t heard before,” Steve says. He props himself up on one elbow as Tony listens to them, one after another until he sets his phone aside and stares at Steve with a disbelieving look.

“You’re insane,” Tony says firmly. “Completely bonkers. I should have you checked.”

“I love you,” Steve smiles.

“See! Right there! That’s why you’re a crazy person!” Tony grumbles. “You, sir, are certifiable!”

“And what does that make you?” Steve asks.

Tony rolls his eyes, “Obviously I’m the deliciously hot bimbo who falls in love with the psychotic moron.”

“Good.”
The One With The Legend Of Sleepy Bucky

Chapter Summary

Bucky stays with Steve and Tony, Natasha has a nanny cam, and someone is stealing Tony's food.

The building Bucky lives in decides to throw a temper tantrum on a cold Thursday in February. Bucky blames himself, really, for his terrible taste in living quarters. Seeing as he may or may not have picked this place out because of its convenient location is the middle of the holy grail of bars and strip clubs, it really shouldn’t be a surprise to him that the building he lives in is absolute shit. He doesn’t notice, of course, until one of the water pipes rips through the wall like a chest-buster out for revenge and blasts his entire living room with water from god knows where.

The building manager promises him they’ll have it fixed within the week, but seeing as most of Bucky’s furniture and his TV are ruined now, he simply asks for the insurance deposit he paid for the place before he gets the fuck out of dodge.

Which is, of course, how he ends up in front of Steve and Tony’s door with two duffle bags to his name. And, okay, that’s a lie, he put the rest of his (salvageable) stuff in storage until he could find a new place. But he knows from experience that the less stuff he has with him, the more Steve will pity him, and the more likely he is to have a place to stay for the next couple of days that he doesn’t have to pay for.

Logically, he could have also gone to Natasha. Just as logically, though, he fears waking up and finding Clint staring at him murderously while he sleeps. While it may not be obvious to the casual onlooker, Bucky does possess some self preservation, thank you very much.

It’s rather early in the morning when he knocks on Steve and Tony’s door, and when Steve answers he starts to wonder if now was really the best time to ask for a place to say, if only because of the look Tony’s giving him over Steve’s shoulder.

“Good morning,” Steve says cheerily as he holds the door open for Bucky to come in.

“Go away,” Tony grumbles. He’s octopused around Steve like he usually is before noon, looking sleepy and just a little bit dazed as he tries to focus his gaze enough to give Bucky a proper glare.

Bucky raises an eyebrow in Tony’s direction in return. He knows full well that he wasn’t interrupting anything, certainly not anything more important than Steve’s habit of making a rather extensive breakfast. He supposes that Tony just hasn’t had his coffee yet. Which is why he came prepared.

When he holds up the drink carrier stuffed with four steaming fresh cups of coffee from Coulson’s shop, Tony makes a noise somewhere between what Bucky would classify as “verge of death” and “verge of orgasm.” He tries not to think about it too hard though, for sanity’s sake. Tony makes grabby motions towards the cups and Bucky allows him to take one before pulling the drink tray back again.

“So my apartment is flooded,” he broaches while Tony’s too busy guzzling down coffee to give a
crap.

Steve’s eyes widen, “What? Are you okay? Do you need help fixing it? Do you need a place to stay?”

Bucky waves a hand at him to stop any more questions from being thrown his way.

“Fine, no, and yes,” he answers. “Especially that last bit. I’m just going to buy a new apartment, but while I’m looking I would very much appreciate it if you let me crash on your couch.”

“That sounds like a horrible idea,” Tony mutters as he finishes off his cup of coffee. Without a second thought, Bucky hands him another.

“Of course you can stay,” Steve says readily while Tony meanders off to go sit at the kitchen table. “You can stay as long as you need to.”

It isn’t until Steve’s already finished making breakfast and Bucky’s on his second plate that Tony snaps out of his morning-coffee coma. Steve just puts a plate of bacon and eggs in front of him as soon as he notices, and Bucky eyes Tony warily across the table over his own cup of coffee, waiting for the inevitable explosion.

When Tony finishes inhaling his breakfast he peers around the room like he’s only just (properly) woken up. He takes a good long look at the two duffle bags Bucky left sitting on the back of the couch before he focuses his bleary gaze on Bucky himself. “You have a week,” he informs.

Steve sits down at the table and nudges Tony’s knee with his own, “Tony . . .”

“Two weeks,” Tony corrects. “Tops. Any longer and I’m leaving you in front of the building in a box that says ‘Free Dog To Good Home’ on it.” He jabs his fork in Bucky’s direction while Steve snorts good humouredly into his orange juice.

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

Everyone else finds out about Bucky’s predicament when they all go out for lunch together. Out for lunch, of course, meaning downstairs to SHIELD Coffee. It’s not like they hang out anywhere else.

“Sucks for you,” Clint jeers around a muffin. Bruce makes a disapproving sound at him, but it’s clear that he’s in much of the same mindset as Clint, he just has more tact.

Bucky shrugs, “Whatever. It’ll be good to spend some time with Steve anyways. We don’t get enough bro time anymore.”

Natasha rolls her eyes, “If you think that loafing on his sofa will change that, you really are an idiot.” She pauses and takes a moment to where Clint and Bruce seem to be engaged in some sort of slap war with their hands, which was most likely caused by Clint’s insistence in trying to take Bruce’s croissant. “You could always stay with us,” she says slowly, smirking when Clint and Bruce immediately freeze.

“Oh,” Clint gapes, eyes wide.

Bucky leers, “Wouldn’t that be fun. Just the four of us getting up the finest of shenanigans.”

Bruce sputters, face reddening with an expression somewhere between mortification and absolute fury. Clint puts a hand on his arm and casually gives Bucky an appraising look, “Fine by me. But you do realize that in our household the definition of fun and games doesn’t just apply to Natasha’s
Catching on, Bruce adds, “And if you were there, I’m sure Natasha would be more interested in watching than participating.”

Bucky covers his face with a hand, “And scene. The mental images that put in my head were too horrifying to comprehend. I’m out.”

“You were never in,” Clint reminds, holding up a hand which Bruce readily and enthusiastically high-fives.

Natasha shakes her head, “It was only a matter of time until they started using mental tactics instead of fists against you, Barnes,” she says sympathetically.

Bucky whines, head still in his hands, “That doesn’t mean you should encourage them.”

“You’d rather be punched?” Natasha asks mildly.

“Yep,” Bucky informs, peeking out from between his fingers to glare in Clint and Bruce’s direction. “And et tu, Bruce? I expected more from you.”

Bruce flashes him an innocent smile, “What? I’m not allowed to have a little fun now and then?”

“Not at the expense of my sanity,” Bucky mutters.

“As enlightening as this conversation has been,” someone speaks up, “The rest of us are also greatly uncomfortable.”

Bucky, Natasha, Clint, and Bruce glance over at where Sharon, Thor, and Jane have been sitting this whole time as if they’ve just now noticed them. “The rest of us minus Thor,” Jane corrects when she notices that Thor’s doodling absentmindedly on a napkin, looking like he hasn’t heard a word anyone has said for the past ten minutes.

Sharon raises an eyebrow, “Actually I’ll be storing those mental images away for future use, Jane, but you can be uncomfortable if you want.”

Jane flushes and nudges Thor, “Don’t you have anything to say?”

“Natasha, Clint, and Bruce’s activities behind closed doors are not any business of mine. Although I would discourage Bucky from partaking in their romps between the sheets because that seems a bit crowded,” Thor muses, his eyes never straying from his napkin drawing.

Clint lets out a bark of laughter and is quickly joined by everyone except Jane and Bucky, who share a rather constipated look before going back to their lunch and coffee without another word.

“Best of luck to you,” Natasha toasts Bucky once they’ve all settled down again.

Bucky’s eyebrows furrow together and he frowns, “With what?” He points a finger in Clint’s direction when the other man starts to open his mouth, no doubt with another snarky and highly inappropriate comment, “No. Shut up. You don’t get to say anything else for the rest of the day.”

“With Steve and Tony,” Natasha clarifies over Clint’s flabbergasted noises of protest against Bucky’s orders. “They’ve worked out a lot of shit recently, so they’ve relapsed back into the honeymoon phase. For the millionth time.” She makes a face and Clint nods in understanding.

“I’m convinced that they never actually left it,” Clint pipes up, “We just don’t notice it most of the
time because none of us live with them. Anymore.”

Bucky throws his muffin wrapper at him, “I thought I told you you weren’t aloud to talk anymore.”

He turns back to Natasha, “So, what, they’re calling each other nauseating pet names or something?”

“God forbid,” Natasha mutters. “No. They’re just . . .” She waves a hand towards where Steve and Tony have been standing at the counter chatting with Coulson. “They’re . . . Bruce, word,” she prompts.

“Steve and Tony,” Bruce supplies without hesitation.

There’s a pause as everyone considers this and Natasha nods, “That sums it up nicely, thank you.”

Bucky gapes, “Um, what?”

“You’ll understand soon enough,” Clint soothes, dodging as Bucky hurls a wadded up napkin at him.

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

It takes Bucky a few days to notice it, due to the fact that he was serious when he said he was going to actively look for a new apartment. He spends the first two days searching for possible places online, and the one after that visiting said places and deciding that he doesn’t want to live in any of them. So it’s on the fourth day, when he’s decided that the best thing to do is spend the majority of his time moping about his predicament on the sofa and watching really bad daytime TV, that he starts to notice what Natasha was talking about.

It begins in the morning, like all things do. Steve is the first one up, emerging from his and Tony’s room at the crack of dawn, already dressed in his usual jogging outfit. He’s back within the hour, flicking on the coffee maker before he heads off to the shower. It takes less than ten minutes for Tony to stumble out of the bedroom, looking bleary-eyed and dazed, drawn to the sounds and smells of freshly brewed coffee. For a minute or two he stands in front of the pot, as if he’s forgotten how to pour himself a mug, which is apparently the case as Steve wanders out of the bathroom a moment later with only a towel around his waist to pour Tony a cup.

Even though Bucky’s already been there a handful of days, somehow it suddenly feels like he’s intruding. He watches over the back of the couch as Tony becomes momentarily distracted from his coffee, a hand straying from the mug Steve holds out to him so he can brush it down Steve’s bare side as he leans up to peck the blond on the lips. Steve smiles, whispering something teasing about morning breath that Tony rolls his eyes in response to before Steve shuffles back to the bedroom to get dressed.

It takes awhile for Bucky to understand as he watches Steve and Tony go through their seemingly habitual morning routine. They make breakfast together, Steve flipping pancakes while Tony slices up some strawberries and pops a couple pieces of bread in the toaster, which Bucky is unsurprised to notice is pretty much the extent of Tony’s kitchen skills. Bucky joins them briefly for breakfast before Tony leaves the table to shower, keeping the bathroom door open so Steve can get finish getting ready for work.

Personally, Bucky knows he would find such a situation both odd and, eventually, boring if it was himself, but it’s the opposite with Steve and Tony. They don’t seem bored with it in the slightest, even though it’s clear to Bucky that it’s almost routine by now. They carry on a full conversation about something Tony’s working on while Steve fixes his hair and Tony showers, and Bucky tries not to pay any attention to that because, in his opinion, discussing anything with someone while they
bathe is super weird. When Tony’s dressed and Steve’s pouring over some notes he made from his last volunteer firefighter’s training session, Tony fixes his collar, his tone fond as he smoothes out the front of Steve’s shirt.

After Steve departs, SHIELD Coffee apron in one hand and his notebook in another, Tony disappears into his workshop. Bucky buries himself in searching for an apartment again, interrupted just after noon when an alarm goes off in the kitchen. He looks up as Tony bustles out of his workshop, covered in oil and clutching bits of wire in one hand. “Lunch alarm,” he explains as he turns it off, looking strangely embarrassed. “Steve sets it so I, uh, don’t forget to eat.”

And that’s the moment Bucky gets it.

Tony vanishes back into his workshop with a sandwich in hand, and Bucky doesn’t see him again until after three, at which time Tony taps him on the shoulder and asks if he needs anything from the store. If it hadn’t already clicked, Bucky would have been immensely surprised that Tony Stark even knew what a grocery store was, let alone was going to one. Instead, however, he just smiles and nods, asking if he can accompany him.

It turns out that not only does Tony know what a grocery store is, but he also knows where one is and how to navigate the aisles better than Bucky does. He also, of course, zips down them using the shopping cart like a scooter. “Do you do this every day?” Bucky asks while Tony’s weighing a bunch of bananas on a little scale.

“What, shopping?” Tony makes a face, “No. God, that would be horrible. Steve makes a list twice a week, so I go twice a week.” Bucky thinks that someone, somewhere out there should be presenting Steve with an award for convincing Tony to go grocery shopping, because it’s truly a feat to be admired. “I messed up a bit the first few times,” Tony confesses while they’re in the dairy section, “Didn’t get the right brands or missed something on the list, etcetera. But Steve would go with me when I had to take things back and show me which kinds he liked. And, I mean, it seriously makes no difference to me whether I’m eating name brand cereal or Kroger, but Steve likes it so . . .” He draws off, his smile almost shy as he fumbles for a block of cheese. “Anyways,” he says, clearing his throat, “grab me a couple things of blueberry yogurt there, would you?”

Bucky starts tossing cups of individually packaged yogurt into the cart until Tony makes a noise of protest. “No, the ones Steve likes,” Tony whines, picking the yogurt back out again and placing it carefully on the shelf. There’s a startling moment when Bucky realizes that he doesn’t know what Tony’s talking about until Tony shows him the cups with the little cartoon animals on the sides and he chokes back a laugh.

“Steve still eats those?” he hiccups.

Tony grins, “Almost every morning.”

And here’s the thing that Bucky should have figured out sooner, long before Natasha pointed it out to him. He picks up on it in their morning routine, in the way Steve sets an alarm to remind Tony to eat and the way Tony readily and happily treks to the grocery store when Steve’s busy with work. It’s there when Steve returns that night with Chinese take out in hand and Tony blocks him from entering the apartment until he’s received a kiss, which ends in a bit of a scuffle, a tangle of limbs, and Steve huffing out a laugh against Tony’s neck where he’s caught between the door frame and Tony’s persistent arms. It’s the way they talk about their days and seem genuinely interested in everything the other has to say, long after Bucky has zoned out and wandered away to watch TV. And it’s the way they’re also content to sit in silence, Tony tapping away on his tablet and Steve reading a book, one arm hooked over Tony’s shoulders across the back of the couch.
Natasha was right. There’s no such thing as Steve and Tony anymore.

It’s just Steve and Tony. And the blend is seamless, so much so that Bucky finds himself faltering to remember when it wasn’t like this, when he and Loki were trying so desperately to set them up because it seemed wrong that they weren’t together. He realizes now how right they had been about that. Obviously, Bucky can still trace out the timeline that lead them here, find the pivotal points on it without much thought, but it’s an oddly straight path, considering all the twists and turns he knows it took to get where they are now.

And when he thinks about it, sees the glow of contentment in Steve’s eyes that had been absent for far longer than Bucky would like to admit, he can’t stop smiling.

“You have the creepiest look on your face right now,” Tony informs him awhile later, barely looking up from his tablet to glance at Bucky’s wide grin. “It’s starting to wig me out.”

Steve hums a sound of faint agreement, but he flashes Bucky an understanding smile over Tony’s head in return.

Bucky laughs.

He remembers, he really does, what it was like before this, before Steve and Tony and even before Steve and Tony. But it’s like holding water in his hands. It slips through his fingers no matter how hard he holds on to it, leaving a cool and fading feeling against his fingers and palms, a lingering reminder.

It’s . . . Different.

He remembers Peggy and he remembers Steve as he was with her, drops of water slipping through his fingers and flowing away from him. And he remembers their love, vivid and fiery like a bottle rocket and gone just as fast. It hurts, he thinks, to recall it in such a way even though he knows it’s true. No one ever asks, but Bucky misses her, too.

But the light in Steve’s eyes when he’s with Tony isn’t the same, for which Bucky is glad for. Tony’s not a replacement for Peggy, never has been and never will be, and if Bucky admits that he thinks Steve shines just a bit brighter when he’s with Tony, he knows he wouldn’t be lying.

He tells Tony so while Steve’s rummaging around in the fridge for his yogurt the next morning.

“I don’t think,” he whispers, “you can ever understand what you’ve done, or how much he loves you.” Bucky watches Tony’s eyes widen and he smiles, “But I’m grateful to you for it.”

Tony ducks his head, fumbling with his fork for a moment before he murmurs a swift and stammering, “T-thank you.”

Bucky just smiles.

OoOoOoOoOoO

“Where is my leftover pizza!?” Tony yells into the empty apartment on the sixth day of Bucky residing on their couch. Normally, he’d just blame Steve and forget about it, but he knows for a fact that Steve took three different Lunchables to work for lunch today, so he can definitely rule that out. If Bucky wasn’t away looking at prospective new apartments, he’d strangle the guy, certain that his missing pizza is his fault.

When Bucky gets back, however, he denies it, and Tony glares at him until he retreats back to the
Someone, obviously, has to be lying.

“Maybe you ate it but forgot,” Steve says over dinner.

Tony scowls, “I may be scatter brained, but seeing as I was saving that pizza for lunch today, I can say with certainty that I definitely didn’t eat it.” This is a lie, of course, which Steve sees right through and shakes his head at, but Tony lets the matter slide.

At least until he finds that he’s suddenly out of Steve’s favorite yogurt. “I just bought some two days ago,” he grumbles as he roots uselessly around in the ridge for it. “I bought like twelve of them! And I hate those things, so I couldn’t have eaten them.”

He questions Thor, first, who has a habit of raiding their fridge while they’re gone, but Thor denies it. “I dislike the consistency of yogurt,” he claims, and Tony has to agree with him there.

Which, once again, leaves Bucky.

“I didn’t eat it,” Bucky protests when Tony corners him later, “I don’t even like the blueberry ones. I only like strawberry yogurt.”

After the last slice of Steve’s apple pie goes missing, Tony’s had enough.

“That was *my* pie!” he rants to Natasha and Pepper the next morning in Coulson’s coffee shop. “And once again, everyone denies eating it! So either my fridge has been turned into the Bermuda Triangle, or someone is lying!”

Natasha takes a calm, oddly collected sip of her coffee before saying, “It’s Bucky.”

Tony narrows his eyes, “I knew it. I mean, yes, the guy gets points for proving that he’s not a scary, overprotecting best friend, which I was slightly afraid of when he asked to sleep on our couch, but I’m taking those points right back for stealing the last of Steve’s awesome pie from me.”

Pepper sighs into her coffee and Natasha smirks. “He doesn’t know he’s doing it,” she says evenly, and Tony balks.

“How-”

“Sleep eater?” Pepper guesses.

“Sleep walker,” Natasha corrects. “He tromps around and messes with stuff, eats things sometimes, too.” She shrugs, “One time he sang the entire score of Les Miserables.”

Tony gapes while Pepper descends into a fit of laughter, “Did you ever tell him?”

“Of course.”

“And what did he say?”

“He said he’s never seen Les Miserables,” Natasha deadpans.

Tony groans, “No. I meant what did he say about the sleep walking.”

“Denied it, of course,” she scoffs, “Which is what most people would do.”
Tony folds his arms over his chest, “Well then I’ll just have to catch him in the act. Somehow.”

Natasha takes a long sip of her coffee before saying, “You could borrow my nanny cam,” and Tony’s eyebrows climb into his hairline.

OoOoOoOoOoOo

“I don’t even want to know why you have a nanny cam,” Pepper says as she and Tony crowd around Natasha in Natasha’s apartment.

“Yes you do,” Natasha hums, standing on her tiptoes to snatch a stuffed bear off the top shelf of her bookcase.

Pepper purses her lips, “Not really.”

“It’s probably something stupid like you’re trying to catch Clint and/or Bruce doing something bad,” Tony remarks. Natasha hands him the bear with a piercing glare and Tony smirks, knowing that he’s right. “You do know they probably know exactly what this thing is, right?” he asks, waving the stuffed bear around over his head.

“Which is why they won’t be able to resist,” Natasha says smoothly. Tony makes a gagging noise in return, accompanied by Pepper’s disapproving look at the both of them. “Just put the bear somewhere that Bucky won’t question it or knock it over,” Natasha instructs, ignoring them both. “There’s only eight gigabytes in here, so use it wisely. And make a music video of whatever footage you get.”

“A music video?” Pepper says disbelievingly.

“To a really stupid pop song,” Natasha adds before turning on her heels and waltzing out of the room without another word, leaving a perplexed Tony and Pepper to stare after her. Her reason for leaving, however, becomes apparent when Clint walks through the front door not a moment later.

“Nanny cam!” he exclaims, pointing at the bear before he continues on his way to the kitchen. “Awesome. If you guys are borrowing that I can finally eat all the brownies in peace.”

OoOoOoOoOoOoOoO

Pepper and Tony spend far too long trying to figure out a place to put the nanny cam that won’t seem suspicious, until they realize that putting a stuffed bear anywhere in the apartment is suspicious as hell, and that’s unavoidable. Eventually, Tony decides to settle the thing on top of the television with a sign reading “Do not touch. Possibly robot bear” on it. He figures that with his track record of installing AIs and other such things into objects, no one will question it. And he’s not wrong, seeing as when Bucky returns he just gives the bear a wary stare before wandering over to where he’s taken up root on the sofa.

“I’d stick around to see how this all plays out,” Pepper says, “but since you’ll have video evidence, there’s not really a point.”

“Damn straight,” Tony agrees, and accompanies her out the door so he can pick up more blueberry yogurt from the store.

OoOoOoOoOoOoOoO

The first thing Steve notices when he gets home is that Tony is out. The second thing he notices is that there’s a suspicious looking teddy bear sitting on top of the TV which Bucky is giving the stink
“Is there something I should know?” he asks as he moves to sit next to Bucky on the sofa.

Bucky shakes his head, never taking his eyes off the bear. “No. But Tony put that thing up there and it’s starting to seriously creep me out. I don’t know why.”

Steve glances at the bear and shrugs, “It doesn’t look like something that will explode, so it’s probably fine. Just . . . Don’t touch it,” he adds with an air of knowledge in his tone that makes Bucky wonder just how many things in this apartment explode on a regular basis.

Bucky leans back on the couch, gaze flickering away from the bear so he can properly look Steve in the eye. “Found a new place today. I’ll be out of your hair by the end of the week.”

A smile crosses Steve’s face, “You weren’t in our hair.”

Logically, Bucky knows that as Steve’s best friend it should be alarming how easily Steve slips into the plural pronouns, the our and the we and the us, but instead he returns Steve’s smile. “Naw, I totally was,” he smirks, “I didn’t see it before now, but you guys are really good together. I mean, wait, that came out weird, I totally saw it before now, but I hadn’t seen it in action. Get it?”

Steve looks taken aback for a second before Bucky’s words sink in, “Tony and I?” he asks, just for clarification.


“There’s no need to call me Jesus,” Steve says smoothly, and Bucky snorts out a surprised laugh.

“Nice. But seriously, Steve, I need to know.” Bucky folds his fingers under his chin, putting on his best I Mean Business face. “Are you in this thing for the long haul or not?”

Steve swallows, “Uh, we haven’t really talked about it.”

Bucky groans, “What? Why not? You’re ruining my overprotective best friend vibes. I need to know these things so I can set down the ground rules for who gets punched where if Tony tries to fuck you over.”

Steve blinks, “Tony won’t do that.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

Bucky raises a challenging eyebrow, but Steve just stubbornly stares back at him in return. “I just don’t want you getting hurt,” he sighs. “You know Tony is the world’s biggest commitment-phobe.”

“Moving in together was a big step,” Steve reminds, gesturing around the apartment, “And we got through that just fine.”

“I’m just worried for you,” Bucky reminds, “I mean, staying here these past few days has been an eye-opener for sure, and Tony’s a great guy. He obviously cares about you a lot. But it doesn’t take a lot to make the guy skittish.”

Steve huffs out a sound that’s almost a laugh, “I’m well aware of that.”

“And you should probably be aware that I heard Pepper and Rhodey discussing similar matters over
your head,” Bucky informs, “which basically boiled down to the fact that you are very much a dead man if you’re the one to ditch out on this.” Bucky chuckles when Steve appears offended at the very notion. “We’re all just looking out for you guys. I mean, really, I’m rooting for you all the way. I just have to have back-up plans in place.”

“Natasha told you all the best places in the city to bury a body, didn’t she,” Steve deadpans.

“Duh,” Bucky grins.

Steve runs a hand over his face, “We’re not ready for that sort of thing yet, so you really don’t have to go to such drastic measures.”

Bucky rolls his shoulders, “Eh, you never know man. I mean, you did catch the flowers.”

“Don’t remind me.”

“Steve and Tony, sitting in a tree—”

“Bucky.”

“K-I-S-S-I-N-G—”

“Bucky . . .”

“First come’s love, then comes marriage, then comes—”

“Bucky!”

“Okay, I’m done. Sheesh.”

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

Three days later, Tony knows he has enough video footage to get proper revenge for his pie, and just as Natasha instructed, he makes a terrible music video with it and presents it to the rest of the group on movie night.

“Someone,” he says as dramatically as possible, “Has been stealing the food from our kitchen. Including my pie. I decided to catch the culprit with this,” he holds up the bear and Bucky lets out a groan, “as my assistant.” Natasha catches the bear when Tony tosses it to her, a triumphant smirk in place when Bucky sends a wounded look her way. “So now,” he declares, popping the pre-prepared DVD into the player, “I present to you The Legend Of Sleepy Bucky.”

Bucky lets out a cry of indignation, “What the hell? Who told you I sleepwalk?! It’s a lie - oh hey, look, I sleepwalk . . .” He draws off as, on screen, a very asleep Bucky Barnes traipses across the kitchen to the fridge.

Steve sits up and points an accusing finger at Bucky, “Is that why the stash of fruit rollups would always be gone when you spent the night when we were kids?”

Bucky doesn’t reply, as his attention is fully on the screen where his sleeping self has dropped down to the ground to do pushups. “I’m not even doing them one-handed!” he exclaims indignantly, “This is not a proper portrayal of my awesome manly skills, Stark.”

Tony leers, “Well later you juggle, jump rope, jog in place, and even recite an entire soliloquy. How’s that?”
Sharon chokes on a laugh behind her hands, and Thor moves to sit on the edge of his seat as the sleeping Bucky on screen wanders out of the room and returns with a boxing helmet on his head. Bucky himself covers his eyes and flops over the arm of the couch with a strangled scream.

“Hush. Everyone hush. This is the part where he starts singing Good King Wenceslas!” Tony shushes them, ignoring Bucky’s shrieks of protest.

“I’m never staying with you guys ever again!”
The One Where They're Up All Night

Chapter Summary

There is no If, there's only When. Or at least that's what Tony thinks.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tony Stark does not panic about stupid shit.

Or at least that’s what he tells himself the first time he watches the entirety of the nanny cam footage. At first he just fast-forwards through all the bits that don’t include the obvious things he needs, which would be Bucky sleepwalking and stealing his food. Later, though, when he’s dropping all the video files into the recycling bin on his laptop, he pauses over the one where Steve and Bucky talk.

It’s about fifteen minutes long, and Tony had made it a point not to watch or listen to anything that wasn’t really his business, but he remembers what little he saw of it. Specifically, he knows they’d been talking about him, and recalls with perfectly clarity the wary tone to Bucky’s voice when his name had been spoken.

Curiosity kills the cat.

“Are you in this thing for the long haul or not?”

“Oh, we haven’t really talked about it.”

“I just don’t want you getting hurt. You know Tony is the world’s biggest commitment-phobe.”

The words sting more than Tony would like, and it doesn’t help that Steve seems to agree with Bucky. “I could do it,” he mutters to his laptop as he angrily flicks the file across the screen and into the trash. “I could do that whole permanent commitment thing. I could.”

Tony’s all too used to lying to himself, oftentimes to the point where it’s as much of a habit as breathing, but this lie sinks like a stone into his gut, uncomfortable and heavy enough to make him feel sick. His track record with commitment alone proves him wrong, dissolves his words to dust, and the fearful flutter of his heart at the thought doesn’t back up his false claims in any way.

Living together he can do, but . . . Everything else? Not so much. He thinks of all the instances in his life, all the fuck ups and screw ups, many of which weren’t even his own, but he took them to heart and used them as stepping stones to get to where he is now. He’s seen how bitter such long term things can become, how they can drip with hatred and disgust where they once shone with love, or at least some semblance of it.

Tony clenches his hands into his jeans, staring at his left ring finger with trepidation. Things like rings and vows are like shackles, slapped over the space between knuckles to remind people of all the ways they can mess something up.

That whole “You complete me” thing is bullshit, in his opinion. His parents, he thinks, were the best example of that. Or at least they were in Tony’s mind, framed and nailed to the wall as a constant
blaring reminder of what marriage could be reduced to. They didn’t complete each other at all, and when Tony thinks back and realizes that his mother was more of a trophy wife than anything to his father, he feels ill. She was a placeholder for what society expected of a businessman such as Howard Stark in the same way Tony had been. A pretty wife, a smart kid to take over the business, all the pieces the public wanted to see but Howard never needed, let alone wanted. And no matter how many times Pepper tries to tell him that that wasn’t true, Tony knows better. He was there, standing in the shadows and bathed in the limelight, raised as more of a tool than a person, and he knows better.

There are statistics, startling ones that set Tony on edge whenever he thinks of them, about how likely it is for a child to turn out to be a basic carbon copy of the parent. Abusive fathers lead to abusive sons in a nauseating endless cycle.

Indifference is a level of violence all its own.

There’s no such thing as “You complete me” because that’s not how life works. And Tony can barely pick up the pieces of himself enough to be a whole person on his own, let alone enough of one to be a part of Steve’s better half.

The statistics tell him that he’s doomed to repeat the past, and no matter how much Tony wants to shout a big “Fuck you,” at such things, the truth roils and boils in his stomach all the same.

He’s scared.

Scared of screwing up, scared of hurting Steve, scared of being hurt in return, scared of looking in the mirror and finding Howard Stark staring back out at him, cold and collected as he curls his lip at Tony’s failures.

Tony’s not afraid of commitment. He’s afraid of what he’ll do with it, twist it into until he breaks it, if even given the chance.

In all honesty he’s glad he and Steve haven’t cared, or had time, to sit down and deal with that bit, to sort out their differing plans for the future and figure out whether or not all their little cracks still fit together enough to keep going.

Steve’s personal life plans are clear to him, he’s known them for years because Steve is, for the most part, a traditionalist. He wants domesticity, a place to live, someone to live with, and if luck would have it, a child. Steve dreams of permanence and stability all the while that Tony’s sifting through nightmares of broken homes and broken families. And, god forbid, he does wake up one day to find that his feet finally fit into the shoes Howard left behind, he doesn’t want anyone else to be around to get caught up in the aftermath.

It’s one thing to go down dark roads by yourself, Tony knows, but it’s another to drag others along with you. Commitments are just the ropes to bind them with, for good or for ill.

Tony scoffs at the idea, well aware of how familiar it rings with certain customs. For better or for worse isn’t as glorious as it sounds. People picture the worst being a sick partner, hard economic times, and small tragedies, house fires that don’t claim much more than possessions and heirlooms. Tony’s seen the reality of such promises, and the harsh stubbornness that holds them together despite. Broken hearts aren’t born from love lost so much as love that turns to ashes in your hands, burned and decimated ones own actions.

“I’m not my father,” Tony whispers to no one, but the words sound as empty as they feel.
Bruce is the first one to bring it up, but Jane’s the one to make the plans. It’s like getting science double teamed, in Clint’s opinion, as if Bill Nye The Science Guy and Ms. Frizzle teamed up to try and ram science down the throats of every child in the world. Except in this case the children are the rest of their ragtag group who really couldn’t give enough fucks. Except maybe Tony, but his first comment is, “We’re going to freeze our butts off to look at a space ice ball that we probably won’t even see through the smog and city lights?”

Translation: We’re all going to go sit on the roof in mid March, a month which may or may not be known for its freak snowstorms from hell, and watch a comet pass by overhead that we probably won’t even see because New York City blocks out all natural light, including the moon on really bad days.

Obviously, none of them are too thrilled about this idea. But somehow Jane convinces Thor, and Thor convinces the rest of them because the only person who might be able to out puppy eye Steve is Thor. And that’s saying something. Tony, personally, doesn’t fall for it, but as a general rule most of them tend to do what Bruce suggests, seeing as the last time they didn’t it ended in the sulk of the century. Which should never be discussed or brought up ever. Ever. They mostly just count themselves lucky there weren’t any casualties from the aforementioned incident.

So they make plans to gather on the roof of Tony and Steve’s building after coffee that night. They’re very vague plans, which means Tony has every intention of getting out of them, or at least he does until Steve throws a blanket at him while he’s pulling on his coat.

“What’s this for?” Tony asks, examining the blanket with a wary eye. “To parachute off the roof with back into the realm of sanity and away from Bruce and Jane’s lectures?”

“It’s going to be thirty degrees out, Tony,” Steve says evenly, and Tony glances over his shoulder to see that the news is currently playing on their TV, perfectly timed to the night’s weather report. “It’s so we don’t freeze.”

It doesn’t take more than a second for Tony to connect the dots, especially considering that Steve is currently digging one of the beach chairs out of the closet. One chair. One blanket. One chilly night.

“I think I’ll go after all,” he says before he can stop himself.

“Thought you might,” Steve smiles.

He regrets his decision less than ten minutes later. It turns out that Bruce and Jane want everyone to have a more hands-on experience in looking for the comet, involving standing up, walking around on the roof, and looking through various assorted binoculars and telescopes. Thor, however, is very enthusiastic about the entire affair.

“I have spotted the comet!” he proclaims after his first look through the binoculars.

Jane follows his line of sight and puts a hand to her head, “That’s an airplane.”

Clint perks up at her words, “Can we pretend that airplanes in the night sky are-”

Bruce cuts him off with a smack upside the head, “No. Now keep looking.”

“Does this comet thing have like, a schedule?” Bucky asks. “When does it start?”

“It started seven billion years ago,” Jane and Bruce say simultaneously before going back to peering
through their respective telescopes.

Bucky gags, “Look, I didn’t come here to be lectured by you science nerds.”

“Then please feel free to return the binoculars you’re using to oggle the woman in the next building with at any time,” Bruce deadpans, extending a waiting hand. Bucky glares and lowers said binoculars before pointedly turning to face the other direction.

“It’s not like she was naked,” he mutters. “I was just surveying the general surroundings. In case of danger and stuff . . .”

For the most part, this is basically how the general circle of discussion goes for the next two hours. After Thor’s fourth time mistaking airplanes for comets, Tony gives up and moves to lean against the low wall bordering the rooftop, staring down at the people milling about below. It shouldn’t bug him this much, the thought of a possible future with Steve, but it does. It bothers him to the point where he thinks about it almost every time he’s close enough to Steve for them to be breathing the same air. He definitely contemplates it now that he’s in the proximity of both Steve and Bucky, painfully reminded that Bucky most likely sees more of the truth about Tony than Steve does. And comets be damned, nothing else even comes close to be half as important right now. Howard’s voice is ringing in his ears, has been ever since Tony dared to watch the video and listen to a conversation that wasn’t meant for him to know of. There’s no meaning to what Howard says, noises filled with implications on tone alone more so than harsh words. Thinking back, Tony can’t even remember an entire complete sentence that Howard had ever said to him, and rather finds that his mind is filled with bits and pieces instead. Words like Useless, Disappointment, and Worthless that seep through his thoughts and into his heart without context. He counts himself lucky, though, because at least his father actually talked to him sometimes, even if the words were laced with poison.

Sometimes, he can’t remember if his mother and father ever talked at all other than in argument. That, he decides, is far worse than being all but ignored.

“Something on your mind?”

Tony nearly jumps out of his skin when Natasha moves to sit on the wall beside him. “One of these days you’re going to give me a heart attack,” he warns lowly. “Seriously.” Natasha just raises a thin eyebrow, looking far too pleased with herself for Tony’s liking. “Also, even if there was something on my mind I wouldn’t share it with you.”

“A wise idea,” Natasha agrees, “Or at least it would be if you were subtle in any way.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Tony snaps.

“It means you have different degrees of worried expressions,” Natasha informs. “Worried about work, worried about stupid things, and worried about Steve. You have the worried about Steve look going on right now.” She points at him, “It’s the angriest look of the three.”

Tony snorts, “You’re so full of shit.”

“Said the pot to the kettle. Don’t make me do something drastic, Stark.”

“Like what?”

“Telling you would give you the chance to run,” Natasha says smoothly, “and we wouldn’t want that. So fess up.”

Tony rolls his eyes, “It’s not really any of your business, is it.”
The look Natasha gives him wasn’t the one he was expecting (he’d predicted something along the lines of If I Could Kill With My Eyes I Would), and he rather finds himself blinking at the oddly, almost unnervingly solemn expression on Natasha’s face. “If you run, there’s no guarantee he’ll be still here when you get back.”

“Are you speaking from experience?” Tony can’t help but ask.

“You’re not the only one who gets a rash every time the subject of commitment is brought up,” Natasha hisses. “But I got over it, after more mistakes than you could even comprehend, and I was lucky enough to have people to return to when I was done fucking up, Stark. You might not have the same good fortunes, so it’s only fair that I warn you.”

Tony grits his teeth, “I’m not going to run away.”

“Then prove it,” Natasha snarls, “Talk it out with Steve. Quit chickening out about every little worry you have. It’s a discussion you should have had a long time ago, so now’s as good a time as any.”

“It’s not your job to sort out my relationship problems,” Tony spits.

“It is when you won’t do it yourself.”

“Maybe I will do it myself.”

“Good. Then go do it,” Natasha shoos him with a hand and Tony’s eyes widen in realization.

“Did you just use reverse psychology on me?”


It’s not that simple, though, no matter how much Tony wishes it was. He stays where he is for awhile, drawing up a hundred hypothetical ways to start such a conversation and fumbling with each and every one of them. And besides that, the fact remains that they’re entirely surrounded by their friends at the moment, and this really isn’t the time to talk, or argue, about such things. Natasha watches him battle internally with himself for awhile before casting her eyes up towards they sky. “I don’t think we’re going to see the comet tonight,” she says lazily, and Tony glances at her in surprise.

A few feet away, Bruce sighs, “I’m starting to think you’re right. We just don’t live in the right sort of place to see it.” Jane lets out a disappointed, but agreeing noise to his right, and Bruce goes on, “It’s getting late, anyways. Maybe we should just pack it up.”

“Oh thank god,” Clint exclaims, “I’m freezing my buns off out here.” He pats Bruce on the back, “Sorry you didn’t get to see your shooting star or whatever, though.”

“Comet,” Bruce corrects dully.

“What if I buy you a stuffed reindeer and name it Comet?” Clint asks, “Like Santa’s reindeer. Get it?”

“I don’t need a stuffed reindeer,” Bruce mutters, but it’s fairly obvious by the look on his face that if Clint were to present him one anyways he wouldn’t mind. Clint grins.

“Okay. If you say so, grumpy.”

Natasha starts to herd everyone towards the roof door, shoving them all onto the stairs before Steve
can ever begin to fold up his pool chair, let alone before Tony catches on to what she’s doing. “My sincerest, but not really, apologies,” she says shortly, saluting them both before she ducks back onto the stairwell and slams the door behind her.

Steve stares after her in disbelief, “Did she just . . . That door locks from the inside!”

Tony just puts his head into his hands and tries not to scream.

Bucky’s first instinct is to take pity on Tony and Steve’s insistent banging on the door to the stairwell. Or at least it is until Natasha details her plan to him and he has to admit it’s a pretty fair idea. He, for one, as a casual observer on one part and a best friend on another, knows how fucking stubborn they both can be. Forcing them to talk about it is the best option they have. Especially since, in his opinion, Steve had been shifty as hell about the subject when they’d talked, speaking reassurances that to Bucky’s ears sounded like they were meant more for himself than for his friend. Tony and Steve working their shit out means that he’ll have a lot less heartburn worrying about Steve’s life choices, at least for awhile.

And that information that he does, in fact, sometimes get uncomfortable twinges in his chest when he worries about Steve is never to be shared with anyone ever. Except Natasha, who magically knows everything whether you tell her or not.

So instead of feeling bad for them (because he really doesn’t. Natasha’s plan is gold. Solid gold.) he decides that messing around in their apartment is a much better activity. He just has one phone call to make first.

“Y’ello,” he says when it picks up.

There’s a long, rather drawn out sigh on the other end, “I thought you said you weren’t going to call anymore, Mr. Pouty.”

“Offensive,” Bucky huffs. “Also, I said I wouldn’t call to pester you about things you didn’t want to do, because I am a gentlemen who completely understands when boundaries are set. For the most part,” he adds when he’s met with silence. “And this is something you’ll definitely want to do. Natasha locked Steve and Tony on the roof for the night, so I was planning on rearranging all their cabinets and their fridge, and moving their furniture by an inch, so that they’ll know something is wrong tomorrow and won’t know exactly why, and it will be awesome. Just saying. Want to help?”

“. . . I’ll be there in fifteen.”

“Bring party poppers we can rig up in random places they won’t find until they explode in their faces. Oh and ice cream. Strawberry or sherbet.”

“Got a sweet tooth, Barnes?”

“Just as much as the next guy, Sharon,” Bucky replies crisply. “Or, actually, get Rocket Pops. Because we can leave what ever is left over of them for Tony. I have no idea why he likes those things so much.”

Sharon snickers over the line, “Probably because-”

“Don’t say it,” Bucky interjects, “I’m still pretending that my mind is innocent and pure to such things. Hush.”
“That was the biggest lie I’ve ever heard.”

“I try.”

OoOoOoOoOoO

Clint isn’t asleep, per say, when the terrible screeching beeping starts, but he damn well isn’t asleep now. Untangling himself from the sheets is a feat all its own, but it has to be done. Mostly because Natasha is giving him the evil eye, but still.

“Whatever it is, kill it,” Natasha groans as she curls against Bruce’s side, snuggling down into the warmth Clint had left behind. “And don’t come back until you do,” she adds, and Clint knows she means it.

So he wanders out of the bedroom with his hands over his ears and his eyes darting around, trying his best not to appear as though he’s two seconds away from screaming like a little girl. “Please don’t be a spaceship,” he whispers to himself as he tiptoes across the living room. “Please don’t be a spaceship.” Out of the corner of his eye, he spots a tiny pinpoint of red light, and he sighs in relief, “The smoke alarm. I should have know. Wait, are we in a fire? Is there a fire?” He unhooks the thing from the wall until he holds it, still beeping relentlessly, in his hands. “How do I know if there’s a fire? Natasha how do I know if there’s a fire!?“ he yells in the direction of the bedroom.

“Well smoke and heat!” she shouts back, irritated.

Seeing as there are, clearly, neither of those, Clint isn’t too alarmed. “Right,” he says, carrying the thing over to the coffee table. “Then I just have to make it stop beeping.”

It takes him more time than it should to figure out how to open the device, which continues to let out obnoxious beeps into the night as he does so. After the pause it takes for him to locate them, he dumps the batteries out onto the floor, and the thing falls silent.

“Aw yeah,” he whistles, triumphant. “And that’s how man conquers machine. What now.” He stands, brushing his hands off as if he’d just completed an arduous task, and starts to shuffle back towards the bedroom.

He doesn’t even have time to get comfortable between Natasha and Bruce before the thing is making noise again, emitting an even more ear-splitting screeching noise than before.

“I took the batteries out!” Clint protests when Natasha tosses him back into the living room again and slams the bedroom door in his face.

OoOoOoOoOoO

Tony bangs on the stairwell door for an entire half hour before he gives up. It’s more like he’s forced to give up, though, after Steve finally puts his hands in between Tony’s fists and the unrelenting barrier, catching them tight and pulling Tony away from the door. He tilts Tony’s clenched fingers so that he can see them properly in the bright late night city lights. His eyes narrow at how red the sides of Tony’s hands and fingers are, at the places where Tony kept pounding against the door until the skin wore thin enough to bleed, and others where it stayed thick enough to do nothing but bruise.

“This is a bit of an over reaction,” he says as he runs a careful thumb over one of the darkening places along the edge of Tony’s palm. “Isn’t it?”

Swallowing hard, Tony can’t help but look away. “Natasha locked us up here for a reason, Steve,” he confesses.
Steve raises an eyebrow, oddly unconcerned for the situation, “Oh?”

Tony gapes, “Oh? Is that all you can say? Our friends are devious little meddling dibsticks!”

“You sound like the villains from Scooby-Doo,” Steve smiles, “Except with more . . . Colorful language.”

Tony snorts, “This isn’t the time for jokes. They’re trying to make us talk about things I don’t want to talk about, and that is pretty high on the list of dick moves in my book.”

Steve opens his mouth and snaps it closed again almost immediately, unsure of what to ask first. “What - They want as to talk about something? I don’t - Tony, we’ve gotten pretty good at sorting out our own problems, haven’t we? Why-”

“I heard you and Bucky talking on the nanny cam,” Tony blurts out. “About . . . About the fact that I’m an asshole who can’t commit to something long term. And he told you to talk to me about it, and I just . . . Steve, I can’t.”

There’s no way out, Tony realizes, as the last two words escape him. Natasha trapped them up here with the intention of making sure Tony couldn’t run away. Steve is looking at him, eyes wide and filled with an emotion Tony really, really doesn’t want to give name to. It’s part hurt, part heartbreak, and part shock, dashed together with a handful of anger that makes Tony feel sick. Of course he’s angry, of course. Tony did just crush whatever foolish dreams he had left, didn’t he.

And then Tony finds his out, his escape, in the form of, well, an escape. The fire escape to be exact.

“Can’t?” Steve asks, “Can’t what? Can’t talk about it, or can’t-”

“Either. Both. All of it,” Tony interrupts, slowly inching backwards towards where the ladder leading down to the fire escape is peeking over the edge of the roof. He doesn’t give a whole lot of thought into what he’s going to do before he simply does it, tripping backwards until he’s tipped over the edge of the roof, having misjudged the number of steps it would take to get there, and falling far too hard onto the first level of the fire escape. Tony’s wincing and cursing, too winded by the fall to move, when Steve vaults right over the end of the roof, a look on his face even more troubling than the previous one.

The sheer panic in his gaze is worse, Tony decides, than the aching heartbreak that had been there just a minute before. “Jesus Christ,” Steve snaps, hands already gliding over Tony’s chest, his sides, his arms, and his legs as he checks for injuries. “What did you think you were doing?”

“Freaking out?” Tony answers, breathless as he attempts futilely attempting to push Steve away from him. “Getting away. I can’t, Steve. I can’t. I can’t. I can’t.”

Steve narrows his eyes, “So you fell onto the lawsuit ladder because you ‘can’t’? Tony . . .”

“I didn’t mean to fall, I just-”

“You nearly gave me a heart attack!” Steve snaps, and Tony falls silent. He runs a hand through his hair and over the back of his neck, frustration clear in the deep furrow of his eyebrows and his set and unmoving frown. “And besides, I thought we’d worked past this ages ago. I’m not leaving you, Tony, I’m never ever going to get bored of you. That should have been clear enough from the nanny cam recording. Why would I even think about discussing such a long term commitment if I had no intention of seeing it through?”

Tony swallows, “Steve, it’s not you-”
“If you say ‘It’s me,’ so help me, I will seriously . . .”

“But it is me!” Tony protests. “Or, at least, it will be.”

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

Sharon arrives within the half hour, sometime between Bucky taking every piece of silverware out of the drawer and putting them back in the wrong slots. “How long have you been scheming this?” Sharon asks while they dump all the pots and pans onto the table, an act that most likely wakes up every neighbor through at least three stories of the building.

“Since . . . An hour ago?” Bucky decides. “It’s not like I have anything better to do on a Thursday night. Except so I can be well rested for my usual Friday bar crawl.”

She raises an eyebrow, “Bullshit. You haven’t been bar hopping in a month.”

Bucky gapes, “Did Natasha tell you that?”

“Finder of secrets she may be,” Sharon smirks, “But a keeper she is definitely not. Or at least not for anyone that doesn’t share her bed.”

“Obviously I no longer qualify for that category,” Bucky gripes, clanging a couple of the pots together as he moves them to a different cupboard.

“Bitter?” Sharon questions, sounding fairly surprised.

Bucky smiles, a forced and frozen little thing, “No. Not really.”

An uncomfortable silence works its way between them at his tone, and Sharon returns to shuffling the pots and pans into different cabinets without any further comment. It isn’t until they’re starting to rearrange the furniture, carefully sliding the couch over by an inch or so, that she speaks up again.

“Did you love her?”

This time there is nothing but brutal honesty in Bucky’s slow smile, “Even if I did, it doesn’t matter. What’s the saying? Something about if you love them let them go, and if they don’t come back they were never yours to begin with? It’s probably a lot like that.”

“Probably?” Sharon echoes quizzically. “It either is or it isn’t.”

Bucky shrugs, leaning heavily against the arm of the couch, “Maybe for some people, but I’m not one of those people. No one explained to me how the hell you’re supposed to know if you’re in love or not. Is there a point where your heart flutters or something and you’re supposed to suddenly just understand? Oh, hey, I’m in love with that person? Or does Cupid come along and shoot you in the head with a love arrow and it’s obvious because your head is bleeding since there’s a freaking arrow sticking out of it.”

Sharon chokes out a laugh, “No one explains it, you’re just supposed to know.”

“But how,” Bucky whines, “There needs to be a rulebook for this crap. How am I supposed to know if it’s heartburn or heartache?”

“I . . . Don’t know?” Sharon decides uncertainly. They move to tilt the television screen down a bit before beginning to methodically un-alphabetize all of Tony’s DVDs. “Someone once told me that love was when you wake up realizing that you can’t live without that person, and knowing that if something were to happen to them, if you never saw them again, you wouldn’t know whether or not
you could stand up on your own anymore.” It’s a small thing, really, a fleeting expression of realization and recognition that flashes across Bucky’s features when Sharon speaks. “But I always thought that was sort of silly,” she goes on, unaware of the shock on his face as she shuffles the DVDs. “Saying you wouldn’t know whether or not you could stand again, that is, because that’s indecisive. If you loved them you wouldn’t be able to stand again, at all, for a very long time. Love is when you know you can’t stand, and then finding a reason to anyways.”

“You’re not very much like her,” Bucky says, his voice barely above a whisper.

Sharon blinks, “What?”

“Like the person who told you that,” Bucky clarifies, “Like Peggy.”

Sharon freezes, every muscle in her body stilling and her fingers clenching tight around the DVD case in her hands, eyes wide. “I don’t . . .”

And there’s that smile again, the one that screams the opposite of what it’s meant to, reflecting more pain than joy as it breaks across Bucky’s face. “Ah, yeah, I mean your aunt was a regular old spitfire and all. She was great. Took out more enemies than Steve and I combined most days. Steve may be a soldier, but he’s got a soft heart, he almost never shoots for the kill. And even though Peggy wasn’t usually of the same mindset, she loved him anyways.” He shakes his head. “I think it was because that they were a bit similar in that regard. They’d put their whole heart into something that mattered to them.”

“Are you saying I wouldn’t do the same?” Sharon asks, voice wavering between anger and genuine hurt.

“Not at all. I’m saying that you’d do it differently. You look a little like her, in the right light on the wrong day,” Bucky goes on, “But Peggy was a charger, she knew what she wanted and would move full speed ahead to get it. You tend to weigh your options more, even if you know from the beginning which one you’ll choose.” He clears his throat, taking the DVD out of Sharon’s hands where she’s currently almost crushing it in her grip. “I wasn’t there at the time, so I can’t say for sure, but . . . That’s why you did it, didn’t you?”

“Did what?”

“Let Steve go. You initially cared about him because Peggy cared about him, so you clung to the things you remembered from her letters, the feelings that she’d shared with you, and tried to put them back together, even though you knew you couldn’t. That no one could.”

Sharon tilts her chin up, defiant, “I didn’t want to be someone’s replacement.”

“But you tried anyways. For Steve, and for Peggy.” When Sharon doesn’t reply Bucky looks away, “You knew yourself what the loss was like, were struck down and stumbling because of it, and when you accidentally found someone who was also grieving, you tried to fill that emptiness you thought you’d both been left with, only to realize he didn’t need it to be filled, because he’d found his own ways of patching up the wounds.”

She narrows her eyes, fisting her hands into her lap, “And you?” She knows she catches him off guard with the question, knows by the way he stares at her before looking pointedly away. It takes her a moment to contemplate the idea that no one, not even Steve, had ever asked Bucky that question.
Clint manages to find a pair of fluffy earmuffs before he starts to pick the smoke detector apart. They’re not enough to block out the sound of the obnoxious beeping, but they do dull it a little so that Clint’s stopped contemplating flinging himself out the window anymore. Considering how often he hangs out with geniuses like Bruce, Tony, and Jane, he figures that disarming, or rather disalarming the thing shouldn’t be too hard. Also, he took Tech Ed, once, okay? He knows about the soldering and the wires and all the little whateverthefucks that are inhabiting the insides of the wailing smoke detector. Sort of. Also, Clint got straight As and Bs through most of high school (freshman year doesn’t count, freshman year should be erased from existence and all records of it should be systematically destroyed). He can do this.

“Right. Okay,” Clint mutters to himself as he picks at a bit of green coated wire, “To get the beeping to stop I just have to . . .” He draws off as one of his fingers becomes tangled between two other wires. “Are you fucking kidding me,” he swears before reaching under the table with his free hand and hefting a shoe into the air. “I am so done.”

Without a second thought, Clint brings the shoe down onto the blinking and beeping smoke detector, soundly bashing it half a dozen times until it falls silent once more.

“Aw yeah!” Clint exclaims, leaping up onto the couch cushions to throw his hands in the air, “That’s how it’s done!”

He’s not even halfway across the room when the thing starts to emit a single, drawn out and high pitched screech.

“Clint!” Natasha complains from the still locked bedroom.

Clint promptly grabs the smoke detector and hurls it at the nearest wall. “What do you want from me??!”

The long, loud screech continues, and Clint collapses forlornly onto the carpet, pulling the earmuffs back over his head with a groan.

OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOo

“How so?” Steve asks, far too calm for Tony’s already shattered nerves. “Explain it to me.” He has that stance about him as he sits on the fire escape in front of Tony, hands still on Tony’s arms and his jaw set as he forces Tony to meet his eyes. It’s his patented “I am going to be stubborn as all get out no matter what you say” stance, and Tony would roll his eyes in response to it if he didn’t have a thousand other, worse things on his mind at the moment. “How so?” Steve repeats.

Tony waves a hand around in the air, aiming for nonchalant but knowing it probably looks a lot more like he’s trying to fly. “It’s complicated. You wouldn’t understand. Too complicated.”

“Try me,” Steve states, unimpressed by Tony’s failed attempts to steer him away from the subject.

For a long, tense moment Tony meets Steve’s unwavering gaze head on, taking in all the little flashes of emotion behind his eyes with careful calculation. Upset. Worried. Upset again. Hurt. Confused. Upset. Tony sighs, ducking his head and breaking their eye contact. “I . . . I told you a bit about my father, right?”

“This and that,” Steve says.

“You already know how bad he messed me up,” Tony whispers. He raises a hand when Steve’s gaze hardens, “Not like that! He didn’t - well no more than most - it wasn’t -” he shakes his head, “A reprimand here and there won’t kill a kid, Steve,” he tries.
Steve growls, actually *growls*, a low and guttural rumble, and Tony’s eyes widen in surprise. “It can if it’s a reprimand with the back of a hand or a closed fist.”

Tony doesn’t try and argue that point, can’t find a valid reason to and doesn’t really want to. “Well, as I said, you know all that stuff. So you’re well aware that my home life growing up wasn’t very stable. And it’s not like he ever hit my mom or anything, but I knew how he felt about her anyways, how much disdain he carried for her, even though he never really said it. I’m not sure they were ever in love at all.” There’s a quick and striking flicker of realization across Steve’s face then, but Tony continues before he can interrupt. “He was never meant to be a husband or a father, Steve, but he ended up as both.”

“No, just wait until I’m done,” Tony pleads. “Maybe at one point he saw the ideal sort of love in whatever he once had with my mother, and maybe he once craved the benefits that having an heir came with, but none of those things mattered anymore after he obtained them. He collected people like he collected awards. And I don’t . . . Steve, no one can argue that I’m not my father’s son. No one, except maybe me. Or at least that’s what I made myself believe for a time.” He twists a bit in Steve’s grip until he can successfully curl his fingers over Steve’s wrists, nails digging into skin as he tries to keep his hands from shaking. “But what if I am him, Steve? There’s statistics, horrible correct statistics of the likelihood that someone like me will repeat the mistakes of his parents. Be hurt and hurt in return, you know how it goes. There are commercials and posters and little online informative ads that spell it out for me everywhere I go. One day I’m going to wake up and there won’t be a Tony Stark anymore, there will only be the ghost of Howard Stark and the reflection he left behind.”

He inhales then, trembling just slightly as he draws away from Steve once more. “I can’t do that to you. I remember how dull my mother’s eyes grew over the years, each and every time he yelled at her, yelled at me, and I can’t do that to you. Relationship, yes. Living together, yes. But those both have outs. There’s no paperwork, no rings, nothing to hold you to me if . . . When that happens. I want you to have that out, Steve. I want you to be able to break this off without any strings attached should you ever have to.” He finishes with another shuddering breath that leaves him feeling lightheaded, if only because he’s the one knocking himself off balance this time, admitting to his greatest fear and waiting for the return fire.

Bucky tilts his head back for a moment, gazing up at the ceiling before he gifts Sharon with a smile that’s far too cold for her liking. She shivers at the sight of it. “You know, when I first met your aunt I asked her to dance, only to realize that she already had a dance partner waiting for her. She was like the comet we didn’t see, bright ice and fire streaking across the night sky for one shining moment before it’s gone forever. And I thought, for that one brief second in time, that there was such a thing as fate, because even if the heavenly guy himself had chosen someone like that to step into Steve’s life at that exact second, that person wouldn’t have been even half of what Peggy was.” He clenches his jaw, “So when . . . When she died, when everything exploded in our faces, destroying every stupid cheesy little dream she and Steve had built together and leaving nothing but blood on his hands and scars on his heart, I lost it. I completely and utterly lost it.”

He closes his eyes, scrubbing a hand over his face, “What else was I supposed to do? I couldn’t bring her back for him. I couldn’t tell him it would be alright, because I’m not low enough to lie to my best friend. I couldn’t even reassure him that the sun would rise again the next day. I couldn’t do anything. So I found someone who could.”

Sharon’s eyes widen, “Natasha,” she breathes.
“I’d heard about her before, little things and pieces of information of the Black Widow, the assassin that could never be traced and never be caught, and I figured out where to look, who to talk to so that the information, my request, could be passed on to her. And I guess my scant few connections to a very wide grapevine were enough to get her attention.” He frowns and curls his fingers into fists in his lap. “Or maybe she just needed something to do, someone and somewhere to get away to. I don’t know. But Co -” he clears his throat, “- Somebody arranged a meeting for us, and we had coffee. I told her what I needed, what I wanted, and offered to pay her. She refused, and informed me it was highly likely we were after the same person. The rest is, pretty much, history.”

“History I know very little about,” Sharon comments flatly, “Why don’t you fill me in?”

Bucky grits his teeth, “We both bore too much guilt over the battlefields we’d fought on, and the costs of carelessness, so we were similar in that regard. And yes, we got married. It was part of the disguise, the guy we were tracking down through his spider web of a network was, and is, very good at staying one step ahead of everyone else. And we fucked, too,” he says, tone low and harsh. “It wasn’t pretty, and it certainly wasn’t nice. Natasha once blew it off as part of maintaining the façade of happy newlyweds, but I knew better. She was trying to convince herself that she could return to an emotionless lifestyle, to detached and distant relationships, and even though I was well aware of that I never stopped her, never stopped myself, never even tried to tell her that I knew what she was trying to do.” He digs his nails into the knees of his jeans and lets out a jagged breath that rattles painfully in his lungs, as if he’d forgotten to breath while recounting what had happened. “And we never caught the guy. No matter how good we were, how fast we were, he was always one move ahead of us. I never got to put a bullet between his eyes, and I probably never will.”

“Revenge doesn’t-” Sharon starts, but Bucky cuts her off with a sharp look.

“Don’t try and give me that line, Carter. You don’t know, okay? I’m well aware of the price of revenge, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want it. Steve might not. Steve might be the guy who feels that there’s no point, that taking a life for a life doesn’t get you anywhere. But I’m the one who had to watch my best friend break because of under-the-table bullets and illegally-dealt weapons. I’m not doing it for him, and I’m not doing it for Peggy. I’m doing it for me. It’s selfish, I get it, but it’s true. And maybe it won’t make me feel any better about what happened, and it definitely won’t change what already happened, but it sure as hell will help me sleep better at night.”

He turns away from her, flipping through the rows of carefully alphabetized DVDs and mixing them up with absentminded movements. “I didn’t love her,” he says after a beat, “I needed her. And that’s not always the same thing. Loosing her meant that I couldn’t finish the job. It meant that I’d be stuck here, counting the days until December Second every year and knowing that other people would be marking off similar dates on their own calendars, who would also bring flowers to war graves and talk to cold headstones.”

Bucky pushes a line of DVDs back into place before stepping back to admire his handiwork of jumbled up movie titles until Sharon gets up to stand at his side. “You’re like her,” Sharon says quietly, and Bucky raises an eyebrow. “Like Aunt Peggy. You put your whole heart into what matters to you.”

“Thank you.”

OoOoOoOoOoOoOoO

Natasha storms out of the bedroom at half past three, a jacket in her hands. Clint has reverted to curling up into a little ball on the floor and weeping into the carpet while the smoke detector screeches on into the night. It takes Natasha less than five seconds to retrieve all the little beat up parts of the appliance and bundle them up in the jacket, and then she’s marching out into the hall
with the entire thing. Clint rolls over and drags himself to the door so he can see where she’s going, promptly smacking himself in the face when she dumps the bundle into the laundry chute at the other end of the hall.

“Back to the pits of hell from whence you came,” Natasha mutters before stomping back into the apartment.

“You are a genius,” Clint praises while she drags him to his feet and back to the bedroom. “Why didn’t I think of that? You are the best.”

“You’d do well to remember this event before you eat all the brownies Bruce made tomorrow morning.”

“Bruce made brownies?”

“If you eat them all before I wake up you’re going down the laundry chute next.”

OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOo

Steve is silent for a few heartbeats too many, and Tony’s already examining the rickety stairs down to the next level of the fire escape when he finally speaks.

“That is the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”

Tony glances up to gape at him, “What?”

Steve rolls his eyes, “You’re aware of what your father did, to both you and your mother, right?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“And you are, clearly, scared to death of repeating his mistakes.”

“Bingo.”

Steve nods, “So there you go. Two reasons you will never, ever become the sort of man your father was.”

Tony narrows his eyes, “You don’t-”

Steve stops him with a hand on Tony’s shoulder, “My father was an alcoholic, Tony.”

“ . . . What?”

“He wasn’t a nice guy,” Steve continues before Tony can question him any further. “He and my mother were not on good terms, sometimes to the point where I questioned if he’d ever cared for her at all. With the logic you’re going off of, that means that someday I’ll turn out to be just like he was, and continue the vicious cycle he upheld, as I’m sure his father before him had also done, correct?”

“Of course not!” Tony snaps.

“Why’s it any different for you, then?” Steve asks smoothly.

Tony purses his lips, “It just is. You grew up into a good guy, Steve, whereas I’m the exact same, if not worse, mess my father was. I designed my first missile when I was twelve, inherited old money when I sixteen, and lived without caring about anyone but myself until I found out what my weapons were doing to people. I didn’t get the chance to redeem myself for my father’s mistakes. You did.”
“You’ve redeemed yourself a hundred times over, Tony.”

“Not to myself. And even if I had it wouldn’t fix anything, change anything.”

Steve sighs and catches Tony’s hand when he waves it in his face in an endeavor to cut off any more arguments Steve might have. “I don’t need you to want that, though,” Steve confesses quietly before placing a light kiss against Tony’s palm. “I don’t care if we make that type of commitment or not. The point isn’t that we have rings or licenses, that’s not what this is about at all. Maybe I’d like it, yes, but it’s not a deal breaker if you don’t. All I care about is staying with you.”

“Even when the day comes that I end up hurting you?”

“If,” Steve corrects softly. “And yes. Even then. I don’t need for better or for worse, I already decided a long time ago that I’d stick with you through both, no matter what.”

Tony chokes as Steve presses another kiss to his left ring finger, “Don’t-”

“I won’t push you to do anything you don’t want to,” Steve smiles against Tony’s knuckles.

“Remind me, again, who was it that called who ‘stupid’ a few minutes ago?” Tony asks shrewdly. “Because I’m fairly sure that it was the pot speaking to the kettle.” Steve just smirks and Tony leans forward to let his head rest on the blonde’s shoulder. “You suck, you know that? You seriously suck.”

“I love you, too.”

“You won’t be saying that in ten years,” Tony mutters.

“Watch me.”

OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOo

It takes time. There are too many silent moments as they shift Tony and Steve’s furniture around, rearrange their books, and pour all their shampoo and conditioner into the wrong bottles, too many places where one of them should say something, but neither does. When they’re worn out and are done admiring their subtle handiwork, they play Connect Four without a word passing between them. It isn’t until the sun is beginning to peek over the distant horizon that they say anything, and by that time Sharon is shrugging into her coat in the hall and Bucky is locking the door to their friends’ apartment behind him.

“Thank you,” Sharon says with an air about her as if she’s merely discussing the weather, “for telling me.”

Bucky just shrugs, staring at the floor as she walks away and keeping his gaze there until she’s at the end of the hall. “Thank you for keeping me company,” he tells her just before she disappears down the stairs.

“We kept each other company,” she says resolutely. “And we’re pretty good company keepers if I do say so myself.”

“Do company keepers go out for coffee together?” Bucky inquires.

Sharon smiles, “We’ll see.”

OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOo
Someone knocks on the door five minutes after six in the morning, much to Bruce’s annoyance. At first he elects to ignore them, too busy getting ready for work to care about a solicitor who had snuck into the building despite the sign in the lobby discouraging such things. It isn’t until the fourth knock that he realizes that whoever is standing outside his door is accompanied by a very loud, distressing beeping sound.

When he finally goes to open the door he blinks blearily at the full outfitted fireman standing there with a coat in one hand and a mangled, beeping smoke detector in another. “Uh, can I help you?” he asks, and it is way too early in the morning for this crap.

“Are you Bruce Banner?” The fireman asks, mouth set in a tight, disapproving frown.

“Er . . . Yes?” Bruce says hesitantly.

“We found your alarm in the laundry chute.” He dumps the battered bits of the thing into Bruce’s arms before Bruce can complain.

“This isn’t mine,” he squawks, feeling a little distressed by the sound of the fire alarm’s insistent beeping.

The fireman grunts, “Yes it is,” and holds up the jacket, revealing the scribbled words Property of Bruce Banner not Clint on the inside of the collar. “You know it’s against the law to disconnect those, right?”

“I didn’t-” Bruce sputters. “What? How do I even turn this thing off?”

“The reset button under the cover,” The fireman says with a vague gesture towards the mess of parts in Bruce’s arms.

He leaves then, and Bruce stumbles over to the counter to find the fabled reset button so he can get back to his morning routine. It takes him three minutes to give up trying to find what clearly isn’t there, or at least isn’t among the bits and pieces that remain of the still inexplicably wailing smoke detector. “There is no reset button!” Bruce yells. He frantically gathers up as many of the pieces as he can and hurries towards the bedroom to dump them at Clint and Natasha’s feet.


Clint screams into his pillow and Natasha reaches under the bed to pull out a binder labeled Places To Bury A Body. “I think this deserves to rest in the same grave as that Furby Thor had two years ago, don’t you think?”

“Sounds like a plan,” Clint agrees.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, I'm so fricken sorry this chapter took so long. I literally had something going on every single day that I wasn't at work these past few weeks, which obviously gave me little to no time for writing in between. Not to mention that it took me three tries and over 3,000 scrapped words to get a proper start going on this one. Also, obviously, it's hella long this time.

ENJOY.
The One With The Two Year Waiting List

Chapter Summary

Pepper is a genius and no one can say otherwise, not even Tony Stark.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tony tries not to think about it. In fact, he succeeds in not thinking about it for two entire months, and in his opinion that deserves a pat on the back. He’s actually thinking about it so little (AKA, not at all) for so long that he blissfully allows himself to completely forget about the matter. Mostly. He mostly forgets about it, which is close enough.

Tony conveniently forgets about rings and commitments and any and all things accompanied with the matter until mid May, and then everything goes to hell in a hand basket.

It starts after Steve finally finishes his volunteer firefighting training and enters SHIELD Coffee waving four slips of paper over his head. “Graduation gift,” he explains when Tony raises an eyebrow at him over his cup of coffee. “All of the volunteers got them. They’re tickets to the Morgan Chase Museum.” He pauses for a moment, examining the tickets in his hand before saying, hopefully, “We could go on Saturday?”

Tony smiles apologetically, “I have a meeting, remember? The one Pepper wrote in on the calendar in the kitchen with red marker? We could try for another day, though.”

“They’re only good through this week,” Steve says glumly.

Tony’s already drawing up a list of excuses he could use to get out of his meeting when Natasha raises a hand. “I’ll go.”

“I like the museum,” Jane inputs as she sets down her scone.

“I sort of wanted to see the new Helmet-Pelts exhibit,” Sharon adds offhandedly.

Tony claps his hands together, “Well there you go. Four tickets and four people. You’re good to go.” He smiles when Steve casts him a confused look, “It’s not like it would have been a date anyways, with four tickets.”

“I was thinking of a double date,” Steve confesses, glancing towards Jane in askance.

Jane huffs out a laugh, “With Thor and I? Really? Thor? In a museum?” Thor lets out a grumbling sound of protest at this, and Jane pats his arm. “You are the literal bull in the china shop, sweetheart. A museum isn’t the best place for you. Remember when you knocked over the shelf of plates at the store? That was Target. This is a building full of priceless and irreplaceable artifacts.”

“Point,” Steve agrees, and Thor silently nods along. “So the four of us, then? Saturday?”

In retrospect Tony really should have foreseen how bad an idea this was, but he didn’t.
The story, from most people’s perspective, is rather short. You go to war, and then you come home. The fact that those seem to be the only two parts of the tale people seem to care about makes Steve feel a little ill, sometimes. Of course, that’s now how everyone sees it, and he knows that. He knows that although Tony doesn’t ask for the details, he understands enough to wake Steve from his nightmares, to pull him out of memories that can’t be shaken off and keep him close as he grounds him to the here and now. And that’s enough. Most days, that’s more than enough.

Tony doesn’t ask for the details, and Steve isn’t sure he’ll ever be able to tell him anything more than bits and pieces, little things that don’t hurt as much to say. Telling Tony that the last time he was at the Morgan Chase Museum was with Peggy isn’t really a little detail so much as a big one, so he doesn’t say it. He thinks Tony knows anyways, though, in that strange way he does that Steve will never fathom.

Tony knows, and shows that he does, in the way he’s already making breakfast that morning when Steve gets back from his run. “Pancakes okay?” he asks, and Steve just nods. “They’re probably gonna be burnt,” Tony adds after a pause, “So grab the good syrup.”

They are burnt, little rings of black around the edges which portray Tony’s cooking skills, or lack there of, quite well. But Steve doesn’t mind at all. “They’re good,” he says when Tony looks nervous, “Really good.”

Tony knows, and shows that he does, when he fixes Steve’s shirt before he goes. “Don’t you ever iron these? I mean, I don’t iron anything but at least I take it to the drycleaners so I don’t look like someone’s grandpa. Quit pulling your pants up so high, you geezer.” He fixes those, too, fingers lingering where they’re hooked in Steve’s belt. “Are you sure you don’t want me to come? I can cancel the meeting, I-”

“I’ll have three . . . Two giggling girls and Natasha with me,” Steve reassures. “It’s just a museum, Tony, I’ll be fine. If you get off early you can meet us for lunch?”

Tony knows. Tony knows, Tony knows, Tony knows. Steve can see it in his eyes, the worry there when there usually wouldn’t be over something so trivial. It’s in the way he stands, fidgety and unbalanced as he smooths out another crease in Steve’s shirt. And Steve can’t help but laugh because of it. Isn’t he supposed to be the unbalanced one today, not Tony? “I love you,” he chuckles as he catches Tony’s face between his hands.

Tony rolls his eyes, “Yes, yes. But you have that look on your face and I just-”

Steve raises an eyebrow, “What look?”

“The . . . Distant look,” Tony attempts, “It’s . . . You get that look on your face when you’re remembering something. And not something . . . It’s never really something good. So I just-”

“I know,” Steve murmurs, stopping Tony’s rambling in its tracks. Tony stares at him, mouth open in shock for a heartbeat before Steve leans in and kisses him. “I love you.”

Tony narrows his eyes as he pulls away, “I’m starting to get that you have different sorts of ‘I love yours’. The previous one was a Thank You I Love You, wasn’t it.”

“You’re learning,” Steve smiles.

“Don’t patronize me, mister.”
The story is short. You go to war, and then you come home. Or at least that’s how everyone else sees it, no matter what they’re told otherwise. The truth of the matter has been chronicled many times, in history, in novels, in film reels. It’s the moral of all war stories, even the ones chronicling places and people that never were. The truth is that you don’t come home, not really. And Steve is far, far too aware of that.

Whatever his home was before he went to war, he’s glad he didn’t, and couldn’t come back to it. Trying to fit a puzzle piece where it no longer belongs is both tedious and impossible. A person can change a war just as much as a war can change a person, and that’s an undeniable fact. Steve Rogers left as one man and came back as another, and trying to fit the new man into the old man’s life just wasn’t worth it.

So he made himself a new one. He found a new apartment, new friends, new people to surround himself with as he healed, and he has never regretted it. Steve didn’t come home from the war because he built himself a new home instead, and he likes to think it’s better that way.

He can’t avoid all the old places, though, like the museum. That would be both foolish and folly. Bucky told him, once, that it helped to gloss over the memories of places and people with new ones. Steve lingers between how easy something like that would be, and how wrong he knows it is. Glossing over something implies devaluing its importance, of replacement and ignorance. He’d prefer, he thinks, to see the situation as a book, a document filling up with pages and chapters where he could flip back and see what he’d already read, what had already happened, all the while continuing on towards the end and the epilogue. A book’s pages aren’t interchangeable, can’t be mixed around so that one fills up the empty space where another had been, because then the story becomes jumbled and unstable, words and paragraphs out of place.

Steve isn’t overlapping the story of Peggy, of before, with the present, the story of Tony, or vise versa, as Tony sometimes seems to think. The world isn’t made up of those close to you and replacements and substitutes for them, but rather of something more simple. People. Steve doesn’t love Tony because he’s like Peggy, or even unlike Peggy, and in the clearest and most honest explanation, Steve loves him just because he’s Tony.

The museum is no different. It’s not a monument of the five and a half hours Steve and Peggy had spent there one cloudy afternoon, nor is it a marker for grief as Steve had half expected it to become. Instead, it is merely there, a structure to house priceless artifacts and art, as it should be. And when he stands in front of it for the first time in many years, he finds that it will never be anything more than that.

The doorways and hallways of the Morgan Chase Museum are no more filled with the ghost of Peggy Carter than the rest of Steve’s life is. If he had to describe the moment he stands in front of the huge double doors, the faint ache and flutter of his heart that mixes with a bubble of a surprised laugh and a smile as he remembers how Peggy had lectured him for holding those same doors open for her, he would not illustrate it as anguish. Rather, he realizes, it’s a lot closer to relief, like unclasping tightly closed hands to find that the butterfly you’ve kept tightly cupped against your palm is still beating its wings.

The museum may house memories, statues and portraits and crumbling bits of history that speak stories of war, death, and heartache, but they are not home to any of Steve’s.

“You look oddly happy for someone about to be tortured with endless amounts of horrendously boring art depicting constipated looking winged babies,” a voice intones, effectively snapping Steve out of his thoughts.

Clint has his arms folded over his chest, his gaze on his feet as he stomps his way up to Steve’s side,
Natasha close behind him with her hand placed a little too firmly against the back of Clint’s neck for the gesture to be mistaken as either loving or gentle. “Uh,” Steve tries nervously as Natasha’s fingers dig into Clint’s skin when he squirms a bit. “I wasn’t aware you were joining us. I only have four tickets.”

“I’m paying for him,” Natasha says mildly, relaxing her hand and withdrawing it slowly, warningly. “It’s a small price for a well deserved punishment.”

“I broke the curtain rods,” Clint stage whispers to Steve, “She’s not happy with me.”

“How did you-” Steve stops himself with a pinch to the bridge of his nose, “No, never mind, I really really don’t want to know.”

Clint nods, “Professional stripper poles and curtain rods are apparently not made of the same thing, and one should never be substituted for another.”

Steve covers his face with his hands, “You didn’t listen to a word I just said, did you.”

“I did, I just decided that I shouldn’t have to be the only one who suffers mental pain today,” Clint grins.

Steve raises an eyebrow, “Not a fan of art?”

Clint laughs and waves a hand, “Nah, art is fine. I just hate standing around and staring at the same cracked vase for five minutes.” When Steve continues to look confused, Clint smirks, “Just wait until we get inside. Natasha will hold us all up with her careful examination of every piece on display. Last time she dragged Bruce and I here it took us two hours to work our way through the first floor alone.”

Natasha, who has been pointedly ignoring them both, takes the tickets from Steve when she notices them sticking out of his breast pocket. “Stop chatting and get moving.”

“But Jane and Sharon aren’t here yet,” Steve starts while she shoves Clint towards the door.

“I’ve got it covered, go, go,” Natasha shoos.

Clint narrows his eyes at her back when she retreats to go meet Jane and Sharon, “That was . . . Odd.”

“I get the feeling I’m being set up for something,” Steve says cautiously, glancing at Clint for confirmation.

“Definitely,” Clint agrees, “But I wouldn’t worry unless Pepper magically shows up. It’s when you’re getting ginger tag-teamed that you know for sure that shit’s about to get real.”

“Noted.”

OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOo

Tony knows something is wrong when he gets to the board meeting and it takes less than twenty minutes. He’s positive it’s Pepper’s doing when he learns that she called in sick.

In all his years of knowing her (they were closing in on a decade now, holy shit Tony felt old), Pepper had never once actually been sick when she called in. Tony would know, since seeing as he couldn’t function in office settings without Pepper’s support he would often times go to her house
and fake sick as well when this happened. He had been suspicious for awhile now that Pepper might be some sort of android or something, or possessed a mutation that kept her from catching things even as simple as the common cold. When they were together he’d been determined to figure out this puzzle, but Pepper never did anything more than mention she was allergic to strawberries, which proved absolutely nothing.

Pepper Potts, in Tony’s memory, had never been legitimately sick, and any work days that she was absent from with the excuse of the sniffles were often times days when Tony found himself caught up in something absurd that was claimed to be beneficial for him. Incidents such as the time she left him in the middle of the city with a couple hundred dollars to his name were the results of such days. Thusly, Tony had a valid reason to be concerned when he was informed of Pepper’s absence, and could really not be blamed for the wave of terror that washed over him when she didn’t answer her cell.

“Did I miss someone’s birthday?” Tony asks Bruce when he finds the good doctor lounging in his and Steve’s apartment. “I know it couldn’t have been Pepper’s because I’ve been good about remembering that one for the past few years. When’s Natasha’s birthday, holy shit what if I missed Natasha’s birthday. I’m a dead man.”

Bruce just flashes him a quizzical look over the top of his Gameboy DS, “Tony, even I don’t know when Natasha’s birthday is. It’s one of the many classified bits of information I’m not privy to.”

“But what if I missed it?” Tony whines, “I don’t wanna die, Bruce! Pepper’s missing and there’s always a reason for that, a bad reason that usually ends in me being guilty and miserable.”

“Aren’t those your automatic default settings anyways?” Bruce asks sarcastically.

Tony flips him off, “My default setting is awesome, thank you very much. Now are you going to tell me what you know or not?”

Bruce chews on his bottom lip, considering this, before saying resolutely and without regret, “Not.”

“So you do know something,” Tony hisses. “You traitor.”

Bruce smirks and goes back to playing his game without another word.

Logically, he’s well aware that Pepper has never actually done anything that would hurt him. Severely strain his emotional and mental limits, yes, but not hurt him. And, admittedly, everything that she has done for him, suspicious motives and methods aside, did help.

He feels he has the right to worry all the same, however.

“I’ll call Happy,” he decides after a pause, leaving Bruce to his game in order to figure this thing out before the rug gets pulled out from under him, as it no doubt will with Pepper involved.

It started over coffee, as most things tend to do between them, and it ended with a plan.

“Tony’s ready,” Pepper said simply the week before. “More so than he ever was with me, I’m sure of it.”

“You’re positive? As I recall, he was prepared to get hitched with you after dating for little under a year,” Natasha frowned. “We’re closing in on a similar amount of time and he completely lost his
Pepper pointed a finger, “Exactly. Anyone who isn’t scared shitless of something so serious isn’t really in it for the long haul. It’s that sort of fear that portrays how much he loves Steve. If he was confident about it then he wouldn’t be acknowledging the reality of the situation.”

Natasha chuckled, “You took three days to decide to marry Happy after he proposed, so I suppose that is a valid hypothesis.”

It took very little coordination or effort, for the most part, and within a few days Natasha and Pepper had concocted the perfect scheme. Nothing could go wrong, and every move had been predicted, right down to Tony leaving a panicked message on Pepper’s phone before she had even set foot in the museum.

“I know you’re up to something, Pep, and whatever it is I want no part of it.”

She rolls her eyes with a fond smile before shutting her cell off and handing it to Happy, “If Tony calls you, ignore him,” she instructs before sidling up to where Natasha is waiting to meet them.

Tony’s not stupid, but for every layer of genius in that man there’s an equal layer of dense as fuck. It’s a quality in him that Pepper finds more endearing than she should, mostly because it makes her life a little easier when it comes to situations such as these. She guesses, correctly, that Tony has pushed the idea of marriage so far out of his mind at the moment that this will be the last thing he expects to be sprung on him, a matter that will be just as shocking as she intends it to be.

Sometimes, a good shock to the system is the best reality check in the world.

“Shit just got real!” Clint proclaims when he spots her entering the museum. “I told you, Steve, I told you! Someone call Bruce and tell him how our cruel fate came about! Warn him before it’s too late.”

Natasha kneels him in the leg, “Hush, this isn’t about you,” she hisses, voice too low for Steve to hear as he moves to nervously greet Pepper, Sharon and Jane at his side.

Clint purses his lips, “Lies. The world revolves around me.”

“It’s about Steve and Tony,” Natasha clarifies, watching as Clint’s eyes widen in understanding.

“This is a bad ide-”

“It’s a great idea,” she soothes as she smacks a hand over his mouth to silence any protests. “And all you have to do is try not to fuck it up, kapeesh?”

Clint wiggles away from her, “No way. Seriously, this is a bad idea. I mean, you’re well aware of what my issues with commitment are like, and if you multiply that by ten then you’re starting to get close to Tony’s amount of issues. He’s going to flip.”

“Which is why this is just step one of a very long list of steps,” Natasha explains. “A list that involves a time period of at least two years.”

Clint takes a second to contemplate this, hand on his chin as he stares her down, “. . . That might work.” He holds up a finger before she can respond, “However, if this ends in me getting an eyeful like the last dozen times you interfered with Steve and Tony’s relationship, I’m out of here.”

“There are no plans for any nakedness,” Natasha assures before adding, “Today.” She whirs around towards where Steve is eyeing the two of them suspiciously, “Right then, I thought we came here to
see some art! Let’s get a move on!”

“You’re so fucked,” Clint whispers to Steve as he strides past.

OoOoOoOoOoOoOoO

Pepper Potts is a genius, and even Tony will attest to that. It was through the hard work of Pepper Potts that Tony was able to keep his position as head of his company after the fiasco with Obadiah. It was thanks to the fast thinking of Pepper Potts that Tony didn’t end up drinking himself to death shortly there after, and rather found himself sitting in the middle of New York with a handful of twenties in his pocket and nothing more. It was because of the stubbornness of Pepper Potts that Tony stopped being a complete serial one night stand man. And it would be through the sheer awesomeness of Pepper Potts that Tony would realize he was, in fact, a man for commitment.

Or at least that was the plan, anyways. Hell, she’d convinced herself to settle down, and that was something to be proud of. Convincing Tony wouldn’t be any more difficult. Except convincing wasn’t really the right word, as it was more like subtle manipulation.

Whatever the means, though, Pepper knows her plan is foolproof. And that’s exactly why she and Natasha can’t let Clint in on the final part of it.

Two years is far too long, in her opinion, and Tony always handles things better under pressure.

The timing, however, has to be perfect, and she’ll make sure of that even if she has to drag Natasha and Steve through the museum herself, which is basically what she has to do.

“But I want to sketch—”

“No.”

“Pepper, that was a display holding some of the first ever Matryoshka dolls and—”

“No. We’re going to the main atrium to see the traveling exhibit Jane wanted to see.”

Clint raises a hand, “Will we be allowed to stop at the gift shop sometime today? Or is that also a no?”

Pepper eyes him for a second before muttering a quick, “Maybe after lunch.”

“We’re still meeting Tony for lunch, though, right?” Steve asks carefully, sighing in relief when Pepper nods. “Then we have just enough time to go see one more exhibit.”

In Pepper’s opinion, it took far too many phone calls to orchestrate this whole affair, and it all relied a little too heavily on her precisely planned timing. It’s only reasonable, then, that they arrive at the main atrium five minutes too early. Steve, however, takes no notice of the way she keeps exasperatedly checking her watch, too busy staring at the displays with Jane and Sharon to pay attention to her and Natasha’s fervent whispering.

“We’re too early,” Pepper informs.

Natasha growls, “Or maybe your watch is off and we’re too late. How do we even know this Raven girl is reliable to play along?”

“She’s the museum’s official event planner, ‘Tasha, I’m pretty sure she can handle showing up at a specific time and following our instructions.”
“You’re underestimating the levels at which Steve and Tony can accidentally fuck something up,” Natasha reminds.

“Hey, I like to whisper, too.” They both jump as they notice that Clint has sidled up beside them, hands on his hips and eyes narrowed. “But as we all know, whispering is frowned upon as a method of sharing information that could potentially harm someone.”

Natasha curls her lip, “No physical harm will come to either of them.”

“Mental trauma counts as harm in my book,” Clint says lowly.

“Tony can handle it,” Pepper dismisses him.

Clint raises a disbelieving eyebrow, but has no time to comment further as he’s shoved aside by a young woman entering the main atrium, closely followed by an excited looking couple who can’t be more than a year or two out of college, if that. The girl is clinging tightly to her partner’s arm, even though he keeps trying to detach himself from her as their guide leads them through the massive room.

“The aisle can be here,” the woman gestures down the length of the atrium, “And most people hold the ceremony at that end there,” she waves a flourishing hand towards the front of the room.

Clint slaps a hand over his mouth as he realizes what Natasha and Pepper have been planning. “Holy . . . I didn’t know you could get married in a place like this,” he gapes, stunned.

Steve is, quite suddenly, at his side, a casually interested expression in place. “Neither did I. It’s a beautiful place, though.” He moves a few steps towards a high arch at another end of the atrium, “But this would be a better place for the ceremony, don’t you think? Where the sun from the skylight illuminates the space under this arch here.”

The woman leading the soon to be married couple eyes Steve with a critical gaze before clearing her throat and saying, “Excuse me, may I help you?”

Steve lets out a soft, apologetic sound, “Oh, no, sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

Pepper clears her throat pointedly, “Do you do a lot of weddings here?”

After a pause, the woman extends a hand to her, “I’m Raven,” she introduces herself, “Event planner and manager for the museum. We hold weddings here most weekends, but there’s currently a two year waiting list.”

“Jeeze,” Steve whistles, “It’s a popular gig, isn’t it.”

“Very,” Raven says tartly. “Were you considering scheduling a date with us, sir?”

Pepper doesn’t miss the way Steve hesitates before he shakes his head and smiles, “Nah, not right now.”

“Well that’s why there’s a two year waiting list,” Natasha reminds carefully. “You don’t have to get married right this second, you have two years to dick around.”

Steve blinks at her, “I don’t . . . Tony and I already decided that we . . .”

“You decided that’s not what you wanted to do right now,” Natasha readily fills in for him, “But I was under the impression you were more of the ‘Never say never’ type, Steve.”
“Belieber,” Clint coughs, wincing when Natasha elbows him in the ribs.

“I’m not going to push Tony into anything he doesn’t want,” Steve says stonily.

Natasha shrugs, “Suit yourself. But I’m signing up.”

She whirls around and waltzes past where Clint is currently choking in shock, arms flailing about as he struggles to catch up to her. “Are you nuts? We’d never even use the reservation, Nat!” He follows her to where Raven is holding out a large date book and a pen, tugging at her hand the whole way.

“Two years is a long time,” Natasha says evenly, “You never know what could happen by then.”

“If polygamy becomes legal in two years I’ll let you tie me up to that arch,” Clint mutters, watching in fascinated horror as she pens her name and phone number.

Jane and Sharon are suddenly beside them, “I wanna do it too,” Jane says as she plucks the pen from Natasha’s hand, “And if I’m not engaged in two years I just won’t use it!”

“Same,” Sharon says with a longing look around the atrium. “If only because this is such a nice place.”

Jane nods in agreement, “Who are you going to marry?”

Sharon snorts, “Myself? Is that an option?”

“Er . . .”

“Quit dawdling,” Natasha scolds, batting the two of them away so she can drag Steve over to the book, “Steve has to sign up, too. Come on.”

Steve takes the pen that’s thrust into his hand, staring at it for a long moment before slowly signing his name. Clint congratulates him with a hearty pat on the back while Jane and Sharon argue over whether marrying yourself is legal.

“One guy married a body pillow,” Sharon points out, “And some lady married a company. An entire company.”

“I wouldn’t use those as role models,” Jane says stiffly.

Pepper waits approximately ten minutes, or the time it takes for everyone else to make a full circle of the atrium and all the pieces on exhibit, before crossing the room to where Raven is still patiently waiting.

“Here to cancel?” Raven asks slyly, opening the book to the coming November of that year. Pepper finds her name easily, written in red pen beside Happy’s with ink that’s now nearly two years old.

“Give my reservation to the Stark-Rogers party,” she instructs airily.

Over her shoulder, Happy chuckles. “Didn’t we sign up for that when we were at that party here? We’d only been dating for a handful of months at that time.”

“We were very drunk,” Pepper admits. “Very.” She signs off on the cancellation form Raven hands her before turning to track down the rest of their museum-going group. “And, just to double check, you’ll be calling the number Mr. Rogers left when, exactly?” she asks, addressing Raven once again.
Raven smirks, “As soon as I return the calendar to my office assistant, Ms. Potts.”

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

When he’s tired of pestering Bruce and failing to get a hold of Happy on his cell, Tony spends an entire hour watching Thor try and teach Chick and Duck how to play hide and seek. It is, overall, not a very successful effort.

“Why do they just sit there when I clearly gave instructions for this game of hiding and seeking?” Thor asks, leaning down so that he’s eye level with the two farm fowl. “Are they deaf?”

“I don’t think they understand English,” Tony deadpans.

Thor mutters something indiscernible under his breath before saying, “Loki always convinced them to do his bidding, though.”

Tony huffs, “I’m pretty sure Loki’s some sort of evil mastermind, big guy, he could make chipmunks do the cha-cha if he tried hard enough.”

Thor considers this for a moment before declaring, “My friend, you are a man of science, are you not? Couldn’t you devise a way for me to communicate with my feathered friends?”

Tony stares at him before turning on his heel towards the door, “Would if I could, buddy, but I have to meet Steve for lunch in a half hour. You know who’s also a man of science? Bruce. And Bruce could help you, seeing as he’s just loafing around on my sofa playing videogames at the moment.”

It takes only a few minutes for Thor to coerce Bruce away from his game and over to his place to “Experiment on whether or not birds understand human speech,” as per Thor’s request. Tony is rather thankful to find his apartment empty when he leaves them, and immediately collapses on the couch with an arm thrown over his eyes. “It’s not even noon yet,” he whines into the fabric of his sleeve. “And I still have another meeting at three. Why.”

When the phone rings, he gives it no notice, too busy listing all the reasons he hates the corporate part of his job to pay any attention to it, let alone care. It isn’t until the voicemail picks up that he moves his arm away from his face to roll over and stare at the flashing message machine.

“Hi, you’ve reached Steve Rogers,” the voicemail declares in Steve’s friendly greeting. Tony can’t help but smile. “And Tony Stark,” it goes on in Tony’s own tones, “We can’t come to the phone right now, so please leave a message.”

“Steve has to be the only person in the world who still uses a landline and a voicemail,” Tony murmurs into the side of the couch as the message machine lets out a loud, drawn out beep.

“Hello and good afternoon, Mr. Rogers, this is the assistant of Raven Darkhölme with the Morgan Chase Museum events department,” the caller starts.

“It’s not afternoon yet!” Tony retorts at the machine, knowing that his words will go unheard by the speaker on the other side.

“We’re calling to inform you that there has been a cancellation in our calendar for the second to last Saturday in November of this year, and would like to know if you would consider rescheduling the Stark-Rogers wedding for that date.”

Tony is on his feet in less than a second, scrambling over the arm of the couch and practically collapsing on top of the end table as he fumbles for the phone. “This is Tony Stark! This is Tony
“Stark!” he gasps into the receiver, chest heaving. “Yes, the groom - No! Not the groom!” He listens to the assistant talk for a minute before he responds with a tight, “Yes, that’s fine. We’ll call you back this evening,” hanging the phone up with a slam.

And then he breathes, short, gasping, panicking breaths until he feels his heart rate start to begin its slow descent back into normality. “What the hell,” he wheezes. “I don’t . . . What the hell!”

Tony is exactly thirteen minutes late, sixteen if Steve counts the time he spends talking to Raven at the museum entrance before joining them in the café.

“I haven’t been here in years,” Tony remarks offhandedly when he takes a seat to Steve’s right, “They’ve really jazzed the place up, haven’t they.”

“It looks the same to me,” Steve says. He instantly picks up on the tension in Tony’s posture as he smoothes out his napkin over his lap, the thick sound of his words when he speaks, and the way he won’t meet Steve’s eyes. Something is, quite obviously, very wrong. “Did the meeting go all right?” Steve questions, concerned.

“Fine,” Tony grits out, “I have another one in a few hours.”

“Will you be home in time for dinner?”

“Probably.”

The noncommittal way Tony says this sends a chill down Steve’s spine. “Tony-” he starts.

“Don’t,” Tony snaps, “Just . . .” He sighs, rubbing a hand over his forehead before facing Steve head on. “Okay, just . . . I know you’re not the type, and you already said you wouldn’t do it anyways, but just to clarify, if I said no to something you wouldn’t pressure me to do it anyways, right?”

Steve’s jaw drops, “Of course not!”

Tony’s eyes narrow, and he casts a swift glare over to the other side of the table where Pepper and Natasha are suddenly very absorbed in their menus. “Right. Good. Next question then,” he sighs, long and loud before asking quietly, “You love me, right?”

“Tony-”

“Steve, just answer the question.”

“I love you,” Steve replies easily. “But I don’t understand, what-”

Tony shushes him with a finger to Steve’s lips, ‘Later. I’m not finished. If I, god forbid, ever did anything to hurt you, would you kick my ass and knock some sense into me? Or at least complain to Bucky so he can do it for you?”

“Uh . . .” Steve hesitates.

“Close enough,” Tony relents. “Last question. Just to clarify everything one last time. You want this, right? This relationship, this . . . Us. I’m not just hallucinating that we might actually make it?”

Steve nods dumbly until Tony draws his finger back, allowing him to give a proper response, “Yes. I want this,” he whispers, “And that’s not going to change. Tony, is there something I should know? Did something happen at work or . . .”
Tony shakes his head, “Nothing. I’m just being paranoid. It’s not a big deal.” He calmly flips his menu up in front of his face, ignoring Pepper and Natasha’s confused tittering across from them. He leans back in his chair a bit and tilts his head up, gazing around the museum café before glancing at Steve again, “Have you been in the atrium yet? I heard they remodeled it a couple years back, it’s supposed to be hoppin’ with parties these days.

Steve reddens and he raises a hand to scrub over the back of his neck. “Oh, uh, the atrium was really nice.” His eyes glaze slightly and Tony feels the quirk of a smile forming on his face as he looks away again, seemingly absorbed in his menu.

“Right,” he murmurs.

OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO

For awhile, Steve lingers in the museum gardens, hands clenched tightly in his coat pockets. It’s been years, he knows, since he’s walked here with Peggy, but he likes to pretend that the blades of grass under his feet were only just flattened by them, just for a moment or two. The footprints left by the pond side could be theirs, the way the toes of them are already being washed away by the wind and the water side by side. The stone bench under the tree, warmed by the afternoon sunlight, could have only just been occupied by two young lovers, soldiers on a short and slipping leave from war. They walked this path, stood in the shallows of the water, and sat on the cool granite seat when it was covered in soft cloud shadows.

But it’s been years.

Part of him wanted to bring Tony here, to do the same things over again and wash away the memories that stuck in him like a thorn and paint over them with new ones, ones that don’t sting as much, don’t ache.

He doesn’t, though, and instead says nothing about the matter when Tony departs after their all to brief lunch. The other part of him, the stubborn part, knows it’s better to let that thorn remain where it is, pricking and stabbing at his heart as the pain slowly lessens over time. And he knows that it will, knows that it has been, with every day and every breath and every heartbeat he has taken, and will take, after Peggy’s death. Replacing her, replacing the memories, has never been the point, if there was any point at all. He does not linger in the garden with the intention to erase her, so much as to remind himself that not all thorns are adorned by bramble and briar.

This year, he decides with a smile, he’ll bring Peggy some roses.

When he returns home the apartment is oddly quiet, the lights off and the windows closed up tight. He thinks nothing of it as he tosses his keys onto the key ring by the door and moves to deposit his coat on the back of one of the kitchen chairs. Tony tends to nap after a long day full of meetings, so the silence is far from unusual on a day like this. Steve bustles about the room, moving things out of the fridge and onto the counter as he starts getting things ready for dinner before he wanders over towards the bedroom to see if Tony wouldn’t mind helping.

Except Tony isn’t there.

Unconcerned, Steve checks the fridge where they usually leave notes for each other when they have to go somewhere, mildly surprised when there’s nothing but a wad of coupons from the Sunday paper stuck to the freezer. “Weird,” he says to himself before reaching for his cell.

Tony doesn’t pick up.
It’s only then that Steve starts to worry, because Tony always picks up, even when he’s in a meeting. The only times he hasn’t picked up was when he was mad at Steve, or upset about something. But he’d only just reassured Steve he was neither over lunch that day.

Steve started sorting through the food on the counter, fidgeting as he shifted his attention between that and the door. Tony had probably just gone out to get milk, or something of that sort, they were pretty low on milk.

His eyes only catch the blinking flash of the message machine when he’s pulling his coat back on to go check the coffee shop.

“You have one new message,” the thing chimes when Steve absently presses play.

“Hello and good afternoon, Mr. Rogers, this is the assistant of Raven Darkhölme with the Morgan Chase Museum events department. We’re calling to inform you that there has been a cancellation in our calendar for the second to last Saturday in November of this year, and would like to know if you would consider rescheduling the Stark-Rogers wedding for that date.”

Steve breath catches in horrified realization, and he’s already moving towards the machine, picking it up in his hands and shaking it, “No, no, no! You weren’t supposed to call for two years! Oh, God, he didn’t hear this, did he?”

“This is Tony Stark! This is Tony Stark! Yes, the groom - No! Not the groom!”

Steve’s legs give out from under him, and he finds himself sitting on the hardwood floor, breathless with fear. “Oh, no. Tony, no. I didn’t . . . Oh, god. I have to find him. He probably . . . Oh god.”

He blabbers on incoherently, hands shaking where they’re still clutching the machine. “I have to go find him,” he repeats unsteadily. “I have to-”

“Have to what?”

Steve jolts, fumbling with the message machine as he stands and finds Tony shrugging off his coat in the doorway. “Did you get milk on the way back from the museum?” Tony asks, “Because I totally forgot. And if you want toast or sandwiches tomorrow we need bread, too.” He purses his lips and pauses halfway through a motion to throw his coat on the couch. “Actually, let’s just go get that stuff now. Because I definitely want a sandwich tomorrow.”

“Tony,” Steve whispers.

Tony turns towards him, confused, “Yeah?”

Steve holds the message machine up and Tony rolls his eyes, “Oh, that. I already said, didn’t I? At lunch? No big deal. I know Pepper and Natasha probably lead you straight into that one. You said you wouldn’t push me and I believe you. And, frankly, we’re probably just not ready for that step. Or at least I’m not.” He takes the thing from Steve’s still-shaking hands, placing it on the table and taking said hands tightly in his own. “Whoa, look at you, babe. Jittery much?”

“I thought-” Steve starts, stops, ashamed to have thought it at all.

“That I’d leave?” Tony chides good naturedly. “After trying to hurl myself off a fire escape, I think I’ve reached the point where nothing else you do could scare me off.” He bites his lip, “Except chickens. If you get a bird of any kind I am out.”

Steve laughs, a choking, relieved little sound. “Seriously? That’s the only condition?”
“For now,” Tony says mysteriously, “You never know. I could become like one of those rich bitches on MTV and start demanding foot rubs and Nicholas Sparks movie marathons.”

“Sure,” Steve smiles.

“Now go grocery shopping with me because every time I go to the store alone I lose another bit of my sanity, which logically shouldn’t even be possible but it is,” Tony pleads, taking half a step back as he starts to put on his coat only to collide with the end of the sofa. “God damnit! I swear this thing has been moved, I’ve been saying that for weeks now, Steve, and you don’t believe me. But it’s been moved.” He waves a hand towards the door, “Go, go, I’ll be right out after I kick this couch back into submission.”

Steve laughs as he heads towards the door, stepping out into the hallway and out of sight just before Tony pulls out his phone and hastily types something in.

You fucking suck, you conniving genius. Thanks. -T

You are very welcome. I assume Raven showed you the atrium? Beautiful, isn’t it. Dibs on maid of honor! -P

Tony smirks and stuffs his phone back into his pocket as he heads out the door, catching up to Steve by the stairs and taking his hand. “If we’re going to the store together you have to let me be all up on you when we pass old people. Because it’s funny when they look really scandalized.”

“Tony . . .” Steve sighs.

Chapter End Notes

Once again, I sincerely apologize for how long this took, but my life was basically like, ironically, a sitcom for this past month. I got a wisdom tooth removed one week, found a six week old stray kitten in a parking lot the next (and yes, I kept her, her name is Darcy), and then this week I moved back up to the dorms and started classes again, so my life has been extremely hectic. I’m usually better at updating while I’m at school, though, so hopefully that holds true.
The One With The Ring

Chapter Summary

Thor takes Jane to his hometown and Tony realizes that finding a ring is a lot harder than he expected.

Loki has been gone for 297 days. Thor knows, he's counted, fingers lingering over every weekday and weekend between then and now. He's unsure if the absence is what the sayings make it out to be, a reason for the heart to grow fonder, or whether it's slowly chipping away at him over time instead. For almost as long as he can remember, Loki has been a part of his life, and when Thor finds himself without him, without seeing him and sometimes, gods forgive him, without thinking of him for longer and longer periods of time, the guilt and grief just about rips him in two.

It is not with any conscious intention that Thor starts to fill in the spaces in his life where Loki used to be, it simply happens over time.

Morning routines where Thor would take an hour searching for his favorite hoodie in Loki’s things are instead carried out in the coffee shop, a cup of jo between his hands and a smile on his face as he listens to Clint and Tony argue over who gets the last chocolate doughnut. Dinners once spent arguing over take-out places to order from are now spent in Jane’s apartment, an open cookbook between them as they learn how to prepare meals together. Afternoons passed in mutual silence and the occasional mild exchange are used instead for walks in the park and bike rides to Main Street.

It’s not so much a series of replacements as the rearranging of a system, one that once orbited around Loki and now functions entirely on Thor’s own whim and will. He uses the time for himself, and the lingering thought that, perhaps, Loki was right in saying that the time apart would do them good makes him feel a little ill.

“I want to go somewhere,” he says when Jane enters the apartment, a stack of notebooks and papers in her arms.

She pauses a minute, rifling through them before giving him her full attention, “Somewhere other than the park? I thought we were going to ride bikes again today.”

Thor smiles, “Nay, today is not the time for a race.”

Jane sighs, “Thor, every time you race you take the corners too fast and crash. That’s why we don’t invite Bucky along anymore.”

“I will get better,” Thor shrugs. “Tony says that practice makes perfect.”

“Tony applies that theory to the statistics of how many times his inventions explode,” Jane points out, “So I’m not sure that’s the best advice.” She shrugs and glances around the room, at the summer lit windows, at the dust catching the sunlight in the empty corners of the room, at the muted TV framed by the two recliners that look as if they’ve been moved recently, indentations left in the carpet where they once sat. The question of whether or not Thor shifted them on a whim or out of anger goes unspoken. Jane knows what the answer would be by the way the one on the left seems slightly off kilter, as if the frame underneath has been bent in places.
Thor follows her gaze for a heartbeat before turning away again, “Are you busy?” he asks, almost too quietly to be heard.

Jane shakes her head, “No. Did you want to go somewhere, Thor?”

He stands, moving across the room to flatten a hand over a pair of tickets on the countertop. “Just a day trip,” he explains when he turns his wrist and lifts them for her to see. “I’d like it if you could accompany me.”

“Of course.”

OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO

The movies and media always make it seem like the wedding was the hard part of getting married. Or at least that’s where all the huge disasters happened. Objections, run away brides, second thoughts, cold feet, hair disasters, dress disasters, missing bridesmaids, hung over groomsmen, vow slip ups, and everything in between that could be filmed and put on America’s Funniest Videos. And, quite frankly, Tony does not want any part of his life being narrated by Tom Bergeron, so he’s determined not to let any of that crap happen to him.

The media, however, is full of shit though. The hardest part of getting married is finding a fucking ring.

Tony has already sorted through a dozen engagement magazines and twice as many catalogues for jewelry shops, all without finding a single thing he likes.

“These are complete shit!” he yells, throwing his stack of magazines into the air and watching them scatter across his living room floor. “They’re all made up of 90% women’s jewelry!”

“That’s kind of what the majority of the populace looks for when it comes to engagement rings,” Clint says from his perch on the armchair. Tony throws a wadded up Jared’s ad at him. “I’m just saying, dude! No need to be mean!”

“Then help me,” Tony pleads, “It’s been a week and a half and I haven’t found anything that doesn’t make me want to barf.”

Clint blinks, “I really don’t understand why you even need a ring. Steve’s gonna say yes whether you have one or not.”

“Let’s just pretend I’m a traditionalist,” Tony says dryly.

“You should get him The One Ring,” Clint suggests immediately. “Because it’s The One Ring. And then when bitches are going around showing off their rings with diamonds that could sink the Titanic, Steve can hold out his hand and be like, ‘Yes. But I have the one ring to rule them all.’”

Tony stares at him for a moment before asking, “Is this some sort of dream of yours?”

“Possibly.”

“Okay then . . . But I don’t think that’s the sort of thing Steve would go for, so . . .”

“I heard you can get a piece of bone extracted from your jaw and grown into a ring now,” Clint tries. Tony grimaces, “Yeah, no. That sounds kind of creepy.”

“Natasha says that if polygamy ever becomes legal that’s what she wants us to do. I think it’s
because then she can trap us forever with voodoo or something,” Clint decides far too calmly for what he’s discussing.

“I really have nothing to say to that other than to raise my eyebrow and silently question your sanity,” Tony responds, proceeding to do just that.

Clint flips him off, “Do you want my help or not, Stark?”

“Do you know the difference between a Tiffany cut and a Princess cut?” he flips the nearest and least damaged catalogue and holds open one of the pages for Clint to examine.

“Yes,” Clint deadpans, “I also know the difference between those and the menagerie of paper cuts you’re currently sporting after tossing a bunch of magazines about.” Tony yelps and rushes to the kitchen sink to rinse the thin lines of blood from his hands. “Tired much?” Clint calls after him. “I mean, it takes a hell of a lot of a lack of sleep for me not to notice things like that, and the fact that you didn’t, oh king of insomnia, is probably not a good thing.”

“I’m just a little stressed out right now,” Tony hisses.

Clint smiles, “I really don’t understand why.”

Tony scoffs, “Probably because you’re already as committed as you can possibly get in your relationship, short of having kids.” Something in Clint’s eyes darkens, but Tony takes no notice, too busy fretting over his own problems. “Whereas I’m attempting to, uh, what’s the phrase, tie the knot? Yeah, that. But I’m failing miserably because I can’t find a freaking ring!” He gestures wildly at the scattering of magazines near the sofa. “This shouldn’t be so hard!”

“You could get a custom,” Clint suggests.

Pursing his lips, Tony considers this, “I could. Except I know nothing about rings in the first place, so I wouldn’t know what to ask for.”

“Well then you should study up on the selections,” Clint decides, “Go to the shops around town and browse to see what you like, what Steve would like, and figure out what to do from there.”

Tony’s eyes light up, “That’s actually a great idea. Let’s go.”

“Let’s?” Clint echoes, “I wasn’t planning on-”

“I need your keen bird eyes for this,” Tony says seriously. Clint groans.

“I’m not a - Ugh, never mind. Fine. It’s not like I have anything better to do.”

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

There’s a difference between being brave and doing the right thing. Thor, possibly, knows this better than anyone.

Bravery is standing up an authority figure, a father. Bravery is abandoning a home, a safe place built of all you’ve ever known. Bravery is walking when you’re not sure if you can walk anymore. Bravery is being lost in unfamiliar surroundings while still moving forward despite. Bravery is taking up root somewhere new, constructing a life of new places and people until you finally feel stable again. Bravery is staying behind. Bravery is offering a hand and saying, “It’s all right,” without knowing if your words are true, just that you wish them, believe them to be.
And that’s just it, isn’t it, starting with an extended hand and ending with being left behind. He has no way of knowing what the full consequence of those actions were, of all of it all of his life. But he fears, almost knows, that those things, those little braveries, were not right.

Children are taught the differences between right and wrong with fables, spun tales of chopped down cherry trees, boys who cry wolf, and golden balls tossed into wells. Those stories are for the simple things, though, the moral and the obvious.

No one teaches children about the consequences of the tougher things, the parts that sometimes hurt more than they heal. Thor wishes, far too late, that someone had.

“Did you take a train when you came here?” Jane asks when she returns to their compartment, a bag sandwiches from the lunch trolley in hand.

“I used a bus, among other methods,” Thor says simply, which sounds suspiciously like he might have stolen a bus (completely on accident, because, well, it’s Thor), but Jane doesn’t comment on that.

“And Loki?”

“He walked,” Thor explains. This does not come as a surprise to Jane, in all honesty. “And hitchhiked,” he adds after a pause. This doesn’t really come as a shock, either.

Jane slides into her seat beside Thor and passes him one of the sandwiches, “Was it far?”

Over time, Thor has told her bits and pieces of what happened, moments that lead him to where he is now. It doesn’t yet make a complete and linear story, but she knows the details that matter. The exact whens and wheres, but in the end, that information isn’t even half as important as the rest of it.

“As far as we’re traveling today,” Thor says easily.

Jane blinks at him as the words sink in, stunned silence settling between them before she chokes out, “We’re going to your family home?”

Thor laughs, “Hardly. I merely wanted to revisit the area. I’m not sure I’m up to walking through my father’s door just yet.”

“But it’ll be the neighborhood you grew up in, right?” Jane is practically bouncing off of her seat in excitement.

“More or less.”

“Will I get to meet them?”


“No, your friends,” Jane clarifies, still absolutely giddy, “What did you call yourselves again? The Warriors Three or something? Except there were a lot more than three of you . . .”

“Thor, Loki, Sif, and The Warriors Three,” Thor booms, amused. “And we can see them, if you wish.”

“I wish a whole lot,” Jane grins.

Thor chuckles, “Then so it shall be. I will contact them posthaste so that we may meet up for dinner.”
In truth, Thor hasn’t talked, or given much thought to his old friends in an uncomfortably long time. He tries not to contemplate the fact that it’s because they grew apart, tries not to think about how they didn’t follow when he asked for their loyalty.

“But this is our home.”

Thor knows that for most people the word “home” has a meaning. It represents a specific place where a person can feel grounded, safe, and loved. But he has always found that it is the people who form a home, rather than four walls.

He had not expected them to follow him when he’d asked, though the little, unwelcome flicker of hope had said otherwise. There is such a thing, however, as asking too much. Thor realized as soon as he’d spoken that day that that was exactly what he was doing. He should never have asked his friends to help in what they had no heart for. While he’d always tried his best to include Loki into the group, the truth rang cold and clear that day.

“This is our home.”

Home was where one grew up and grew old, where family members were born and buried to stay with smooth gravestones where they’d once stood. Home was where friendships had been formed and broken, one just as easily as the other, a rip and tear that left marks behind long after the fact. Home was where the streets and roads grew so familiar they could be walked with eyes closed and only sound to guide the way.

For Sif and The Warriors Three, Loki had not been included in that definition.

It’s okay, though. In the end that’s just the way the world works. People grow apart, whether it’s due to their own choices or something inevitable.

When he scrolls through his phone down to Sif’s name he hesitates to dial. How many years has it been again? Too many? Too few? Either or, it’s enough that Thor fears that he’ll be stepping where he’s no longer welcome.

Then again, he’s always the one to take the route of bravery and wonder about the consequences, both right and wrong, afterwards.

He dials.

OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO

“Did you know you’re kinda psychotic when you’re pissed off?” Clint asks mildly as he watches Tony storm around the interior of the jewelry store for the fourth time in five minutes.

“Did you know,” Tony parrots, “that you are literally no help at all? This is the zillionth place we’ve been to and I still can’t find the perfect ring!”

Clint sighs, “And thus the rampaging through the store. I get it, okay, but sulking and stomping about isn’t going to make a ring magically appear.”

“Says you,” Tony mutters, but he follows when Clint motions for them to leave and step outside.

Usually, Tony isn’t much a daylight person. He prefers to walk the streets of New York City at night, if he has to at all, and the early summer sun that beats down on them as they exit the latest jewelry store is entirely unwelcome. “I hate this,” Tony grumbles, trudging along at Clint’s side. “Meandering along and window shopping without finding anything I like, let alone something Steve
will like. I don’t understand how girls can like this sort of crap.”

Clint tilts his head, “What, shopping?”

“Yes.”

“It’s no different than you ordering a dozen items off of eBay,” Clint shrugs. “Except that it takes a little more time and you can go out to a nice lunch and enjoy some human interaction and conversation along the way.”

“Yeah, I get enough of that crap at work,” Tony huffs. “Where to next, oh master of totally not helping me find a ring.”

Clint purses his lips, “Actually, I called in some help. So we’ll be meeting someone at the antique store down the street.”

Tony makes a face, “Oh, what? First of all, antiques are gross. And they smell. Second, you are a traitor. No one else is supposed to know what I’m doing today.”

Clint just hums in response, a sly smirk on his face. “If you say so. I was thinking we needed some military precision in this sort of decision. Heh. That rhymes.”

Narrowing his eyes, Tony says, “If you’re talking about Bucky, I’m going to run before he gets here. But if you’re talking about Rhod, then I’m going to squeal into my hands like a little girl.” He pauses as Clint’s smile widens. “Seriously? But he was supposed to be marching around the base for another month! I love you.”

“Save those sentiments for Steve,” a voice says, startling Tony out of his high-speed jabbering.

They’re still a block from the antique store, but Rhod has met them halfway, hands in his pockets and stance easy and relaxed as he eyes them. Tony clasps his hands together, “You got time off?”

“A week,” Rhod says, “It pays to let your vacation days pile up, Stark. Now what’s this I hear about you getting engaged without telling me.”

Tony sticks out his tongue, “I’m not engaged . . . Yet. Do you even know the definition of engaged, Mr. So Single He Could Be A Monk?”

“I’m pretty sure that nickname describes your entire life between dating Pepper and dating Steve,” Rhod replies smoothly.

“You wound me,” Tony gasps, “But you’re wrong. I saw people.”

“Seeing people in a situation wherein you are touching their genitals and then never seeing them again is not considered dating, Tony,” Rhod reminds.

Clint chokes on a laugh, “Oh, so much burn. Round one goes to Rhod. Ding! Can we finish up this freaking ring shopping ordeal now, please?”

Rhod eyes Clint for a moment before grabbing Tony by the arm, “The fact that you didn’t tell me you were getting engaged in the near future and were going ring shopping is something I find deeply offensive.”

Tony glares, “Uh, you were supposed to be dicking around with the military for a couple more weeks, so . . .”
“The excuses you use when you forget to keep in touch are growing old,” Rhodey warns.

“I wouldn’t forget if you were around more,” Tony pouts.

“Sure you wouldn’t. Now let’s go pick out a ring for that guy of yours.”

The antique store is relatively empty and thin layers of dust cover the aging collectables and fine furniture. A single salesman is shuffling about behind the counter, his expression stony and professional as they enter with a ring of a small bell above the door. “May I help you?” he asks, addressing Rhodey who is already heading towards a jewelry case in the back.

“Not at the moment, thank you,” Rhodey says before hurrying past, Tony being dragged along behind him and Clint bringing up the rear with a bored yawn. He hauls Tony up in front of the glass windowed case and stands him there, pointing at the merchandise inside, “If you don’t find the sort of thing you’re looking for in here, I can’t help you.”

Tony raises an eyebrow, “Putting a lot of faith into your ring shopping skills, aren’t you?” Rhodey simply gestures towards the case again until Tony returns his attention to it.

“I’m starting to think I should just buy him a dog or something,” Tony mumbles, “An engagement dog. Can people do that? Or an engagement car, since I already gave him a motorcycle. Engagement robot? I mean the coffee machine is practically one already. Engagement . . . How offended do you think he’d be if I tied a ribbon around my-”

“Engagement Revolutionary War Musket!” Clint screeches from the middle of the store, a gun held up over his head.

Tony stares at him for a long moment, “You know, I’m so glad I chose you to help me out with this, Clint.”

“Of course you are,” Clint cackles.

Rhodey gives the musket a considering look, “I don’t know, Tony, if someone got down on one knee and presented that to me I’d definitely marry them.”

“Both of you are useless,” Tony says through gritted teeth. He leans down to get a better look at the selection of rings beneath the glass and points to one. “This one isn’t half bad. Hey,” he straightens and waves down the salesman, “Guy. Sir. You. Can I see this ring, please?”

The man rolls his eyes, “This one?” He pulls the ring out, balanced perfectly on a small, plush purple velvet cushion. “This ring is from the early 1920s. It’s made up of a thick sterling silver band with an ingrained thin band of gold along the center, approximately two karats worth to be exact. The inside is smooth and unbroken silver, perfect for engraving.”

Tony’s eyes widen as the salesman speaks, gaze fixed on the ring held before him. “Okay. Wow. Okay. Can I ask you to hold that ring out to me and ask me to marry you?”

The salesman opens his mouth to protest, but Rhodey signals him to keep quiet. “Humor him,” Rhodey instructions.

“Right . . .” The salesman drawls. “Will you marry me?”

Tony claps a hand over his mouth, “Yep,” he says, his voice totally not wavering around the single syllable. “That’s the ring. I found the ring.” He straightens and pulls at the collar of his shirt before clearing his throat, “How much is it?”
“The shift from overly emotional to expertly professional was unnerving,” Clint says as he shoves Tony aside, “But stop right there. I am a haggler. I am good at haggling. That’s why you brought me along, remember?”

“I brought you along because you caught me looking at jewelry catalogues,” Tony deadpans.

“Whatever,” Clint sniffs. He turns his attention to the salesman, “Sir, how much is the ring?”

“$8,600,” the salesman provides.

Clint nods, “We will give you ten dollars.”

“Oh my god,” Rhodey growls, “quit messing around so Tony can buy the thing already.”

Tony fumbles for his wallet, “Right, right. Just give me a second to locate my credit card . . . That I gave to Steve so he could pick up a new chair on his way home from work to replace the one that Bruce broke last week . . .”

Rhodey blinks as he absorbs this information, “You know,” he says steadily, “Sometimes I think, ‘Tony is done goofing up. He finally has his life on track. I’m so proud.’ And then stuff like this happens.”

Tony scowls, “It’s not a big deal. I’ll just catch a cab, go back to the apartment and snag it from him, and come back here. It’ll take a half hour, tops.”

“And the ring?” Clint asks. “What if the ring isn’t here when you get back?”

“Guard the ring,” Tony instructs, already halfway to the door, “Both of you.”

When he’s gone, the door still swinging on his hinges in his wake, Clint turns to Rhodey with the musket still in hand. “I wonder what other sort of old war antiques they got around here.”

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“We have a Union cannon from the Civil War downstairs,” the salesman provides.

OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO

Thor is, contrary to popular opinion, not from a small town. Or at least not by the general description of the term. He does not know the names of everyone he passes on the street, and neither do they know his. There are chain restaurants and chain shopping centers, regular traffic and stoplights at every four-way crossing. It’s not small, not really, but it pales in comparison to the towering heights of New York, and returning to it after so long makes it seem like nothing more than a few houses and some stores.

“This was where I went to elementary school,” Thor says he and Jane pass the stout little building. “I met Sif there in kindergarten when she smeared mud into my hair. And Volstagg when he challenged me to a sandwich eating contest in third.”

Jane smiles, “How did you become acquainted with Fandral and Hogun?”

Thor chuckles, “Let us just say that we had a bit of a rivalry over gym class and a game of dodge ball gone too far.”

They keep going, navigating the crisscross of streets and roads where Thor used to wander years before. “We stuck together into our college years, too,” he explains, “for awhile, at least.”

“But?” Jane prompts carefully.
Thor attempts an uncaring shrug, but the tight frown on his face betrays him. “It was a ways away from here, so I didn’t find out about Loki and my father’s fight until later, or about Loki running away. So when I set out to find him I asked if they would accompany me. They refused.”

“Oh.”

Thor shakes his head, “I should not have expected them to, to be honest. Loki was not their responsibility, nor their family, it was not their duty to follow me in my search.” He smiles slightly, “They did great things, you know, became great people. They got degrees and jobs and made names for themselves, whereas I ended up, well, nothing of the sort.”

Jane smacks him gently on the arm, “Quit that. You’re not anything less than them just because you cared about your brother.”

“I am not more than them, either,” Thor reminds. “I made a choice and they made theirs. I do not hold any ill will towards them for that. There’s only so long you can cling to childish wishes and dreams, after all.”

The pair is approaching a space between the houses by now, a dip in the landscape that’s free of trees and shadowed places. For as long as Thor can remember, a playground has rested in that groove between homes. It’s a tiny thing composed of nothing but a slide, a few swings, and a rusted old hopping frog. While he’s surprised that it has remained standing for so long he’s relieved to find it as such. “This is the place,” he says softly when they reach the edge of it, toes of their shoes digging into the sand the area is boxed in with.

Jane’s eyes skim over everything, the frog that looks as if it’ll fall over the next time a child sits on it, the slide’s long, wide tube that’s starting to grow thick tendrils of grass along its base, and the swings that are still swaying in the summer breeze. “Here? When I imagined it it was so much bigger.”

Thor huffs out a laugh, “It seemed bigger when I was small. Impossibly big.”

“I can’t picture you as ever being small,” Jane teases.

Shaking just slightly with amusement, Thor approaches the swings. His hands catch the middle of the three, his fingers curling over the chains until it stops and stills in his grasp. “Loki doesn’t remember,” Thor begins when Jane draws up beside him.

“Well he was very young at the time, wasn’t he,” Jane reminds.

“Four,” Thor agrees. “But sometimes I wonder that if he did, if he remembered this, would he still feel so lost?” Jane falls silent, unsure of what to say in return. “I thought I was helping him,” Thor continues. “I was wrong.”

“No,” Jane reassures, “How could you have been wrong? You were six, Thor! Six years old! And what would have happened to him otherwise? If you hadn’t-”

“Maybe I took him!” Thor shouts. Jane takes a step back, not out of fear so much as the need to give Thor his space as she studies the conflicted anguish in his eyes. “Just because he was alone here doesn’t mean he was abandoned! What if someone came back for him only to find him gone? I offered my hand to him because I was selfish, Jane, and I know that. I wanted to play the hero, the brother, the savior in a situation I knew nothing about.” He turns away from her and collapses into the seat of the swing, heels gouging rough marks into the sand. “And now,” he says, voice falling to nothing more than a whisper. “Now he can’t remember that, and it’s tearing him apart. He has no beginning before me, and so he can not find an end, let alone a middle where he can stand on his
own.”

Jane slowly moves to sit in the swing to his left. “It isn’t your fault.”

“Isn’t it?” Thor whispers. “If anyone is to blame, it is I. My father accepted him into our home, regardless of whatever came after. My mother called him her son and raised him as one. My friends did their best to consider him one of their own. And I? What did I do for him, Jane?”

“You did the best you could,” Jane murmurs. “You found him, Thor. You found him alone in this little playground and you gave him a home.”

OoOoOoOoOoOoOoO

When Tony comes scrambling back into the antique store, credit card held high over his head, he’s greeted by a rather astounding sight. Astounding here meaning absolutely ridiculous to the point where you wonder if someone slipped something into your drink. “Um,” he says, “what exactly is going on here?”

“Epic things,” Clint says seriously. He’s dressed in what appears to be a Civil War Union soldier uniform and is in the process of straddling an actual cannon, similarly branded with the Union flag across its wood base.

“Important things,” Rhodey corrects from the other side of the shop. Tony’s eyes widen as he takes in his friend’s equally ludicrous attire, fading Revolutionary War uniform coupled with a lopsided three-cornered hat and the musket thrown over his shoulder. “We’re discussing whether or not I could shoot him before he blew me away.”

Tony waves a wary finger between them, “Those aren’t actually loaded, are they?”

“This is an entirely hypothetical situation,” Rhodey confirms.

“With props!” Clint adds.

Tony purses his lips and looks between them for a moment before cautiously edging around them, “I don’t even want to know, okay? Not even a little bit. Although I will remember this game for later, like my bachelor party. Because having imaginary duels with unloaded weapons is always great fun and games at events.” He grins when Rhodey levels him with a cold gaze. “Anywho, I’m just gonna slide past you guys here and get that ring.”

“Ring?” Clint echoes.

“The one I’m getting for Steve,” Tony reminds as he approaches the case. “You know, the one that you’re guarding and . . .” He stops, peering into the case, “Is supposed to be right here . . . Guys?”

“Oh shit,” Clint squeaks.

Rhodey is already struggling to remove the war uniform, “It was there a minute ago! I checked!”

“It’s not anymore,” Tony whispers. “It’s gone.”

“I checked every five minutes,” Rhodey says, “There was only one guy in here besides us, and he left like thirty seconds ago and-”

Tony’s racing towards the door before he can finish speaking, muttering curses as he goes. Rhodey groans. “He’s gonna go beat up a guy over a ring, isn’t he.”
“There are prices to fucking around when given a job to do,” Clint relents.

“Remind me again who convinced me to hold the rifle in the first place."

“It totally wasn’t me, Colonel Rhodes, sir. You picked it up of your own free will.”

It only takes Tony a second or two to pick out the man who bought his ring (Steve’s ring) from the crowd. He’s carrying a tiny bag with the antique store’s insignia on it clutched close to his chest as if he fears he might drop it or lose it if he carries it any other way. Tony waves his way in between other passerby until he skids to a halt in front of the man, hand outstretched and chest heaving. “Hello, I’m Tony Stark,” he pants, free hand falling to his knee as he lets out a tired whoosh of breath.

The man blinks, “Do I know you?”

“No,” Tony says, stubbornly keeping his hand out. Hesitantly, the man shakes it. “Um, I have a favor to ask of you,” Tony continues, “A big one. You see I’m stupidly in love at the moment and was planning on proposing with, well, that ring you’re currently in possession of. But I forgot my credit card and had to run back home to get it, foolishly leaving my friends to make sure the ring was still there when I returned, but they didn’t do a very good job.”

“I see,” the man says coolly.


“I don’t—”

“Please. It’s the perfect ring. I should know, I’ve spent weeks searching and this was the one I just knew he would like the moment I set eyes on it. Please.”

The man’s mouth twitches in the smallest of smiles, “If it is as perfect as you say why should I give it to you?”

“Money?” Tony tries, desperate. “Seriously. I can double the price of that ring for you.”

“You do seem to have your heart set on it,” the man remarks.

“I’m trying to turn over a new leaf.”

“Bold of you. But your offer isn’t without merit. This ring was meant for my girlfriend, however I think I overspent.”

Tony nods along with his words, “I’ll give you enough for a new ring and then some.”

The man raises an eyebrow, “I’m not one to take charity, Mr. Stark. But it would be irresponsible of me to decline your offer. Considering that I’ll soon have a family to support a little extra cash wouldn’t be a bad thing.”

Tony sighs in relief, “Holy crap, thank you. Thank you, thank you. I’ll write you a check right now. The thing won’t bounce, I promise, but I’ll write my number on the back just in case you’re worried about it.” He fumbles to dig his checkbook out of his back pocket, “Who do I make it out to?”

“Richard Parker.”

“Great. I owe you, man. Thank you. I hope you have a beautiful wedding or whatever.”
“You too.”

OoOoOoOoOoOo

The diner isn’t crowded when dusk falls upon it, but it is loud enough to deceive a passerby or two into thinking so.

There are six of them stuffed into a booth close to the wide front window, talking and laughing up enough noise for twice their company. Jane is seated to Thor’s left, squashed against his side while Volstagg waves his arms around on her other side in mid-retelling of the time he had convinced Thor to sneak out of his house for the first time. Fandral is directly opposite Thor, adding in the bits that Volstagg forgets while Thor attempts to protest the inaccuracies.

“I did not fuss so as you claim I did,” Thor mutters, “You are an overzealous storyteller, Volstagg.”

“I remember you saying that your father would eat us all alive if he found us,” Sif supplies unhelpfully from the other side of the booth between Fandral and Hogun, the latter of which is making an effort to enact the classic yawn, stretch, and place an arm over her shoulders move.

“Give him credit,” Hogun says after he successfully completes his mission without Sif shaking him off, “He was nine at the time. And Odin is sort of a scary guy.”

“He was a bit of a short nine-year old,” Sif mock whispers to Jane, who giggles in return. Thor looks offended.

“I grew out of it,” he reminds, puffing out his chest.

“Yeah, after I towered over you through the seventh grade,” Sif grins.

When they laugh, long bellows and rumbles mixing with higher-pitched snickers so that the noise rolls together like thunder, Thor can pretend that he never left. He keeps his eyes away from the empty space at the end of their booth, attention fixed on Jane and his old friends.

There’s nothing wrong with pretending, if only just for a little while.

He’ll wake up when the morning dawns again and reveal the empty absences to remind him of his mistakes once more.
Chapter Summary

It's only after something seems too good to be true that the damage done becomes apparent.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You know,” says Natasha slowly as she spins the ring around between her fingers, “jewelry isn’t really my thing, but this is pretty nice. You’ve done well, Stark.”

Tony snorts, “Of course I have. Now quit twirling that thing around before you drop it.” He snatches the ring away from her and carefully returns it to the little black-velvet ring box.

Natasha raises an eyebrow, “The quality of the ring aside, you’ve had that thing for nearly a month. Are you just using it for decorating your pockets or are you actually planning on proposing?”

The way Tony grits his teeth and tenses his shoulders gives it away. Natasha grins, “You’ve already tried, haven’t you.”

“It’s really hard,” Tony whines pitifully.

The first instance had been just three days after he’d purchased the ring, on the date that marked his and Steve’s one year anniversary. The idea had been to just casually hand it to Steve at some point during the night, preferably between dinner and the end of the movie. The moment, however, never actually came due to the fact that Steve fell asleep less than twenty minutes into the film. In all honesty Tony didn’t mind, and he rather found it to be completely endearing when Steve nodded off with his head against Tony’s shoulder.

Summer is, notoriously, a fire season, due to both the heat and the increase of vacationers and teenagers on summer break running around with too much access to fireworks and lighters. And now that Steve was fully trained he was often needed elsewhere, putting out everything from small stove fires to house fires. He has yet to come home with anything more than a few soot smears on his face and a story of success, so Tony really doesn’t care if he falls asleep during something that, in the long run, is so trivial. He was never big on anniversaries anyways, he just thought it might be a good setting for something like a proposal.

The second was supposed to be a bit more glamorous. Tony had figured that the first attempt had simply been too casual, thus its failure, and that the solution was simply to make the next plan more extravagant. Why he, Tony freakin’ Stark, hadn’t tried an elaborate proposal to begin with was a mystery even to him. The beach house, now refloored and refurbished without a grain of sand in sight, had seemed like the perfect setup. He and Steve took a walk through the town, a swim in the ocean, and half a dozen tumbles on the bed, but during the entire affair Tony found that he simply was too much of a chicken to say anything along the matters of proposals and marriages, the ring box sitting heavy in his pocket for the entire weekend.

The third time had been ruined through no fault of his own when a bee had flown out of the bouquet
of flowers hiding the ring and stung Steve on the palm of his hand. Regardless of the fact that Tony got to spend the rest of the day convincing Steve to stay in bed with him, “Just in case you’re allergic to bees, you never know. You could come down with a fever at any minute,” a third failure cut a bit too deep for Tony’s liking.

Naturally, he was starting to think the universe was against him.

“I was thinking I’d try again this week,” Tony confesses when Natasha impatiently kicks him in the shin. “On, uh, the fourth.”

Natasha grins, “Steve’s birthday?”

“Yeah. I mean it would be pretty nice if I picked a date that was already significant, but there’s also the issue of—”

“-the party.” Natasha finishes for him. “We always do a huge birthday bash for Steve since it’s also a national holiday. I mean, I’m all for you guys having some alone time this year or whatever, but if you have to tell everyone else to bug off to do so, which you will, someone’s going to end up spilling the beans before you can propose.”


“Of course. Plus, he’d pull you aside before you could do anything to give you one of his many ‘If you hurt him’ speeches, and then Steve would realize and the jig would be up.”

Tony sighs, “This is way to complicated.”

“There will be plenty of time at the party, though. And, personally, if you did it at something so public I’d be grateful. That way I could witness the fruit of all my hard work.”

“What?”

Natasha smiles, “Nothing.”

Running a nervous hand through his hair, Tony shakes his head, “I don’t know. This whole thing is starting to seem beyond my capabilities.”

Tony would like to think that in a large assortment of stressful, possibly deadly situations, that he would be able to put mind over emotion to get through them. Sometimes when he’s extremely bored he takes to imagining such ordeals, everything from being kidnapped and held captive in some foreign country to an apocalyptic showdown in the middle of the city. His brain, he knows, would be his key in any one of these instances, and each event would merely play out as a game wherein he would be required to use both strategy and a certain level of stubbornness to prevail. He would succeed with both poise and style and without the setbacks of anything so frivolous as feelings. Proposing, however, is not one of those situations. Except that Tony keeps insisting on approaching it like one.

Tony Stark is, overall, a man of the mind. He can apply science and mathematics to every situation, regardless of whether or not such thinking is appropriate for the affair at hand. And although he has, on multiple occasions, seen the positive effects to letting the heart rule out the mind’s precise equations, he has yet to realize that the obvious conclusion would be that his orderly way of thinking can not be used to properly analyze certain things. Most of these certain things pertaining to his relationship with Steve.

So it is through that equational way thinking that proposing, he surmises, needs just as much strategy
and stubbornness as any hypothetical tense situation.

“If I were kidnapped I would escape in giant metal robot suit,” Tony murmurs to himself. “I just need to think of a plan for proposing that’s on the same scale as a robot suit.”

“Oh,” Natasha says, at a loss for how to respond to his logic. Tony puts a finger to her lips to silence any protests (the fact that he doesn’t get said finger bitten off is something to be admired in many heroic tales for decades to come).

“I am a genius,” Tony announces, “and I have a severe phobia and aversion of normal human interaction relationships. Let me handle this like a man and in my own way.”

Natasha rolls her eyes, “You’d think that as a genius you’d realize your hypothesis of the positive effects of using science over spontaneity in this instance is completely false, as proven on three previous occasions. You know, there’s a reason the trope of nerds never getting laid exists.”

“Rude,” Tony chides. “Genius and nerd are two entirely different categories, the latter of which I am not a part of.”

“Then start approaching this task like a genius,” Natasha argues. “Because right now your methods are hovering around the Land Of Dork due to the amount of wasted time they’ve amounted to.”

Tony regards her silently for a moment before saying, “I bet Bruce loves it when you talk like that in bed.”

“Damn straight.”

“The patriarchal society-deemed roles that restrain your wasted potential make me weep.”

“Thank you.”

Tony folds his hands underneath his chin, “I assume you have a plan, then?”

“As if I wouldn’t,” Natasha smirks. She pulls a notebook out of seemingly nowhere and with a flourishings gesture hands it to a startled looking Tony. “Specifically, I have outlined six different plans for you to choose from. Read them carefully and make your decision.”

Tony flips open the first page of the notebook and sighs, wondering exactly what the hell he’s gotten himself into.

OoOoOoOoOoOoOoO

It’s been a little over a month since Tony bought the ring, and it’s been approximately three and a half weeks since Steve discovered it in the back of Tony’s sock drawer. At first he’d merely assumed it was some sort of gift for their anniversary, but when Tony had failed to give it to him it became obvious that that wasn’t the case.

He’d spent an hour or two just staring at the thing after he’d realized it, opening and closing the box as though it would vanish if he wasn’t looking at it. There was some sort of engraving on the inside that he didn’t dare read, and while the ring itself appeared to be a little aged it had clearly been recently polished to shine like new. The whole thing, box and all, set Steve on edge and fried his nerves. For all his wild daydreams and plans for the future, he hadn’t thought that they’d all fall into place so fast.

“Hypocrite,” he berates himself when he returns the ring box to the sock drawer for the fifth time that
The motion of closing the drawer is painfully slow, and when it finally clicks shut it takes everything Steve has not to wince at the odd finality of the sound. Shaking his head he shifts his attention to the bedside table and the single drawer at its center. Inside a layer of dust still outlines where the handgun once made its home, but it’s a fading image. Steve brushes past it and reaches further back, shuffling aside old forms and papers, copies of registrations and death certificates he pays no heed to as his hand closes around the small plastic sphere in the far left corner.

When he withdraws it from the drawer he keeps it clasped tightly in hand, fingers curled over the plastic until his knuckles are deathly white.

“What’s that thing?” Steve starts and stumbles backwards until his legs hit the bed. Bucky is standing in the doorway, his eyes fixed on Steve’s fisted hand. “Everyone else is jollifying around planning your birthday while you sit in here sulking like a five year old who dropped his ice cream. What’s up?”

Steve forces a smile, “Just a bit of stress with work.”

“The firefighting bit? Because I don’t see how serving coffee at Coulson’s could be very stressful.”

A strangled laugh escapes Steve at this, “I guess you’ve never been there when we run out of muffins, then.”

It’s that choking sound, the thick and heavy way it slips from Steve’s mouth, unnatural, that tips Bucky off. He steps forward and Steve steps back, but there’s no more room to move in that direction and he finds himself stumbling onto the mattress with Bucky standing over him. “What the hell,” Bucky says, gaze dangerous and protective, “is going on?”

“Nothing,” Steve says immediately. His fingers tighten around the little plastic capsule and Bucky’s eyes catch the movement, his hands not far behind as he pries it out of Steve’s grip.

Steve fumbles to stop him, but it’s a halfhearted motion that leaves him grasping at empty air while Bucky holds the little gumball prize up to the light. “I didn’t know you still had this,” he hums. “I thought it would have deteriorated over the years simply because it’s so cheap.” He returns it to Steve’s waiting hands with a flat, tight smile, “Why?”

“Why what?”

“This,” Bucky taps the little capsule where it’s cupped between Steve’s palms. “Why do you still have it? Sentiment, or . . .”

“Inability to let go,” Steve fills in for him, voice barely above a whisper.

Bucky bites his lip, “Steve-”

“Don’t,” Steve cuts him off. “I just . . . God, Bucky, I was the one pushing things to where they are now, I was the one charging ahead into this while Tony stumbled along and struggled with all of his own hangups. I forced him through that, I coaxed him through all of it, and pretended that that was what I wanted.”

Bucky takes a seat on the mattress beside him, “It wasn’t?”

“Yes. No. I don’t . . . I don’t know anymore. Maybe I did, but at the same time,” he shakes the little gumball capsule, “I still had this. I still clung to this. And now it’s time to let go of it and I can’t.”
“Why is now suddenly the time?” Bucky asks, “Why not two, or five years ago? What’s so different about now than then?” Steve just points wordlessly to Tony’s sock drawer. The ringbox is still nestled in there, barely even hidden, and when Bucky gets up and grabs it, prying it open, he can’t help but whistle. “Damn. You don’t even need a wedding with the quality of this thing. He liked it and he’s gonna put a ring on it. Go Tony.” Bucky draws off with an awkward clearing of his throat when Steve doesn’t respond. “I think I missed something,” he says slowly, “because you should be excited. You wanted this. Hell, I was the one who brought this crap up in the first place because I was worried Tony was gonna be against it while you were so set on it. But—”

“-Fools rush in,” Steve fills in. “That’s the saying, right? And that’s exactly what I did.” He squeezes the capsule against his palm. “Bucky, there’s no way . . . Even if it was subconscious, I used him. There’s no way I didn’t.”

Bucky gapes, “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“The same way I used Sharon,” Steve continues. The plastic is starting too crack in his hand, a thin splintering sound leaking out from between his fingers.

Swallowing, Bucky says, “You didn’t. Not on purpose.”

“Lack of intent doesn’t make it any less wrong,” Steve snaps. “And if I could do it to Sharon, seek mindless comfort for the grief I can’t get rid of in her, who at the time was almost a stranger to me, what says I can’t have been doing it to Tony, too?”

Bucky frowns, “Because that wasn’t how you guys worked! It was give and take, Steve. It’s not like you were just drawing what you needed off of him without him doing the same to you in return.”

Steve shakes his head, “And how is that healthy?”

“It isn’t,” Bucky says honestly, “And that’s why it’s good. Society teaches children that healthy relationships are built by two unnaturally perfect people. In reality, however, it’s more about finding someone with the same amount of chips in them that you yourself have, so that you’re healing and helping each other equally. Fuck perfection.”

Steve laughs, low and bitter, “It wasn’t equal, though, at least not with this.” He uncurls his fingers from the now cracked little capsule. “Maybe it was with everything else, and I’m okay with letting myself believe that but this . . . Bucky, I couldn’t even get rid of it, and that’s no better than wearing it on my finger.”

“I really don’t think he’ll care.”

“He won’t,” Steve agrees, “Which makes it all the worse. I’ve conditioned him, Bucky. I unintentionally taught him to accept the fact that he’s second best, and I never wanted that.”

Bucky raises a disbelieving eyebrow, “Is he really? You’ve never treated him as anything less than the most important part of your life.” He makes a mock-wounded expression that Steve ignores. “I mean, in my personal experience, when you start putting someone else’s happiness before your own that’s love, man.”

“Is it?” Steve whispers.

“Of course it is,” Bucky snorts.

“Then that’s the clincher,” Steve says resolutely. “Because we haven’t done that.”
The fact that Natasha has actual blueprints and storyboards of how everything is going to go down really should scare Tony, and the fact that it doesn’t is more than a little terrifying in its own right. “It means we’re friends,” Natasha explains when she finds him staring at the sketches she’s given him with a mildly constipated look on his face. “And that you trust me.”

“Trust is a strong word,” Tony says. “Now, go over this with me again,” he gestures to the blueprint she’s holding in her hands, “We’re having the party on the roof.”

“Yes.”

“And at nine you’re going to clear everyone to the side so we can have some space.”

“Correct.”

“And then I’m just going to propose?”

“Exactly.”

Tony squints at the plans, “That seems way too simple.”

“He’s going to get embarrassed if you make a fanfare out of it,” Natasha reminds. “Sometimes the traditional route is the best way to go. But if you insist on festivities you can wait until you see what Pepper and I have planned for the wedding.”

Tony purses his lips, “If you find me screaming into my pillow at any point in the future, it’s probably because of the newfound knowledge that you two have, most likely, extensively outlined every detail of my wedding.”

“We had a lot of free time and a couple dozen bridal magazines. The only thing we can’t agree on is whether or not you’re going to consent to wearing a dress.”

Tony makes a strangled little noise, “Of course I won’t! Why the hell would I - wait. Does it come with one of those garter things and can I make Steve pull it off of my leg in front of everyone?” Natasha grins. “I’ll get back to you on that,” he decides after a pause.

Viewing Natasha’s carefully laid plans on paper is all well and good, in the same way that pictures of active volcanoes on postcards is equally as visually appealing. However, neither retain the same feelings in the viewer once they’re seen in action. The first sign of this that should have tipped Tony off was the fact that Natasha wanted to have the party on the roof.

Besides the mishap with the comet and Tony trying to high dive onto the fire escape in an effort to escape essential conversations, the roof tends to be a rather happy place. The only (other) exception to this rule is Clint’s issues with the building next door.

When they’d all first moved in some five or so odd years ago, Tony had spent an entire night pointing at the roof of the next building over and lamenting about the fact that it possessed a hot tub, something which contrasted nicely with the various lawn chairs and suspicious puddles of water that sometimes occupied their own roof. He had, unsurprisingly, completely forgotten his ramblings by the next morning. Clint had not. And so, it had become a rather common occurrence to find Clint standing on the roof’s edge after a few drinks whenever they threw parties up there. The assembling of Steve’s birthday and the following bash weren’t an exception.

“This year,” Clint declares the second they reach the rooftop with the first box of decorations, “I am
going to jump over and bathe in that glorious hot tub.”

“In July?” Tony asks incredulously. “Without a beer or two under your belt? I think the crazy has finally overwhelmed your slightly stable mentality, pal.”

Clint huffs, “If I jump it I won’t have to stick around to watch you and Steve get all gooey and gross. I can observe with cognitive dissonance while basking in a high class cauldron of bubbly awesomeness.”

Tony rolls his eyes, “The fact that you are so disturbed by public displays of affection and relationships in general yet pull double duty on both fronts will never cease to amuse me.”

“I’m an entertainer at heart. Circus born and raised.”

“You are no such thing,” Tony reminds, “You ran away to the circus for a week when you were sixteen. I’d only let you get away with that lie if it was for at least a year.”

Clint ignores this remark and starts pulling party decorations out of the box, “Whatever. So are you gonna pop the big one tonight or what?”

Tony laughs, “You might want to use some clarification there, because I can’t tell if you’re talking marriage or cherries.”

Clint makes a horrified face, “Marriage. Jesus Christ.”

“That’s what I thought,” Tony smirks, “Any suggestions?”

“Don’t do the flower thing. If Natasha suggested the flower thing to you, don’t do it.”

Tony wrinkles his nose, “Yeah, that part of the plan was clearly meant to embarrass me.”

“Any plan that involves putting flowers underneath clothing is a bad plan. Especially if they’re roses.”

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

The one good thing, if there’s anything good about it at all, is that December is a quieter time to visit a grave. Whether it’s a fresh scattering of leaves or newly fallen snow, the natural carpets over the headstones and grass silence the whole world around them. In December Steve’s lucky to find new footprints in the snow, or the casual visitor a few rows away huddled into their coat. The flower then are few and far between, frosted over and wilting, and the only color is in the dead and dying leaves of the trees. It feels more like a graveyard then, somber and soft and painted in shades of black and white. The summer is another matter.

On days such as this, historical occasions to celebrate the defending of a belief and a nation, the area is packed. In winter Steve would classify the people wandering between the graves as mourners, those missing family and friends as the year draws to a cold end. In the heat of July they’re celebrators. The grass is blanketed with checkered cloth and picnic baskets, the graves adorned with flags and pinwheels in reds whites and blues. It’s bright in an ironic sort of way, perfectly contrasting the somber darkness of the funerals before it. He’s always a bit startled when he comes to visit in the summer, taken aback by the odd merriment that can be found in such a place. It’s a rejoicing of the life that was rather than the one that was lost, and while he still struggles with feeling the same he understands it completely.

Peggy would like the summer better, for those reasons. She’d enjoy the ruckus and the bustle more
than the grief ridden grave-side mourners. Steve hates imparting on that, taking away from the liveliness of the Fourth of July celebrations with his heartache, but this conversation is years overdue.

Today he starts by reaffirming what he hopes she already knows. “I told you I was happy,” he says carefully, “And I am. Selfishly so, maybe.” He sits down on the grass, elbows on his knees and his chin in his hands so that he’s eye level with the engraving of her name. “I think . . . I think there’s a price for that sort of happiness. It’s unstable, ungrounded, and I’m starting to wonder if I’m taking more than I can give. I wanted . . . God, Peggy, I wanted so much. I wanted to love and be loved and to create a future built on that. I had it all planned out, even when he told me that wasn’t what he wanted. And I still did it. I still pushed him towards it and now . . . Peggy, what if I was just looking towards a future so I didn’t have to look at the past?”

Of course there’s no answer, there’s not even the slimmest chance of one. He pauses anyways, letting the laughter and gentle hum of the other visitors surround him for a moment. She’d laugh at him too, probably, tell him that he was an idiot for thinking that. But he knows he’s not wrong. Not this time. “It’s not okay. I’m not okay. And I’m weighing Tony down with that, burdening him with what I think I need to right myself in the world again. That’s not fair. Clinging to him like that until he caves in, I shouldn’t have done that. It’s so wrong. It’s so messed up.”

And that’s the cold, hard truth of the matter. Steve clenches his fingers against his thighs, fisting them into his jeans until he can feel the fibers straining under his grip. “I thought . . . Peggy, I don’t even know what I thought anymore. Maybe I was under the impression that my ideals, the same ones I’d created with you, were the only road to happiness, and thus by forcing them on him he would be happy, too. But I was just . . . I think I turned him into something he isn’t, Peggy. I unknowingly set down rules and conditions to this whole thing that he followed because he didn’t really have any other options. We had to be public. We had to move in together. We had talk about the future as if there was a definite plan to it. And, god, Peggy, he didn’t really want that, any of it. If I’d left it up to him we’d still be just rolling around between the sheets and nothing more. Part of me . . . Part of me is scared that’s all he ever wanted from it, and that everything we did after that, aside from that, was just to please me.”

He swallows hard and grates the palm of one hand against his eye in a fruitless attempt to block out the too bright colors and sounds of summer visitors nearby. “I don’t doubt that he loves me, and that’s why he did it. But the fact that he did it for me, and only for me, is obvious now. All I did was take, Peggy. I took, and took, and took from him until there was a ring in the sock drawer that wasn’t ever supposed to be there. I took from him to patch up the broken pieces of myself that you left behind, and when I finally looked back he . . . He’s just another ideal. I did that. I made him think he had to do all this to keep me.”

In the wake of the silence left behind when he finishes, the merriment of the other graveside visitors is unsettling. It seems distant to his ears, otherworldly as he waits for a reply, a scolding that will never come. He imagines that Peggy would berate him for his words, insist that he has done nothing wrong. But she won’t deny that it’s all moving too fast. That’s the dead giveaway, in Steve’s mind, that something is so very wrong with this situation.

He wishes, too late, that he could go on believing it was due to the whirlwind of romance and love, that he could continue to fit their life into a neat little DVD box and constric it to a story that can be told in hours and minutes. The simple ease that would take is terrifying to him, if only because that’s what he’s been doing for the past year.

Steve knows now that sometimes the credits are meant to roll without a happy ending.

OoOoOoOoOoOo
The only one left out of the loop about Tony’s secret party plans is Thor. This is mostly because of the fact that Thor doesn’t exactly possess what one would call an indoor voice, and Tony might be a little bit paranoid that if he tells him Thor will try and congratulate him on his engagement before the actual engagement is made. It’s an entirely plausible situation, but the very act of conveniently forgetting to inform Thor of the impending proposal is what ends up driving Tony up the wall.

It starts when Thor arrives decked out in the most heinous crime to fashion Tony has seen in years. He’s going to have to have a word with Jane about letting one’s boyfriend out in public wearing attire that might set the eyeballs of most mortals on fire. Currently, said fashion crime consists of a tourist style white button up covered in red and blue stars and, god forbid, sequins. There are sequins along the collar, sleeves, and button line of the thing. The sight of them just about makes Tony lose his lunch. And there’s a matching set of shorts. The icing on the cake, however, is definitely the hat. At first glance it seems to be a traditional Uncle Sam type stove top, but on close inspection is adorned with various tiny pinwheels, also covered in sequins, and enough glitter to make Edward Cullen cry in shame.

“I think I’m gonna be sick,” Tony groans as Thor approaches and slings and arm over his shoulders.

“Nay,” Thor proclaims, “You can not fall ill on this most splendid of days.”

Tony arches an alarmed eyebrow and glances at Jane, who just shrugs and says, “He really likes the Fourth of July. You don’t even want to see the amount of bottle rockets and sparklers that are in the trunk of my car right now for later tonight. I’m worried we’ll get arrested on grounds of terrorism because of it.”

“That much, huh?” Tony says skeptically. He turns his attention back to Thor, “Well, bud, you’ll have plenty of reason to celebrate things with a bang tonight.”

Thor grins, “Of course. It is a mighty holiday, and there is much to rejoice in.” He turns and grabs a large, cloth covered basket off the ground and holds it out towards Tony, “Such as this.”

Tony apprehensively eyes the basket, “Uh, what?”

“It is a surprise,” Thor says seriously, “that can be rejoiced in.” Throwing caution to the wind, Tony peels back the cloth and finds himself eye to eye with Thor’s duck. The proceeding screech of alarm and scramble to shove Jane in front of him as a shield is neither unexpected or surprising to either Tony or the faintly annoyed Jane. Despite this, Thor smiles as if nothing is wrong.

“Why is your surprise your dumb duck?” Tony squawks from behind Jane.

“It is not the duck,” Thor booms. “I was showing you its nest.”

Tony peers over Jane’s shoulder at the basket and immediately hides behind her again, “Oh, god, please tell me those aren’t what I think they are. I can’t deal with more than two of those things.”

“Eggs!” Thor proclaims excitedly.

“Eggs of what?” Tony can’t help but ask, “While I’m going out on a limb here and saying that your duck is, by this revelation, probably a girl, the only other bird in your apartment is a freaking rooster. And I’m pretty sure biology doesn’t work that way.”

“It doesn’t,” Jane confirms. “They’re probably just normal duck eggs.”

Thor looks fairly disappointed at this news, and Tony flips the cloth back over the duck and egg basket before patting him consolingly on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, big guy. Whatever hatches will
be, er, cute and fluffy and . . . Birdlike anyways. And the rooster-

“Chick,” Thor corrects solemnly.

“Chick,” Tony amends, “Can be their adopted dad, or something. Totally.”

No amount of scientific proof, however, can change Thor’s mind that the eggs must be the product of both of his pets after Clint returns. Tony should have known not to mention the things to him, because as soon as he heard Clint crowded around the basket with Thor and started yelling, “Holy shit, chuck eggs!”

It’s very hard, it seems, to properly finish setting up for a party when two of your guests are loudly discussing what a supposed “chuck” will look like after it hatches. So it is that Tony is still fussing with the vegetable platter’s contents when the rest of his friends start to show up.

“It’s a little early to be freaking out,” Natasha says when she finds him staring intently at the arrangement of carrots around the celery.

“I’m not freaking out,” Tony protests, “I’m just fixing vegetables. They don’t look right and they need to be perfect. Everything needs to be perfect.” His breathing rate pitches upwards a notch as he speaks, and Natasha grabs him by the shoulder and steers him towards one of the lawn chairs.

“Try not to hyperventilate too much before he even gets here, or you’ll make him worry.”

“Why would he worry?” Tony whines, “He shouldn’t worry. I should worry. What if I mess up? Natasha, I’m going to mess up. I always do. Oh, god, just throw me over the roof now, I can’t do this.”

Natasha sits him down and leans over until he’s forced to meet her gaze head on, which Tony will later proclaim is one of the most terrifying moments of his life. “Tony, there is literally nothing that makes this set up any different from the other times you’ve tried to propose. Except that we’re all going to be here watching you, but I know that’s not the problem. So get over it.”

“What if-” Tony starts, cut off as Natasha slaps a hand over his mouth.

“No,” she hisses, “No what ifs. Just sit here and calm down so that you can greet Steve like a stable human being when he gets here. Nod if you understand.” Tony does, and Natasha sighs, “Good. Now excuse me while I go make sure Clint doesn’t try and jump the gap between buildings. Again.”

Clint, who has predictably migrated from cooing over the “chuck” eggs to the ledge points at them, “You can’t hold me back, woman! Today is the day that I leap over this puny space and obtain the coveted privilege of the hot tub!”

Clint’s rather feminine shriek when Natasha takes a threatening step forward goes unnoticed as the door to the roof stairs cracks open and Steve’s head pops into view. “Am I early?” he asks His eyes drifting over the food table, the gathered guests, Thor’s “chuck” basket, and Clint balanced on the ledge, alighting for no more than a heartbeat on each before his gaze finally settles on Tony. “I just came straight over after . . . After some errands. And I really need to talk to-”

Tony shuffles up to him and silences him with a grand gesture towards the party décor littering the rooftop. “You’re just in time,” he laughs. The tension all but melts out of his body as he pulls Steve onto the rooftop and slips an arm around his waist. “The cake’s not here yet, though, Bucky’s picking it up. So technically you’re in time for everything except cake.”

Steve shifts from toe to toe as the rest of the guests start to approach them, gifts and party favors in

“Presents first, babe,” Tony chides, “Thank yours later.”

In their little rag tag group presents tend to be a rather rowdy affair. Everything is passed around to everyone who, when it’s in their hands, shakes the gift and guesses what it is before passing it on. Eventually everything ends up in Steve’s lap to be unwrapped, but not before being manhandled by his collective friends. The general rule, due to a few mishaps with such manhandling, is not to get anyone anything fragile. Which is why Natasha had taken to reinforcing the Faberge eggs she gives to Pepper with enough packing stuffing to cushion an elephant. Steve’s gifts aren’t nearly so delicate.

He’s only halfway through unwrapping things when Bucky arrives with the cake. Up until that point, the process of tearing the paper away from the packages had been done with trepidation, the expectation of the ring box stalling him every time. Once Bucky presented him with the cake, however, his suspicions fell on the food and drink. He’d seen enough romcoms to know which traditional and cheesy methods of proposing Tony might go for. Every second that passed with another delay in telling Tony the truth was another risk that he’d have to do it in front of everyone in the face of an offered ring.

“Which one’s yours?” he prompts Tony when he’s peeling off the wrapping from Thor’s gift, an abnormally large tabletop gumball machine.

Tony smiles, “I’m saving it for later.”

Steve’s heart jumps to his throat, “Here, later, or private later?” he whispers, distracting everyone else by passing the gumball machine to a very jealous looking Clint.

“Here,” Tony reassures. “Private later can come after you thank me with gratuitous elation.”

“Tony-”

Bruce hands him another gift, and once again Steve finds himself without enough time ad surrounded by far too many people for what he needs to do.

It’s Bucky who pulls him aside between Tony’s rigged piñata (filled with some sort of foreign candy coated in chili powder) and the cutting of the cake. “You’re all wound up,” Bucky says after he and Steve are out of earshot. “Tony’s starting to notice, too. See,” he casually glances over to where Tony is watching them from where he’s standing between Thor (who’s eating the trick candy without a hitch) and Clint (who’s choking and trying to down half a bottle of Mountain Dew to calm his burning taste buds). “You’re freaking him out. Please tell me you’re not going to do what I think you’re going to do.”

Steve lets out a shaky breath and Bucky shakes his head. “You’re going to break his heart. Are you sure?”

“No.”

Bucky stares at him, confused, “Then I don’t get it, Steve. I don’t see the point in this unless it isn’t what you want.”

Steve laughs bitterly, “That’s exactly why I can’t, Bucky. It’s always what I want.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Bucky snaps, “You think Tony doesn’t want this, too?”

“I’m sure he does,” Steve says, “but does he genuinely want to go through with this? Or is he just
doing it for my benefit."

He shrugs off Bucky’s hand on his arm as he walks away, back towards where Tony is coaxing Clint back up onto the ledge. “Tony, we really need to talk.”

Tony hums, “Yeah, in a second. Clint’s gonna jump it.”

“‘The evil candy and the Mountain Dew have given me the strength, or the insanity, to do it,’” Clint declares, bunching his knees in preparation. “I’m tired of listening to that asshole Watson guy over there brag about it. Tonight, I bathe in style.”

“He’s going to die,” Bruce says, covering his eyes with his hands.

“He used to jump that far all the time before—” Natasha tries to remind.

“Key word ‘before!’” Bruce whines. “Oh god, oh god, oh god. I can’t watch. Tell me when it’s over so I can call an ambulance.”

Clint sticks his tongue out at them both, “Ye of little faith,” he grumbles. “And you,” he jabs a finger in Tony’s chest, “if I make this you have to buck it up and do your thing. You’ve been dodging it all day. I saw Natasha’s plans, you were supposed to do it an hour ago.” He waves at the rest of them and salutes before turning around and leaping.

For a heart stopping moment Steve thinks he’s not going to make it. It’s one of those slow-motion seconds in life, where the world stops and holds its breath for the inevitable fall that never comes. Clint sails right across the gap with over a foot to spare on the other side. He stumbles on the opposite roof for a second, disbelief in his eyes when he faces them and lifts his arms in stunned triumph.

Tony’s the first to react, letting out a breathless whoop and punching the air with Natasha not far behind. Bruce lowers his hands from his eyes in shock when Clint starts a victory lap around the hot tub. “Let’s go!” Natasha urges before hopping onto theledge herself.

She makes the jump look easy, landing with enough grace to inspire the rest of them to follow. Thor is third, and though his feet hit the other side rather hard he does it without so much as a stumble. Jane berates them all before she jumps, bringing up the point that they have no way of getting back that none of them really care about. Bruce is coaxed to the other side solely by the fact that Clint and Natasha are already pulling off the tarp over the hot tub and kicking off their pants at the same time. She has to take off her heels first, which she complains about, but Pepper makes the jump too, with Happy as not to tip backwards into the alleyway far below. Bucky jumps after Sharon touches down spectacularly, still wearing her heels, claiming that he refuses to be outdone.

“Ready?” Tony asks as he drags Steve up onto the edge of the roof beside him, knees already bent to make the leap.

Steve wants to say no, wants to pull him back because, no matter how easy it had seemed for the rest of them, the chance that Tony could fall short makes his stomach hurt. The word catches in his throat, though, weighed down by the implications behind it.

No, I'm not ready.

No, I can’t do this.

No, I’m not dragging you down with me.
No, Tony. I can’t keep doing this to you.

They catch on his tongue, sting the inside of his mouth as he struggles to say them, all the nos that Tony needs to hear, that are necessary to fix what Steve unknowingly broke. No.

He can’t say it.

His hand slips from Tony’s when Tony jumps, and Steve watches without a word as he lands harmlessly on the other side to the whistles and cheers of his friends. He calls to Steve to join them, one hand in his pocket and Steve knows what comes next, can see the clear outline of the ring box there that he missed before.

The last step is metaphorical, another stair to climb towards what society has elevated to be the ultimate show of love. But in this case it’s a leap, a test of devotion that Steve can’t make, he can only move in steps. Steps were what got him here, pushing and pulling Tony along at his side for better or for worse. It was mostly, he hopes, for better, no matter what the outcome was. And maybe it still is. But not here, not now, not with this impossible leap standing between them.

“I think there’s been a misunderstanding.”

He made a mistake.

“What are we doing, Tony?”

He pushed Tony into his own ideals.

“Something stupid.”

He took too many steps too fast.

This time, he takes a step back.

Tony blinks in confusion as Steve backs off the ledge, his gaze on his feet as he starts to turn towards the stair door. The ring is left in his pocket as he scrambles to the side of the roof and leans over, “What are you doing? It’s not that far! Come on!”


The stair door closes on the other side with a resounding thud, and Steve is gone.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this took so long, I was burdened down by homework, Darcy’s spay surgery, a convention, and the guilt over whether or not I could actually go through with this chapter.

The gumball prize will be explained next time, so it’s useless asking about it now. Just don’t.

Everyone try to breathe. Think about the chucks.
Or scream at me, because I find that amusing as I giggle evilly to myself in front of my laptop.
The One With The Jam

Chapter Summary

The difference between For You and With You sometimes means all the world.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You seem like the type that has his whole life planned out ahead of time,” Peggy says, the smallest, almost amused curve of her smile on her lips. “So let’s hear it, soldier.”

It’s six months after they’ve started dating, and another six months before heartbreaking circumstance will rear its ugly head. At the time, of course, Steve is unaware of this, blissfully ignorant about the final moment that will bracket pinpoints and details in time, such as this one, in a neat little box. For now, his timeline with Peggy stretches on and into the infinite. Such innocence is something Steve now looks back on with disdain, his failures to appreciate the singular minutes and the ease with which he moved between one day and the next without taking in and memorizing all the little details of those moments haunts him. She might have been wearing her uniform that day, or maybe she was more casual, dressed down yet not without her usual flair of authority in her collared shirt and pencil skirt. He doesn’t remember her outfit, nor the street they were walking on while they had the conversation. The days have all blurred together by now because at the time he took them for granted, too caught up in his own illusions of bright futures to remember the little things that would one day be all he had left to cling to.

It’s the basic storyboard of tragedy, and Steve falls into the steps of it without knowledge, as all in life tend to do. He will never recall the finite parts, the robin’s-egg blue of Peggy’s top or the little star point earrings, the sound of almost hushed foreign traffic two streets over or the name of the restaurant, the Balle Café. But he does remember the important bits, the words exchanged and the promises behind them that were still solid and real enough to clasp close to his heart, six months away before they’d all slip through his fingers and shatter in a cruel splash of blood.

At first Peggy’s question catches him off guard, causing him to halt in mid step and inhale sharply in surprise. “What?”

Peggy waves a hand at him, “You know, life plans. Don’t lie to me, you had a scrapbook of cutouts from wedding magazines as a child, didn’t you.”

Steve stares at her consideringly for a moment before boldly saying, “You had one of those.”

The look Peggy gives him would make most of his comrades quake in their boots. “You have no proof,” she says, far too calmly. Steve just smiles. “And if I did, I would clarify to you that I was seven at the time, and that it no longer exists due to combustion related events.”

Steve laughs and attempts to stifle it with a hand, “I didn’t have one of those.”

Disbelieving, Peggy says, “Really? You didn’t even hold fake weddings in the school playground.” There’s a slight jolt of surprise from Steve at this inquiry, and Peggy absolutely leers, knowing she’s just struck gold. “Aw, soldier, were you sweet on all the girls? Did you drop down on one knee and
give them all dandelion rings?”


Peggy gapes, “You didn’t.”

“We were five!” Steve protests. “And I’d overheard a neighbor complaining that she couldn’t get in to the hospital to see her boyfriend because they weren’t married yet, or obviously blood related. So I sorta freaked out. A bit.”

“You and Bucky got married in the playground because you were scared that if he got hurt you couldn’t see him in the hospital,” Peggy says slowly, one eyebrow raised.

“Technically it was in the park,” Steve says. “Sam was our officiator.”

Peggy snorts in amusement, “And the rings?”

“Snap dragons,” Steve chuckles, “because they’re Bucky’s favorite.”

They laugh for a moment, caught up in the memories and mental images of two naive five year olds holding a ceremony in the park. “You’re avoiding the subject,” Peggy points out a minute later, breath regained though her shoulders are still shaking a bit.

Steve blinks at her, “The future plans subject?”

“That, or the subject that we’re going to be late for reporting back in times for lights out. Again. Take your pick.”

Frowning slightly, Steve says, “What exactly do you want to know?”

“Everything,” Peggy insists with a broad gesture, “And not necessarily what you want out of this relationship. Tell me all the goals and dreams you’ve cooked up for the general future.”

Steve flushes, “All of them?” Peggy nods, eyes fixed on him as she waits. “Well, I mean I’d like to get married. I’ve always liked the old fashioned concept of a chapel wedding with the works, white dresses and black suits and so on. I might want to buy a house, get a dog, start drawing again and see where that leads. Kids, uh, those would be great.” He nervously runs a hand over the back of his neck, “It’s a rather stereotypical American Dream type thing, I guess. Kinda stupid.”

Peggy quirks a light smile, “It’s not stupid.”

“It’s not?”

“Cheesy, yes. Stupid, no.” She shrugs. “And I’m not so sure about some of those things, but I could be persuaded.”

“Which things?” Steve asks, worried.

“Marriage,” Peggy says seriously, watching Steve’s posture slump, “in a chapel,” she continues. “I’m getting married in uniform, Steve, so you can throw that dress idea right out the window. Also, public affairs such as chapel weddings aren’t really my cup of tea. A small, quiet ceremony would be fine.”

Steve’s nervous blush blooms into a full out embarrassed one and he ducks his head as he feels his ears reddening too. “Isn’t it a little early to be talking about this?” he mumbles.
For a long, agonizing moment Peggy just looks at him. Her expression is composed, carefully restrained so no discernible emotion can be found in it. Steve fidgets under her gaze until she promptly walks away. Startled by such a reaction, Steve just stands there as a minute slowly ticks by and Peggy returns, something clutched in one hand that she shoves against Steve’s palm when she nears.

“Here, Mr. Too Soon,” she says steadily, nothing but fondness in her tone. “Whenever you’re ready you can give that back.”

Steve holds the object, a little gumball machine prize capsule, up to the light to glimpse the glint of a thin silver ring inside. It’s a monetarily valueless trinket, probably worth even less than the band of snap dragons Steve had given Bucky when they were small, but he smiles all the same. The value is in the gesture rather than in the quality. “You’re a bit hypocritical,” Steve muses aloud, “to be mocking me for this when you’re the one who kept finding reasons to cut me off every time I tried to ask you out.”

Peggy huffs, “That wasn’t relationship jitters, Steve, as I’ve reminded you a hundred times. The first two times you tried to ask me out we were under fire.”

“There’s no better moment than a life or death situation.”

“Put down the harlequin romance, soldier, and pick up some weights. Last time I checked I could still out bench you.”

OoOoOoOoOoO

The hour and forty-two minutes it takes for them to get off the roof is agonizing, each second that ticks by marking out another panicked heartbeat in Tony’s chest. It’s more than enough time for Tony to run every mistake through his head, every moment that could have lead up to this one and a hundred horrible scenarios that might follow it. Despite all that, however, he’s still stunned to find the apartment empty.

Steve’s stuff is still there, minus his bike helmet, and almost everything seems untouched. There’s no note, no explanation, and no disturbance to the dresser drawers that might suggest intent for an extended leave of absence. To the unsuspecting eye, it merely appears as if Steve has gone out for the afternoon. To Tony, it’s as if the entire place has been turned upside down. It’s full of empty spaces, desolate areas that suddenly bear a suffocating atmosphere. And there’s something so very wrong about that. It crushes him, the pressure of the void corners pushing in around him until he finds himself on his knees and gasping for breath. Steve is gone. Steve is gone. And he doesn’t know why.

A hand falls on his back, a hesitant and gentle reassurance, but Tony shrugs it off. He doesn’t want or need anyone’s pity. He needs an explanation. He needs a reason, the details of what could have lead to this moment so the world can stop tilting underneath him. “It’s your fault,” something inside him screams, broken and wounded, “It’s always your fault.”

But that can’t be, can it? He’d been trying to do the right thing, hadn’t he? Steve had wanted it, had been longing for the security and permanence that comes with it, so in the end it had been something Tony had been happy to give.

Right?

Tony had wanted it, too. He’d been willing to provide Steve with that one thing, at least, to grant that one wish, but instead of agreeing, accepting, he had run. Steve had run, and left Tony with an
apartment made up of empty spaces.

The hand brushes against his shoulder again, this time lingering even after Tony flinches away from it and tries to stumble to his feet. “I need to find him,” he says hoarsely. “I need to go after him. I need-”

“You need to lay down, Stark.” Natasha’s voice is close to his ear, close enough to make him realize she’s been sitting next to him, for how long he doesn’t know. “You’re shaking, you’re breathing as if you can’t get enough air, and your pulse is through the roof. You’re two seconds away from having a full blown panic attack, and you’re not going anywhere.”

Tony attempts to shy away from her when she helps him to a standing position, but her grip is firm. “Let me go,” he pleads, “Natasha, let me go.”

“You’d only end up doing something rash and possibly harmful to yourself,” Natasha says. “And besides, you don’t have any idea where he’s gone.”

“I could find him,” Tony protests. “He found me. Over and over again, when I ran, so I think I could at least do the same. Please.”

“Pepper’s already out looking, and so is Bucky, they’ll-”

“Natasha, I have to-”

“Tony!” Natasha snaps before she forces him to sit on the couch, “You are staying here. Whatever happened up on that roof, whatever the fuck went down there, it didn’t leave you in any mental, or physical state to go running around New York!”

Tony glares at her, fists clenched at his sides, “Then what else am I supposed to do?!?”

Natasha tosses a cell phone at him, “Call him. It’s our best bet for finding him, if he wants to be found. Otherwise I’d suggest just sitting here and waiting until we hear from Steve himself.” She sighs, glancing away before adding, “He’s a soldier, Tony. Or he was. If he runs there’s not a whole lot we can do about it until he’s ready to come back.”

OoOoOoOoOoO

If Steve could see the way everything breaks apart from a single action, the way the cracks split it all into pieces until it crumbles in his hands, he might have made a different choice. Then again, maybe he wouldn’t have. Regardless of whether or not he can see it happening, he still feels it, hears it every time his phone buzzes in his pocket.

All he takes with him is his helmet and his motorcycle, and with a tap of his finger against the flashing screen in his pocket he can listen to his world crash down around him while he drives.

He’s almost in the Bronx by the time the first call comes through, his phone complaining about his refusal to answer it with irritated vibrations until it transfers over to voicemail.

“MISSED CALL FROM PEPPER POTTS - Steve, this is Pepper. If you don’t get your ass back here before it gets dark you won’t have an ass to return with because my foot will be - Happy, don’t put your hand over the speaker I have to - END OF MESSAGE.”

The second one is left when he’s crossing into Queens, navigating the main roads through sluggish traffic. He almost doesn’t hear it over the blare and screech of the cars around him.
“MISSED CALL FROM BUCKY BARNES - Man, Steve, everyone is freaking out. I can’t confirm with visuals, but I guess Tony’s a mess. Natasha texted me. You should have at least told him why. God, this is just . . . He doesn’t understand, Steve. You didn’t give him the explanation he was owed. - END OF MESSAGE.”

The third records while he’s stopped at a light, the dull hum of the bike’s engine lost under the furious tone coming from his cell.

“MISSED CALL FROM JAMES RHODES - I never thought I’d end up saying this, but you’re a complete asshole. I don’t care what your reasoning was, but it wasn’t worth this. If I weren’t busy with work and not allowed off base for the rest of the week, my fist and your face would be getting very well acquainted. Fix this shit, or don’t even bother coming back at all. - END OF MESSAGE.”

“MISSED CALL FROM NATASHA ROMANOFF - A little warning could have been nice, Rogers. I’ll try and hold down the fort until you get back, but I’m not making any promises. Just remember that every minute longer you take to sort out your shit is another minute that Tony’s blaming himself. Or trying to throw the ring into the garbage disposal. Or trashing your room and then carefully putting everything back where it was. So it would be really helpful if you came home soon, because in another few hours he’ll be in full blown Jam Mode, and I don’t need that crap again. - END OF MESSAGE.”

The roads are more familiar when he practically skids into Brooklyn. He takes the side roads and back streets, his carefulness falling away into casual detachment as he follows the twists and turns he wandered as a child. The phone rings again while he’s banking around a sharp corner, a forlorn little tone before it clicks over to the voicemail once again.

“MISSED CALL FROM TONY STARK - Steve, I . . . Jesus, I spent a half hour trying snitch my phone back from Natasha after I tried to chuck it out the window the first time, and now here I am with nothing to say. Honestly, I should be mad. Or upset. Clint keeps using the word ‘Devastated’ but I think it’s a little overboard. Instead I’m just . . . Let down? I guess that’s probably the best way to phrase it. But maybe the shock just hasn’t hit me yet, because I’m still convinced this is just another bump in the road, like everything else has been. I don’t know what the hell made you bolt like that, Steve, but if you need someone to talk to about it, you know where to find me. - END OF MESSAGE.”

“MISSED CALL FROM TONY STARK - It’s getting dark, be careful. Love you. - END OF MESSAGE.”

“MISSED CALL FROM TONY STARK - Bucky says this was about the ring, and may have mentioned something or another about Peggy being involved. Call me back. - END OF MESSAGE.”

“MISSED CALL FROM TONY STARK - Past midnight, Steve. You do know there’s a difference between running off to think, or whatever this is, and disappearing for a long enough period of time that I start to worry, right? Because right now you’re straying dangerously into the latter bit. Don’t be reckless. - END OF MESSAGE.”

“MISSED CALL FROM TONY STARK - If you don’t come back with missing fingers to explain why it was so damned hard for you to pick up your phone I’m going to be pissed. Come on, Steve, at least tell me what this is. Even if it’s something as lousy as a text message break up. - END OF MESSAGE.”

“MISSED CALL FROM TONY STARK - On a scale of one to asshole, this crap you’ve pulled is ranked as dick, just so you know. The best ways to improve your rating would be to fucking call me,
if only to reassure me you’re alive. - END OF MESSAGE.”

“MISSING CALL FROM TONY STARK - Pick up, pick up, pick up! Dammit, Steve! It’s nearly dawn. If you haven’t checked in by noon I’m filing a missing persons report. - END OF MESSAGE.”

“MISSING CALL FROM NATASHA ROMANOFF - You’ve sent him into full Jam Mode now, thanks. I had to send Clint and Bruce out for supplies. Also, there’s a minimum requirement of forty-eight hours before someone can be officially counted as missing, so obviously they didn’t accept Tony’s plea for a search party. For now, at least. He hasn’t eaten and I’m pretty sure he didn’t actually sleep last night. The least you could do is call so he’ll stop worrying about your safety and start being concerned about the fact that you ran out on an almost proposal. He’s more worried about you than he is the relationship, just so you know. - END OF MESSAGE.”

“MISSING CALL FROM TONY STARK - Got my phone back from Natasha again. Whatever this is, Steve, we just need to work it out, okay? Together. Please. Call me back and confirm you weren’t hit by a bus or jumped in an alley or something. Love you. - END OF MESSAGE.”

Steve’s back in Manhattan as the last message cuts out as his phone battery dies with a tired beep. He makes a wide circle around their neighborhood, avoiding the block entirely in favor of looping back towards the edge of the island closest to Brooklyn. The phone falls silent and cold in his pocket.

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

Natasha tends to classify periods in her life with labels. If she made all the individual events into a single movie she would insert title cards in between to clarify them. The title cards that would precede the scenes involving Tony post-breakup would be lettered with the words Jam Mode. While to most it would seem like a very cryptic classification, those who have seen or been involved in one or more Jam Modes with Tony know that it’s actually very straightforward.

Jam Mode is the status Tony slips into when he’s upset, and it involves him making copious amounts of jam. While Tony is capable of burning the simplest of omelets, and has been known to set everything from microwaves to toasters on fire in his misguided efforts in heating up a Poptart, he is strangely excellent at making jam. His fingers tend to get a bit nicked when he cuts and crushes the fruit, and it’s highly likely he’ll burn himself more than once while warming it, and at one point he’ll always spill some of the sugar on the countertop.

Watching him work, the studious, patient way he goes through with the task despite the reasons that drove him to it, fascinates Natasha. “It’d probably be really hot if I found you attractive,” she comments, mostly to herself.

Tony lets out a confused huff, his attention focused on the pot of jam he’s stirring. “I’m insulted,” he mutters, although he’s still lost as to what exactly Natasha is referring to.

“Clint never makes food,” Natasha laments for vague clarification. “And neither do you, usually, unless you’re moping about the house after a bit of heartbreak. Then it’s jam time.”

Tony grumbles, “Heartbreak involves the actual breaking of a heart. There’s nothing to be broken, thank you, it’s just a fight.”

“Is it?” Her inquiry is not without concern, but the way Tony jerks his head up to glare at her makes it seem as though her words were meant to be harsh. She would wince if she wasn’t so practiced at carefully schooling her facial expressions. “Think about it,” she goes on without a hitch, Tony’s gaze continuing to linger on her as he rotates the wooden spoon in the pot, “This is Steve, he balances you
out with his usual calm rational. Whatever reason he had for bolting, it wasn’t unfounded.”

“Don’t think I don’t understand the suggestion that my own relationship issues are unfounded,” Tony retorts. Natasha holds his gaze without wavering until he looks away. “I have my reasons, too. Or had. And I pushed through them. Steve will as well.”

“I envy your optimism,” Natasha laments softly.

Tony glares at her, “I don’t need your pity, you know.”

Tilting her head just slightly, Natasha says, “Pity? Pity is the emotion of someone in higher power conveying hollow ethos in regards to a lower stationed person’s situation. This is nothing of the sort. Empathy, however, would be a word to better express my position.”

“Empathy,” Tony echoes, disbelieving, “is the understanding of someone’s pain because you’ve been through it yourself.”

Natasha smiles darkly, “Look who’s read the dictionary. Impressive.”

Tony snorts and fixes his eyes on the jam again, shoulders stiff. “You’re as evasive as ever.”

“It’s a necessary precaution, Stark, but I’ll bite.”

He barely notices her shift from the sofa to the table, perching on the back of one of the chairs with her feet resting on the seat. “Ask away, if you wish,” she prompts softly, “This is your one and only chance.”

Tony keeps his eyes averted as he thinks. She reminds him, sometimes, of a cat, constantly batting people away from her at one moment, and making quiet, almost nonexistent motion for affection and acknowledgement the next. He understands her caution, from what little he knows of the events that brought her to where she is now, but it’s still a hard concept to wrap his head around. While Tony himself tends to be withdrawn, words spiked with barbs to keep others at a distance, Natasha’s every action has an underlying purpose. Every breath is calculated, every step precise. She’s dangerous, deadly so even, yet Tony has never felt threatened by her. “You trust us,” he starts, and it’s not a question. He knows she does, reads it in the ease at which she can sit so close to him, or any of them, without tension in her posture.

“I do,” she admits.

“So you’ll tell the truth, now, if I ask?”

Natasha considers him for a heartbeat before answering, “For you, just this once. For the sake of empathy.”

“You left,” Tony says. He knows he’s just restating what she knows full well, but he needs the clarification, needs her to fill in the pieces of her story he’s still not quite sure of. “You left because you were scared. The chance that they could abandon you was too terrifying to handle, so you did it first. Hurt, or be hurt in return. Right?”

“Something like that.”

Tony nods, “Right. But then when you came back, and I remember this, a bit, Clint flipped. It wasn’t very outward, I think, more of an internal struggle for him, but he didn’t welcome you with open arms, like Bruce did. He was almost skittish, disbelieving of your sudden change of heart. He was scared of it, wasn’t he.”
“Yes,” Natasha says. “You’re a surprisingly observant one, Stark.”

He smirks and taps the side of his head with a finger, “Genius, remember?”

Natasha hums out a hushed sound of amusement, “Sorry, I forgot even though you’re constantly reminding us. How silly of me.” She waits for a second for the laugh that never comes, instead watching the almost twist of a smile cross Tony’s face before fading. “But you’re correct, Clint was scared. I think . . . I think that it’s different, for people like him. And like Steve. They can accept that people like you and me have our own fair share of issues when it comes to long term relationships, but the idea that we could suddenly change our minds is a warning sign.”

Tony glances at her briefly, confusion marring his features. “A warning? Of what?”

Natasha shrugs, “I’m not quite sure. I can’t really speak for Steve, or for Clint either. It’s neither my place nor something I could ever understand. But with Steve especially, I think, it probably has something to do with Peggy.”

“Bucky mentioned something along those lines,” Tony murmurs. “Although I’m not quite sure I understand the reasoning.”

Waving a dismissive hand, Natasha says, “It would be difficult for you to, as someone who’s never lost anyone you felt particularly close to.” Tony scowls, but he doesn’t comment, a silent agreement. “Steve is, as you have probably already suspected, scared of losing you due to his own actions.”

Tony can’t help but snort, “Real good job he’s doing then.” He regrets his words almost as soon as he’s spoken them, averting his gaze from Natasha once again to dip a pinky into the heated jam for a taste. “I didn’t . . .”

“I know,” Natasha says. “But you understand, right? That much at least? You understand that-”

“-That Peggy’s death pretty much fucked him up for life?” Tony finishes for her, “Yeah. It did a number. On a few people, actually.”

“He’s scared of using you,” Natasha goes on.

Tony’s eyebrows furrow together, “How so?”

“It wouldn’t be a conscious thing,” Natasha explains, “Which is why it scares him so badly. It would be subtle, small suggestions and ideas that would change the way you act, think, feel, shape you in a way that fits his needs because he understands full well that some part of him still aches, is still grieving for Peggy and will probably never stop. He’s scared of forcing you to fill in the holes in his heart Peggy left behind.”

There’s a sharp scrape and clack as Tony grits his teeth, the spoon clattering into the pot so he has both hands free to grip the countertop. “He didn’t force me into anything!” he snaps, chest heaving, three parts fury and one part rising panic. “I decided on my own! I found that I didn’t mind the idea of commitment so long as it was with him! I didn’t sway me or push me into anything!” His knuckles are bone white where they’re clenched over the granite, and he sucks in an unsteady breath to match the shaking of his hands. “I would have chosen this on my own, eventually,” he says, quieter now, suddenly not as certain as he had been just a second before. “I would have . . . Right?”

Natasha doesn’t answer. There are no assurances for things like this, no comforts to offer because the process of manipulation, even an unconscious one by both parties, takes time to unravel. The truth of the matter is something Tony will have to decide for himself, and she tells him so. “That’s something you’ll have to figure out on your own, Stark. And whatever conclusion you come to, whatever end
you find to this mess, make sure it’s the right one.”

OoOoOoOoOoOoOoO

While he didn’t exactly have a specific destination in mind, Steve’s not all together surprised to find himself standing in front of Bucky’s apartment. It’s midday, a little under twenty-four hours since he bolted. He’s been counting, he knows, he’s kept track of every message filled minute he’s been gone, and every silent one after his phone gave up the ghost. The thing is clutched in his hand now, pressed to his palm tight enough to leave an imprint against his skin, but he barely notices. He knocks without letting go of it, skin and hollow plastic resounding off the wood.

It’s unfortunate, really, that Bucky isn’t the one to answer, if only because Steve’s so caught off guard when Pepper throws open the door that he doesn’t have time to defend himself. And even if Pepper is half his size, she can throw a punch with enough force that should scientifically be impossible for someone of her stature. Steve finds himself with his back against the wall and a swollen lip before he can even register what just happened, and when he does he still reels a bit, divided between running for cover and just letting her swing at him again. It’s the fact that he does neither, too stunned to move, that makes her stop. She has one hand fisted around the collar of his shirt, the other still half raised to hit him again before she lowers it.

Bucky comes barreling out of the apartment a second later and pries Pepper’s hand off of Steve’s collar. She stubbornly rips the top button off as he does so, a furious scowl still firmly in place. “You have no idea,” Pepper seethes once Bucky has placed himself in between them, “What you’ve done, do you.”

Steve keeps his gaze on the hall carpet, unwavering. “I did what I had to. For Tony.”

“For Tony?!” Pepper spits, disbelieving. “Don’t you dare give me that bullshit, Steve, you did it for you! You got scared, and you bailed!”


That halts Pepper in her tracks, her mouth still open with a retort still ready on her tongue. “What?”

“As a replacement,” Steve chokes, “for Peggy. I tried to fit him into the space she’d left behind and I messed up, Pepper. He was going to propose because that’s what he thought he had to do to keep me, to fulfill that role I’d been unconsciously forcing him in to.”

Pepper stares at him, “He loves you, he would have eventually done it regardless-”

“Would he have? Say Peggy and I had never met, say it was just Tony and I, nothing to hang me up and hold me back, nothing for me to compare him to, would he? Still?”

Pepper falters, “You . . . Did you seriously compare them?” Bucky shifts his stance at the change in her tone, aware of how positively homicidal it’s become.

“I don’t know,” Steve says. “I wish I could say with certainty that I didn’t, that I was focused on the here and now and him, but . . . Pepper, he changed his mind so fast. It was a matter of weeks, barely even a month. If it had been more than that, years maybe, I’d believe it was real.”

Bucky frowns at this, although he remains undeterred when Pepper tries to get around him again. “Jesus, Steve, it was real. You know that. Hell, the rest of us know that, and we were just the outsiders.”

Steve shakes his head, but he doesn’t reply, doesn’t protest or confirm this statement. Pepper mutters
out a curse under her breath before she shoves Bucky aside, letting him stumble against the doorframe while she moves to stand directly in front of Steve. She eyes the phone still gripped in his hand before meeting his gaze head on. “Fix this,” she says lowly. “Steve, fix this or so help me God, I will make your life miserable.”

“It already is,” he whispers.

Pepper stares him down for a moment longer, her jaw set tight. Bucky remains where she left him, leaning against the door with an apprehensive expression. “Fix it,” Pepper repeats one last time. “You’ve already admitted it’s your fault, your hang ups and misguided notions that Tony can’t make decisions for himself-” Steve opens his mouth to protest but closes it again when she raises a warning hand. “Don’t. Steve, just don’t. You broke it, you fix it. It’s not that hard. You can start by explaining everything to Tony.” She turns to Bucky then while Steve slumps a bit once she directs her attention elsewhere. “And as for you, Barnes, you better glue that phone to him until he follows through. Make them talk it out like the grown-ass men they are.”

She storms off without another word, purse swung over her shoulder and her heels clicking down the hall. Bucky would, if he wasn’t terrified of her, equate the sound to devil hoof beats, but currently he’s a lot more occupied with making sure Steve doesn’t pass out in the hall. “She really clocked you,” he winces as he hustles Steve into the apartment, gingerly touching the bruised area on the right side of his friend’s jaw. “But even if I’d known that was what she was gonna do, I’m not sure I’d have stopped her.”

Steve forces a grimacing smile, “Deserved it,” he mumbles.

Bucky leaves him on the sofa before moving to the freezer to dig around for an icepack. “Just a little. You do know I’m going to follow through with what she said and make you call him, right?” He tosses Steve bag of frozen peas. “Best I got,” he explains when Steve gives him a quizzical look. “Wasn’t expecting to be housing a bruised ding-dong this afternoon.”

“Thanks,” Steve mutters.

“Mhmm,” Bucky returns. “That’s what best friends are for. Now, hand over the phone so I can have it charged in time for a dinner call to your probably immensely distraught . . . Tony.”

“You’re not making me feel any better, you know.”

“I’m well aware, as that was sort of the point. Oh, and Sharon’s going to be here in about an hour. I’m giving you fair warning just because she’s unpredictable and terrifying.”

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

“I don’t see why we need to hang around here all day,” Clint bemoans when he returns to Tony’s apartment, arms laden with the Chinese takeout Natasha sent him to pick up. “It’s not like he’s suicidal.” When Natasha doesn’t respond from her position in the armchair Clint whips around to stare at Tony, who’s concentrating on his seventh batch of jam.

“Your lack of faith in my sense of self preservation upsets me, Clint,” Tony says blandly.

“He’s good,” Natasha agrees.

Clint continues to eye Tony suspiciously for a moment more before handing the takeout bag to Natasha, “Right . . . So, what, are we just going to chill here until Steve gets back? Because that’s kind of boring, and I left my PSP at home-”
“We’re going to sit down to a nice supper,” Natasha interrupts.

“Of incredible lo mein and wontons,” Tony joins in.

“And then we’re going across the hall to see Thor and the eggs.”

This time it’s Tony who appears unsettled by their choice of evening plans. “The mutant bird eggs?” he asks warily.

“No,” Natasha deadpans, “the Velociraptor eggs.”

“Sarcasm hurts, you know,” Tony grumbles. “And I would honestly rather they be vicious dinosaur eggs, that way they could hatch and end my misery.”

Clint arches an eyebrow, “So much for self preservation.” Tony flips him off and Clint sticks his tongue out. “By the way, are you just planning on making jam until you run out of fruit and sugar? Or are you actually going to let people eat it.”

Tony glances at the growing pile of filled jars occupying the kitchen table. “You can have one,” he reluctantly decides. Clint whoops and grabs the nearest jar and turning to snatch a spoon out of the dish rack. “Don’t.” Tony starts, but Clint has already unscrewed the cap and dipped the spoon into its contents. “Oh, gross,” Tony gags when Clint pops the spoon in his mouth with a pleased grin. “Don’t eat that right out of the jar, that’s disgusting! Put it on bread or something!”

Clint blinks, “You put jam on bread?” he asks around the spoon.

Tony claps a hand over his mouth in an effort not to be sick, “Yes, you do. It goes on bread and English muffins and other wheat based products. What the hell is wrong with you?”

Clint licks the spoon clean and swirls it around in the jar again with a thoughtful expression, “Hmm, well I wouldn’t open that box, but come on. Didn’t anyone else ever get dropped off at the theater in the afternoon with a jar of jam?” Natasha frowns and Tony shakes his head, hand still over his mouth. “Huh,” Clint muses, “A couple of my foster moms did that all the time when I was little.”

“Try not to think about it too much,” Natasha urges, beckoning Clint over to her with a hand. “Or you’ll end up in Tony’s bucket of angst. Eat your dinner and your jam.”

OoOoOoOoOoO

When Steve gets his now fully charged phone back from Bucky he takes a moment to just sit there with it in his hands. The message light is blinking insistently at him, a sharp flash of red every few seconds that seems to cut right through him. He cups a hand over it to block it out, but it seeps out through the spaces between his fingers instead. Message. Message. Message.

Bucky lends him his bedroom, and Steve doesn’t feel too bad about taking cover in there before Sharon shows up. The message light keeps flashing where he tucks it under one of the pillows. It illuminates the dark bubble he creates when he pulls the covers up over his head, casting deep shadows across the blankets and sheets. Message. Message. Message.

Even with Pepper’s threats looming over him he leaves it where it is for awhile, face pressed into the pillow and the pillow muffling the persistent red light. There’s an ache, now, that he didn’t notice last night. Initially, he’s comfortable with blaming it on the fact that he hasn’t slept in awhile. It’s exhaustion, a slow spreading heaviness in his limbs, his mind, his chest. But he knows better, knows otherwise. For a minute or two he slips into a light doze only to wake up, hands twisting into the sheets and empty spaces on the other side of a bed that isn’t his, and the red light of his phone blinks
on.


He knows better.

The soft sounds of conversation begin to leak under the door just after six. Steve ignores them, doesn’t feel he should be privy to them despite the fact that he’s all too sure the topic is himself and the mess he’s made. He buries his head under the pillow then, eye to eye with the silent blare of the message light. It burns itself into his retinas with every wink, a soundless tempo that sends a sick shudder through his body. Message. Message. Message.

*Tony.*

Whether or not Pepper actually means to make do with her warnings, Steve has to call Tony. He owes him that much, owes him an explanation.

“MESSAGE FROM TONY STARK - I think we need to talk. - END OF MESSAGE.”

Steve tucks the phone between his ear and message after he dials, waiting.

“Thank god.”

He can’t help but breathe out a sigh when Tony answers. A wash of guilt works its way through him at the relief in Tony’s tone, prompting the first words out of his mouth to be, “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t start with apologies,” Tony pleads on the other end. “God, Steve . . .”

Steve swallows, “You’re making jam?” It’s an easier subject to start with, a gentle way to ease into the harsher parts yet to come, and he can hear the steam and simmer in the background.

“Mmm,” Tony hums, “Yeah. Blackberry, raspberry, lemon, and grape so far.”

“Lemon?” Steve lets out a quiet laugh at this, “I didn’t know there was such a thing.”

“Experiment,” Tony says, “Actually, most of this crap is. I’m just drawing off of what I remember of the stuff my mom made, and the times she let me help. So it’s not anything grand. Clint seems to like it though, he ate a whole jar.”

“Did he throw up?”

“Considering that he’s clutching the toilet right now while Bruce and Natasha rub his back, probably,” Tony huffs. “Although I have no desire to confirm anything for myself.” There’s a pause, and Steve curls a little further into himself under the covers and the pillows, dreading what’s to come.

“Steve,” Tony begins. His voice is hesitant, cautious in a way that makes Steve suck in a shuddering breath. “Natasha says . . . No. Never mind what she says, I want to hear it for myself.”

It takes a moment for Steve to find the right words, “A month ago you were dead set against marriage.”

“I was,” Tony agrees. “Bucky told me you knew about the ring.”

“Why did you change your mind?”

The answer should be simple, should be immediate, but it isn’t. Tony falters, and Steve hears the way the answer catches in his throat. “Because I love you,” he says finally. “Isn’t that what I’m
supposed to say?”

“Is it?” Steve inquires. At this point he honestly doesn’t know. “Aren’t you still scared?”

“Shitless,” Tony confirms. “I’m terrified, Steve.”

“Then why?”

“When I decided, when I let Natasha and Pepper sign off on the reservations at the museum and when I picked out the ring, I thought I was so sure, but now that I’m talking to you, and you’re . . . Steve, do you know what you sound like? It’s like you’re reading off of a script, like you’ve thought about every way this could go and you’re ready to shoot be down no matter what I say. Just . . . Can’t you just answer the question? Why is it suddenly not working? Why now, instead of a month ago, a year ago?”

“You changed your mind,” Steve whispers.

“And that’s illegal?” Tony snaps, “Explain it to me like I’m five, Steve, explain to me why I can’t have a change of heart.”

“I wanted this,” Steve breathes into the receiver, “too much, maybe. Before she died, Peggy and I had been making plans, talking about the future and the idea of spending it together. And I lost that, I was left clinging to a half finished dream and . . . Tony, even if it wasn’t intentional—”

“You think you used me as a means to an end of that dream,” Tony finishes for him. “As a piece rather than a person, and that my actions when we were together were due solely to your influence. Well,” Tony admits, “You’re not wrong.”

Steve doesn’t reply, and he closes his eyes as those words dig themselves under his skin. “Tony, I—”

“Shut up,” Tony cuts him off, “Shut up, Steve, and listen to me. You’re not wrong. I was influenced by you. Whether or not it was because of the reasons you think is debatable, but listen to me. From my perspective, this is how it happened. I was a moron and I fell in love with you. And yes, I am still scared to death of the future, of commitment and so on, but you know what? It’s a little less scary if I’m thinking about doing those things with you. The reason I decided marriage might not be so bad is, like you said, because of you. But not for you. It’s partly that, too, since I was thinking about your feelings on it as well. That was just a prerequisite, though. I already knew, or at least I thought I knew, that you were in it for the long haul. I decided I was ready because if it was with you, if I was slipping a ring over my finger with you, that I could make that commitment.”

“Will you still feel that way tomorrow?” Steve can’t help but ask, and the question echoes in his mind, the bitter and broken sound of it all too familiar. Tony had asked him something similar, once, too. “Or is it just an affect of the moment. If I’m not there, if I’m not able to sway you in your decisions, would you still want this?”

It takes awhile for Tony to reply, and the delay sends another shiver of doubt through Steve’s frame. “I don’t know,” Tony replies after a bit, and Steve can hear the striking candor in that confession. “And the solution to figuring that out isn’t . . . Isn’t something I’d like.”

Steve nods before he remembers that Tony can’t see him through the phone. “Just for a little while, maybe, it’s for the best that we try and get some perspective before we decide.”

“‘Perspective’ is probably the nicest term I’ve ever heard for breaking up,” Tony says steadily.

“Just until we can say with certainty that this is what we want,” Steve murmurs.
“And if, by the end of it, I can tell you that I haven’t changed my mind then-”

“Then we’ll talk about it.” Steve says.

OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOo

Tony can hear the regret in Steve’s voice before he hangs up. It’s a sound that slices through him like a knife, painfully sharp and all too real. He lets the phone slip from his fingers and clatter to the balcony floor before he leans back against the window and slides down to sit just underneath it, knees pulled up close to his chest and his palms over his eyes. Part of him wishes he could have just said the right things to make Steve come back, to persuade him that everything leading up to this decision had been intentional and thought out, but that would be a lie.

The truth, the clear and ugly truth, is that the other part of Tony is just as unsure as Steve is. There is no guarantee he’ll still want this in a few days time, a few weeks. He wants to say that he will, that this is not an act of reparation for a death that cut Steve too deep to ever fully heal. It is not his job to fill in the spaces Peggy left behind, although that would be an easier compromise. It would be simpler to fix what has been broken then to start from scratch and build something new, even if the latter is more rewarding in the long run.

And that is something Tony definitely understands, even if he can’t quite say which it is he was attempting to do. He’s built uncountable things, wrought them with his own hands until his skin is calloused with burns and abrasions. He knows the temptation to try and replicate something, and knows how easy it is to unintentionally duplicate a pattern that has been so ingrained into the mind it seems like new. Such a thing like that, the illusion of creation where it’s just imitation, is a well traveled road taken by many before them.

The drive, however, to prove Steve wrong regardless is an entirely fresh thought. He’ll take the time apart and put it to use, outline all the reasons Steve’s fears are unfounded and use them as proof. Tony Stark is not a replacement, neither a conscious one or an accidental one, and he has no intentions of letting Steve go so easily.

Chapter End Notes

One of these days I'll get a chapter posted in a timely manner. But it is not this day.
The One Where Steve And Tony Are Just Friends

Chapter Summary

Sometimes things have to get worse before they can get better.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Think we should go out there?”

Natasha, Clint, and Bruce have been sitting on the sofa for the last half hour while Tony’s on the phone, watching him apprehensively through the broad window overlooking the balcony. By this point, Tony has basically thrown his cell on the ground (it’s more of a gentle drop, in Bruce’s opinion, but still), and sunk down the window to sit beneath it with only the top of his head still in sight. By Clint’s standards they should have let him be long ago, but Bruce is concerned and Natasha seems to be fixated on cleaning up this mess herself (through indirect means of course). Clint grew bored and frustrated with the situation just hours after it had begun, however, and quite frankly he’s sick of all the drama.

“If someone doesn’t go out there to make sure he’s still breathing I’m going to,” Clint huffs as he stands, waving away Bruce and Natasha’s attempts to stop him. “This is ridiculous, all of it. Steve and Tony and you guys being all sensitive to his emotions and crap. Ridiculous. And I’m done sitting around and watching everyone sulk about it. It’s action time.”

Right on cue, Tony springs back into full view beyond the window. He lets out a yell which Natasha likens to Hollywood’s idea of an ancient battle cry, and proceeds to storm towards the balcony door and kick it open with a resounding, “Fuck this shit! I've got a plan!”

Clint whoops, “Yes! Finally! . . . A plan for what now?”

Tony points at him, “For convincing Steve that I’m serious. And you’re going to help, Barton.”

“Natasha raises an eyebrow, “I’d advise against enlisting the aid of Clint if I were you.” Clint scowls at her, but she ignores him. “And besides that, how can you convince him when you haven’t even convinced yourself.”

“Details,” Tony dismisses. “It’ll all fall into place, so there’s no point in concerning myself with the little things.”

Bruce coughs, “I think he’s lost it,” to which Clint nods.

“Definitely.”

After some extensive outlining involving multiple poster boards, six different colors of marker, and a lot of muttering, Tony presents them with his strategy. “It’s not very grand,” Natasha says, the first to speak while Bruce and Clint eye the diagrams and pictographs from a wary distance.

“Steve’s not really the flashy type,” Tony reminds. “And also he’s intuitive as hell, so if it’s too obvious he’ll know.”
“It’s better that it isn’t grand anyways,” Bruce adds suddenly, “Certain over luxurious gestures have the habit of coming off as desperate.” He glances at Clint who meets him with an offended expression.

“If you’re referring to the seven layer cake I gave you at the hospital—” Clint starts, annoyed.

Bruce grimaces at the mere mention of the incident, “It was almost six feet tall, Clint.”

Tony smirks, “Now that’s what I’d call extravagant. You’re a man after my own heart, Clint.” Bruce flashes him a horrified look and Tony laughs, “It’s not something I’d try and copy, though, as it clearly wasn’t so well received.”

“Six feet tall,” Bruce mumbles.

Natasha leans in to get a closer look at one of the poster boards, skeptically eyeing a very wonky looking venn diagram. “It needs some tinkering.” she says, “But it’s not totally impossible. We’re going to need a little flexibility from you, though, Stark.”

“I can be flexible,” Tony assures.

Clint snorts, “Sure you can. And Nat, what the hell do you mean ‘we’? Because I’m not comfortable sticking my nose where it doesn’t belong, and getting caught up in the fuckery that is Tony and Steve’s relationship right now isn’t really in my best interests.”

Natasha glares at him over her shoulder, “It’ll be in your interests when it splits up the group. We’ll have to start hanging out with each of them separately, coordinating schedules so that plans with Tony don’t clash or interfere with get togethers with Steve. Eventually, we’ll all just split off based on personal preferences as no one can take that sort of pressure for a prolonged amount of time. So unless you’re fine with halving your current number of friends, and possibly bedmates, I’d suggest putting on your big boy pants and helping out.”

“You know,” Clint says haughtily, ears starting to tinge red, “Most people would be alarmed by the degrading way you talk to me.”

“Except that you like it,” Natasha and Bruce chime in unison.

Tony pinches the bridge of his nose and sighs, “Now there was a bit of information I could have gone without knowing for the rest of my life. You guys have obviously been babysitting me way too long, go home and take care of your... Clint, seriously, you need looser pants that is obscene. All of you, out. Leave before I bash my head against the wall to erase the terrible images currently swimming through it.” He shuffles the three of them towards the door while keeping his gaze firmly fixed on the ceiling. “And if you’re still overly concerned about my well being,” he says before Natasha can protest, “I’ll be over at Thor’s. Kapeesh?” Once he’s ushered them all out into the hall he adds, “And don’t call or come back before each of you is well and thoroughly satisfied, seriously.”

He slams the door and locks it, leaving them to stand in the empty hall with matching shell-shocked expressions. “Welp, at least I got to get out of jail free,” Clint relents, already marching off towards the stairs.

“You know,” Natasha mutters, “He’s really not one to talk considering we had to sit around for nearly a year while he and Steve were kings of the land of unsatisfied sexual tension.”

Bruce shrugs, “Doesn’t matter to me, although I do have to agree that Clint’s pants are straying dangerously into skinny jeans territory as of late.”
“Mmm, yes, that is a bit alarming,” Natasha agrees.

“However, it does outline some finer points,” Bruce observes as he watches Clint’s receding figure.

“Shut up and get out of my hallway!” Tony screams from behind the door.

OoOoOoOoOoO

Sharon is by nature an act first and think later sort of person. It’s just too bad that the world as it stands frowns upon such personalities in women, stifling them with too many rules, regulations, and warnings to heed and abide. Today, she finds that it’s a little less hard to reign in her gut instincts since Pepper apparently beat her to the punch this time, quite literally.

“In the face?” she gestures questioningly towards her own after Bucky explains the events of the last twenty-four hours to her.

“Right here,” Bucky says almost too gleefully, pointing to the spot between his jaw and cheekbone, just under his eye. “Pepper nearly knocked him off his feet. Injured best friend or not, it was kind of awesome,” he whistles.

“I’m jealous I didn’t get to do it first,” Sharon mutters.

Bucky snaps to attention immediately at her tone, “What? You wanted to hit Steve? Why?”

She scoffs, “Why not? You were there, Bucky, you saw what he did. He, excuse my French, fucked up. And I did not get involved in a lot of nauseatingly cheesy plans to hook them up only for them to throw the whole relationship down the tube a year later.”

“Yeah,” Bucky sighs, “That is a bit annoying. But there’s nothing much that can be done about that. Steve is convinced it was inevitable because of his hang ups over Peggy’s death.” He winces slightly as he says this, and Sharon glances down, suddenly very interested in her nails. “I mean . . . Jesus, it’s been like, what, five years now?”

“Going on six,” Sharon murmurs.

“Exactly. I know . . . I get it, okay. I get that he loved her more than I’ll probably ever understand, and I get that he’s torn up about it. And even though he says he’s over it, he blamed himself for such a long time and-”

Sharon’s head snaps up again, “Blamed himself?”

Bucky starts, “Uh, yeah. Of course he did. I would too if I were in his position, why the hell do you think I was trying so hard to get the guy responsible? Pure revenge?” He rolls his shoulders uncomfortably when Sharon just levels him with a look, “That’s not really my thing. And maybe it is revenge, a bit. Mostly though it’s just . . . It’s a last ditch effort to clear Steve’s conscience, I guess.”

“He blamed himself,” Sharon repeats, carefully drawing out each word as if she can’t quite believe it. “I don’t understand.”

“You weren’t there,” Bucky says, “So I’m not sure if you could, even if I explained it.” He wilts a bit when she just stares at him pointedly, a wordless prompt to continue. “We got caught in a firefight,” he begins to detail, “It was pretty bad, but nothing we hadn't made it out of before. I guess you could say we’d gotten plucky, overconfident from too many successful battles in a row, and Steve ended up without cover. He got shot,” Bucky motions towards his right shoulder, “I’m sure you've seen the scar, and it wasn't fatal so obviously the enemy would-”
“-Would take another shot,” Sharon finishes, voice barely above a whisper. “Oh, god . . .”

Bucky nods, “She loved him, too.”

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

If Steve closes his eyes and covers his ears he can still hear the sounds of war. The sharp rat-tat-tat of machine guns and the deep and swift booms of grenades ring out far too clearly. They echo between eardrum and palm, ricocheting off of his skin that by all rights should be permanently stained in blood. He wishes he knew how Bucky dealt with it, if he does at all, or at least remember what it was Tony did to snap him back into reality. Except Tony’s not here now, Steve pushed him away with his own self doubts and fears. Selfish, selfish, selfish. And now, he selfishly regrets it for selfish reasons.

He’s been thinking too hard about Peggy, running the events of the past year through his mind over and over in an attempt to figure out whether he’d been building a relationship or duplicating one. It’s difficult, he finds, to line up everything the way he expected he’d be able to. There were moments, yes, there were definitely moments where there was no question that he had compared, that he had allowed Tony to unconsciously slip into roles that Steve had left open for him to fill. It would have been impossible for Tony not to do so, the empty spaces were there just waiting to be stepped in to.

Tony let’s out a noise that sounds vaguely like, “Haaarrgggh,” in his frustration. “You’re a moron, Steve.” Steve sniffs in protest, and Tony grabs him by the shoulders before he can vocalize it. “No, shush, listen to me. You are a good person. You did all those things, and went through all those things, because you believe in the goodness in others, in this world. It is, granted, a rather stupid belief, but that’s why it makes you a good person.”

“You’re a soldier, Steve.” Peggy whispers, hands folded over his own until they stop shaking, “Of course you’re going to question things, anyone who claims they don’t at some point is full of shit. But questioning the morality of war, of why we try and solve problems by killing, doesn’t make you a bad person. You do good things, Steve, both here and at home. You believe in the goodness of others, and that’s something worth fighting for.”

“I don’t know how to dance,” Steve mumbles. Tony smiles.

“I know. You were waiting for the right partner and all that, I remember.” Hesitantly, he holds out a hand, “Sorry I’m not that, but I do know a thing or two about dancing.”

“Never been dancing? What are you waiting for, soldier?” Peggy asks, a smile that threatens to break into a small laugh crossing her face.

“The right partner.”

“I've never had to sneak out before.” Steve raises an eyebrow and Tony looks practically giddy at his confusion. “No one knows yet, you see, about this.”

Peggy lazily winds her hair into a bun where she sits on the edge of Steve’s cot, “First time sneaking out,” she says mildly when she catches him watching. “Might as well make this walk of shame look good. Wartime tomfoolery and all, I have to hold my head high and prove to them it’s more than that.”

Tony’s on his feet, “Are you crazy?” he yells, “You could get hurt! What if you get hurt, Steve?”
“Tony.” Steve starts.

“What if you die?!” Tony shouts before he can finish. “What am I supposed to do if you-”

“Don’t you dare,” Peggy grits out, fingers fisted around the collar of Steve’s uniform, “Don’t you ever do that again, Steve. I can’t - What am I supposed to do if you get hurt?”

“But I didn’t,” Steve tries, “I landed the plane and-”

“Shut up,” she shakes him, a halfhearted motion that ends with her dropping her head onto his shoulder. “Don’t you dare . . .”

It’s not fair for him to compare, to contrast and align them the way he knows he’s wont to do. Even if it’s accidental, a slip of the consciousness between the past and the present, it’s wrong. It’s not fair to either Tony or to Peggy. They’re separate people and Steve should treat them as such. He knows he does most of the time, often to the point where he doesn’t think about Peggy for as long as a few days because his attention is so focused on Tony. As it should be, his mind insists, because he’s supposed to be living in the here and now. But his heart whispers how dare you. How dare he forget her, let her memory disappear into the dusty corners of his heart and mind as if she didn’t matter. It’s only right that he fights to hold on to her, then, isn’t it? To brush away the dust and take a moment or two to remember.

Except that doing so, clinging to Peggy’s memory like it was a solid, real thing had cost him something dear. He’d tucked her too close to his heart and kept her there, long after he should have let her rest. It wasn’t fair, he recognizes now, to assume his heart was big enough to hold them both at the same time, to wallow in guilt and grief while still trying to dole out affection for the living. A life like that, of drowning between two starkly contrasting emotions simultaneously would drive anyone over the brink. Steve had needed time to heal, time to return the gumball ring and move on, and he’d had that time. At the end of it, though, when he should have opened his eyes and only see what was in front of him, he hadn’t.

Even big hearts can only handle so much. He’d let Tony down, broken all the promises he’d so carefully made because Tony isn’t like Peggy.

Peggy had been fierce, confrontationally and truthfully so. Steve had never feared letting her run off into danger because she always returned with nothing more than a scrape and a scratch. She was the type to take a stance on something and stick with it, unwavering and steadfast to the point where it would take an entire army to even attempt to move her. She was loyal, and far more brave than Steve could ever claim to be.

Tony, on the other hand, is different. He embodies many of the same aspects as Peggy, a clear indication that Steve does have a type, but much of it is a farce. Tony is confrontational when the situation requires it, when his job needs it. He’s headstrong because it’s the only way he knows how to survive. His loyalty only extends as far as he can reach, built on trust and people rather than blind faith and country soil. He thrives on socializing in a way that would make most people exhausted, and afterwards he simply returns to his craft, tinkering away at things until long past dawn. There are hundreds of things about Tony Steve still hasn’t had time to examine yet, to pick apart and figure out the same way Tony dismantles machines. He wants to peel back all the layers and study them, understand and know them until he’s familiar with every little detail. And then he would piece Tony back together again, place all the layers where they belong because he would not dare to disregard a single one. In the long run he’s just barely begun this process, too wary to do so in case he ends up face to face with just one more thing to compare, to render worthless. And Tony deserves more than that, more than the reflection of a ghost to compete with in Steve’s heart.
He’s made a mistake, one that might have cost him more than he can bear to think about. It was his choice, though, a sacrifice worth making because Tony will be better off without him, without someone who’s too caught up in shadows and memories to see him as he should be seen. It’s Steve’s choice.

“Steve, this is my choice.”

Steve shivers as the words ring in his ears, too loud and too clear to be ignored. “No,” he can’t help but respond, echoing his own reaction five years before.

“I’m going to need a rain check on that dance.”

That had been a choice, too.

OoOoOoOoOoO
True to his word, Tony stalks over to Thor’s place as soon as Clint, Natasha, and Bruce have vacated the premises. Usually he wouldn't have bothered to follow through, too caught up in his own problems to remember small things like promises to help baby - er, eggsit. But in this case he decides a bit of a breather isn't going to do any harm, and he doesn't really have any place better to be.

“You know these are probably just normal duck eggs, right?” he asks after he takes a moment to eye the basket of eggs Duck is currently happily perched upon. “Because no matter what Clint has told you chickens and ducks don’t have similar enough DNA to breed, they would need equal numbers of chromosomes and-”

“I know,” Thor interrupts. He places a glass of what appears to be some sort of cider in Tony’s hands, “But I’m also aware that miracles can occur regardless of what science claims.”

Tony squints at him, “I’m not sure whether to question your reasoning there, or just simply be pissed off about it.”

Thor laughs, “Ah, my friend, I am aware that you are a man of science, and I did not mean to offend. I was merely stating my own outlook on the matter.”

Tony considers this for a moment, chin in his hands and his eyes fixed on Duck and her clutch. “Seeing as you are a man of your own values and beliefs, what are your thoughts on the idea of substitution?”

“Substitution,” Thor echoes, “As in the act of replacing one thing with another?”

“Specifically pertaining to people,” Tony says. “Such as, uh, well, such as someone unconsciously using another person as a substitute for someone that they’d lost.”

Thor studies him, “I am familiar with the concept,” he says carefully. “Personally so, perhaps.” Tony glances at him, surprised, and Thor continues, “I’m sure you’re aware of some of the circumstances leading to my brother’s leave of absence.”

Raising an eyebrow, Tony replies, “Uh, yeah . . . I know a few things about that. I’m not sure they’re the same things you know, though.”

“Probably not,” Thor dismisses, “But I am of the understanding that my brother was convinced that Jane was replacing him, somehow.” He frowns, “Steve’s position is not so dissimilar to my own, from what I know of it. Except that in his case, the person he fears he has replaced has passed. It’s worse, I think, because of that. His main caution lies within the idea that he has simply superimposed
you over what he once had, rather than begun anew. Yet it is very likely that he, whether knowingly or not, understands that committing to matrimony with you would be the final step in bidding farewell to his lost love.”

Tony inhales sharply, “Oh.”

Thor smiles sympathetically. “I’m sure he feels that his actions are for your benefit, my friend, that you deserve better than playing the part of a replacement.” Tony snorts in disbelief. Thor ignores the sound and continues, “But in acknowledging that, in admitting to what he’s done, he has most likely found himself at a crossroads. He can either move forward, with you, or continue to let his heart dwell in the past.”

“And if I try to coax him to make a decision in my favor?” Tony asks.

“I can not predict the outcome,” Thor shrugs, “I do not possess a knack for the third eye.”

Tony huffs in frustration, “Great. You know, I’m starting to think Loki had the right idea. Running away from all of this would have hurt a hell of a lot less than getting caught up in it and finding myself at a bitter end.”

Thor purses his lips, “If that is what you really think then perhaps this is all for the best. My brother’s choices were his own, and not something I feel I can rule any sort of judgment on. You, however, are another matter. I am not wrong in considering us friends, correct?”

“No,” Tony mumbles, “But-

“Then I have the right to say that I expected more of you,” Thor silences him. “You are strong, Tony Stark, much stronger than people, including yourself, give you credit for. This is merely a time of trial, and although you are free to make your own decisions running from it will do very little to ease your pain.”

Tony regards him carefully, letting the words sink in before he dares to reply. “For someone who keeps insisting that his chicken and duck have spawned scientifically impossible eggs, you’re surprisingly wise.” He shakes his head when Thor arches an eyebrow, a soft chuckle escaping him. “Thank you.”

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

The first few days are rough, filled with busy mornings and sleepless nights. Tony stays on his feet, stays moving, stays working because if he doesn’t reality might finally bite him in the butt. He’s aware, of course, that his plans of winning Steve back are likely to fail, which is exactly why he’s focusing on other things in the meantime. Dwelling on the possible downfalls won’t accomplish anything other than giving him a bad case of anxiety.

“You’re getting dark circles under your eyes,” Clint says on the fourth day. “That’s not going to convince Steve of anything other than the fact that you’ve become seriously dependent.”

“Dependent on what?” Tony gripes. “Coffee? Because seeing as we hang out here at Coulson’s basically every day I’m sure he’s already well aware.” He sips pointedly at his cup.

Clint rolls his eyes, “Dependent on Steve, Tony.”

Tony chokes on his coffee, sputtering at the accusation, “Excuse you, Barton! I am no such thing!”

“Natasha had to remind you what drawer your socks are in this morning,” Clint says lowly.
“It was 5:00 AM, anyone would forget where their socks were kept if they had to be up at that time,” Tony argues. “And besides, the word you’re looking for isn’t dependent, it’s attached. I’m perfectly capable of looking after myself, I’ve just grown accustomed to a certain lifestyle and certain habits because I hold affections for a certain person.”

“Dependent,” Clint repeats smugly.

“Says the guy who refuses to get out of bed until one of his bedfellows makes him a bowl of Cinnamon Toast Crunch.”

Clint scowls, “That is totally different.”

“Sure it is,” Tony smirks into his coffee. “What is it that you call them again? Toasty-Schmosties?”

“Cinnamon Toast Crunch is really hard to say in the mornings!”

“You life is so hard,” Tony teases. He moves to return his cup to its coaster on the table (something Coulson is very strict about) and pauses, attention diverted by the ringing of the bell over the door. “Uh, so,” Tony whispers, “Are the circles under my eyes really that bad? Or can I pull off not looking a little more sane than I feel right now?”

Clint twists around in his seat to spot Bucky and Steve entering the shop. Bucky is already making a beeline for the counter so he can place his order while Steve shuffles along behind him. The blonde’s shoulders are slumped, his hands stuffed into his pockets, and a visible bruise under his eye that Tony suspects is courtesy of Pepper. All in all, his entire appearance can only be described as ruffled. “He looks beat,” Clint remarks as they take this all in, “like you. Aw, you two match even when you’re apart, how adorable.”

“You make me nauseous,” Tony deadpans, his eyes never straying from where Steve is hovering at Bucky’s side. “I know it’s not part of the plan, but I should talk to him, right?”

“Wrong.”

“I’m going to talk to him,” Tony says resolutely. “And if you try and stop me I’ll kick you where it hurts, Barton, so keep out of this.”

“Have fun,” Clint bids him with a sarcastic wave of his hand. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

It takes him awhile to work up the courage to even do something as simple as getting out of his seat, but once Tony is on his feet it’s as if the whole world is shoving him forward, and by the time he can blink he finds himself standing right in front of Steve. In most cases this would be the perfect time to use his words to his advantage, to choose a greeting that would portray both stability and determination in spite of everything that has occurred in the past week. Tony, in a crowning moment of fuckup that surprises no one, hails Steve with, “Fancy seeing you here,” and promptly lets out an internal groan of dismay on his own behalf.

Steve starts as Tony steps in front of him, the mug of coffee Bucky just handed him almost slipping out of his grip, stopped only by Tony putting a hand underneath it to stall its fall. “T-Tony,” he gasps.

“The one and only,” Tony grins. “Since we’re doing the whole friends bit for now, I thought I would come by and interact in a friendly manner.” He tilts his head, studying the almost listless air around Steve, “You look tired,” he whispers.

“You too,” Steve replies.
They stand there for a moment, trapped in the awkward silence that is starting to descend between them until Tony lets out a soft laugh. “I’d forgotten,” he explains when Steve looks surprised at the sudden sound of mirth, “how hard it had been to pretend the feelings for you I felt were platonic.”

Steve attempts a smile that wavers on his face, uncertain. “I’m sure we’ll figure it out again.”

Tony huffs, “And if I don’t want to? You gave me a chance to prove I’m serious, that I haven’t been negatively influenced, and I will. Watch me.”

“Tony . . .” Steve sighs, and Tony doesn’t miss the hint of fondness lingering in his tone.

“You can’t talk me out of it,” Tony chides and turns to make his way back to his and Clint’s table.

Steve watches him go, his coffee gripped tight between his hands, fascinated by the skip that seems to be in Tony’s step. “An optimistic Tony Stark bodes ill for your already wobbly reservations,” Bucky says with barely contained amusement.

“Maybe,” Steve says in return, aiming for indifferent but sounding far more warm than he intended.

Although he comes in to get coffee with Bucky on the fourth day since the disastrous rooftop party, Coulson never calls Steve to complain about his extended leave of absence from work. Bucky calls it a superb act of sympathy, and Sharon is convinced that Coulson is lenient out of some sort of bottled up crush, but whatever the reason Steve finds himself with more time on his hands than he knows what to do with. At first this is a blessing, and he uses it to his advantage while he ponders over the events of the past year. But after he fails to come to a definite conclusion the hours and days begin to waste away. Technically this would be an ideal time to return to work, to grow used to the idea of friendship while being just feet away from Tony. Steve’s not a fool, though, and he knows the consequences of such careless behavior would only lead to him giving in. In order to retain a clear mind with which to make his decisions, he has to remain away from Tony for as long as possible.

He’s outlined the instances where he knows he compared Tony and Peggy, as well as detailed a dozen or so other moments that have left him unsure. In retrospect he knows that the occasions are few and far between, and often times products of pure coincidence. At the same time, however, he’s suspicious of them, of his own unconscious motivations that might have done more harm than good.

And he’s all too aware of the underlying truth to the matter. He’d wanted to keep them both, Peggy and Tony. Steve is still holding on to Peggy’s memory as if it was the physical person, and with such attachments still lingering, it’s no surprise that he’d panicked as he had. He could not take the last step forward when he’d all along been holding himself back.

“These are some pretty flimsy comparisons,” Bucky comments when he flips through the notebook Steve’s been writing in. “I mean I can see it in some of them. Most of these, though, seem to be, ah, what’s the term . . . Sheer dumb luck?” He opens the pages to the entry wherein Steve had noted the similarities between Peggy and Tony in regards to their comments on him being a good man. “Here,” Bucky insists, “this is just them seeing what any person in love with you should. You’re a fantastic, albeit currently stupid, guy, Steve. Hell, it doesn't even take romantic attraction for people to see that.”

Steve slumps a bit on the sofa, letting himself sink into the cushions under Bucky’s determined gaze. “I was,” he says quietly. “But recklessness and the accidents that resulted don’t exactly mark me for being heaven bound.”
“Jesus Christ,” Bucky laments appropriately. He drops the notebook to grab Steve by the shoulders and shake him, “Get over it. She didn’t die because of you, she died for you,” he snaps. “I thought you were done with this shit.”

“I don’t blame myself,” Steve says, even and low, “But I’m not stupid enough to deny that my actions resulted in death.”

“Soldiers die, Steve,” Bucky whispers, “There were a hundred times before when one wrong move would have landed one, or all of us, six feet under, and there probably would have been a hundred more after that. If not her, then you, or me. It could have been any one of us, and it’s not your fault.”

Steve pushes him away, “Inevitable death is still a death, Bucky.” His cell phone rings, effectively stalling any further debate of the matter, and Steve snatches it up from it’s charger before Bucky can stop him. “Rogers,” he answers, tight and controlled. “Yes, I’m free to assist. I can be on site in fifteen.” He hangs up with the flick of his thumb across the screen and returns his gaze to meet Bucky’s stern one. “That was the station, I’m going out,” he states with no room left for objection.

“Fine,” Bucky bites out. “Go ahead, I’m done, okay. I tried. I’ve been trying for five god damn years to fix what you refuse to let heal on its own. Foolishly, I guess, I let myself think that maybe Tony could do what I had failed to, because he loves you in a way that I can’t. But you’ve pushed him away, too.” Steve flinches but Bucky doesn’t pause, doesn’t repent his harsh words. “This isn’t going to get any better until you let go.”

Steve stands, fury in his eyes, “And how am I supposed to do that, Bucky?! How am I supposed to let go when that would mean admitting that Tony means more to me now than Peggy!?” He choke on the confession and ignores the sting in his eyes when he says it. “How dare I admit that when she died for me! If I keep one foot in the past, if I keep looking back, I don’t have to be crushed under the weight of that guilt! I don’t blame myself for her death, Bucky, I blame myself for falling in love again!” He stumbles back from the shock that makes itself known on Bucky’s face, stunned and horrified by his own declaration.

“Steve,” Bucky starts though Steve’s already backing away, hands fumbling for the doorknob. “Steve, don’t…” The door slams before he can figure out what to say. It’s an easy out, for both of them, as Bucky finds himself still unable to properly respond, even in Steve’s absence. What is there to say to that? There are no comforts to offer, no ways to cajole or convince Steve that he’s wrong, especially when Bucky’s not sure that he is.

OoOoOoOoOoO

Steve’s heart is still pounding by the time he arrives at the fire, panicked adrenaline coursing through his system. While to some this might seem an advantage for his work, it sets Steve on edge more than he already is. His own voice, his admission, keeps resonating in his mind, making itself known above the smoke and flames he’s supposed to be fighting. And he hates himself for it. It was not a matter of courage that had stopped him from saying it before now so much as remorse. Love, he knows, is not something that is meant to spawn so much guilt.

However, Steve had been taught that love was just as much a pledge as it was an emotion. And it was one that he’d broken.

“Something on your mind, fruitcake?”

Steve starts slightly at the sudden inquiry, attention diverted from dousing out the last of the fire that had completely consumed a house to the speaker. As it’s clear by now that they’re only stopping the spread of sparks to nearby structures, the decimated house nothing but a charred skeleton now,
he doesn’t mind the distraction as much as he usually would. The speaker is rather short in stature, most of his features marred by soot and ash as Steve’s currently are, his fireman’s helmet tipped lazily to one side as if he’d rather not wear it at all. He’s gruff looking sort, the impression only amplified by his wiry sideburns that merge into a short trimmed beard along his chin, and the cigar held between his teeth. “You shouldn't smoke on site, Logan,” Steve can’t help but chide, “Not while it’s still burning.”

“Bub,” Logan deadpans, “I've been patting out fires longer than you've been alive.”

Steve eyes him, bemused as he was previously under the impression that the other man was only his elder by a decade. “You still shouldn't smoke, the health risks-” He coughs as Logan lets out a puff of smoke right in his face.

“You’re avoiding the question,” Logan says. He puts out his cigar by tossing it into the stream coming from the hose Steve is still holding. “That guy called looking for you, y’know. Buckshot or something.”

“Bucky,” Steve corrects quietly.

Logan carries on without acknowledging him, “If you’re having some home troubles you don’t need to be here. We’re already wrapping things up. And wandering minds are no good to us in situations such as this that require focus.” He flicks a bit of soot off his coat and gives Steve a pointed look, “I told you about the time LeBeau was so upset about some shit or other that he kicked a support and sent half an apartment complex crashing down on his head, right?” He jabs Steve in the chest as he talks, “Because if I haven’t, I can tell you again.”

Steve grimaces, “No thanks, I know the story, sir.”

Logan snorts, “Then hand over the hose before you hurt someone, kid.” He takes it before Steve can protest, lighting up another cigar to stick in his mouth too fast for Steve to figure out where he had pulled it from. “Now quit hanging around here and go fix your crap.”

“There’s nothing to be fixed,” Steve exclaims, too wound up with adrenalin still to stop himself, “I’ve already messed everything up!”

Logan arches an eyebrow, “I’m not your psychiatrist, kid,” he says slowly.

Steve slumps, “Sorry, I just . . .” He shakes his head as if he means to clear it, to dust out the clutter in his mind. “You, um, I don’t mean to intrude but you . . . Fought, right?” The tags, he knows, lie well-worn beneath the collar of Logan’s jacket. It’s not an assumption without evidence, but the silence that follows his question makes him nervous. It wasn’t a recent war, he’s sure, because the tags are too dull, the silver tinted metal clouded with age and time. Still, it takes Logan a minute to respond, to which he only nods. “Did you ever, uh, lose someone?”

“You lose a lot of someones in battle,” Logan grunts, “What’s your point, kid?”

Sighing, Logan shifts the hose from one hand to the other and says, “You sure know how to ask the tough ones, don’t you.” Steve shrugs apologetically. “Look,” Logan states, “kid, I’ve been around a long time, and I can tell you right now there’s no single answer for what you’re asking. Myself? I learned to get over it because time didn’t leave me a lot of other options. On a long list of useless things to do in life, holding on to guilt over things you had no control over is one the stupidest. The only thing stupider is asking for my advice,” He pats a bit of ash from his cigar in Steve’s direction.
“So, to be blunt, I’d say just suck it up. And if you still feel you’re at fault for whatever it is, then confront it. Find the source of the guilt and get rid of it.”

“Get rid of it?” Steve echoes, his hand automatically moving towards his pocket to clutch at the gumball prize ring.

“Or destroy it,” Logan grumbles, sounding a little too educated on the matter for Steve’s tastes.

OoOoOoOoO

“I’m not sure this is a good idea,” Bruce says when they’ve finished discussing the last steps of Tony’s plan. “There’s more ways it could go wrong than it could go right. Steve could take you too seriously, or—”

“That’s the point,” Natasha shushes him, hand falling over his mouth. “Honesty is the key, Bruce.”

Bruce pulls her hand away, “This coming from our number one compulsive liar.” She smirks and he rolls his eyes before turning to Tony, “Are you sure about this? Really sure?”

Tony’s sitting on the arm of the sofa, his feet on the end cushion and his elbows resting on his knees. There’s a definite edge in his position, a tense unease that radiates throughout the room. When Bruce speaks his eyes flicker downwards, avoiding confrontation, and he curls a his hands together under his chin. “As sure as I can be,” he says after a breath. “This is the only thing that might spark reaction from Steve. He responds to the truth, especially in regards to me. And right now we’re at a stalemate. I can’t prove with any certainty that I wasn't at least partially influence, and he can’t present evidence that he could have unintentionally manipulated the situation. If I do this, if I light that spark, then the chances are more in favor that we can sort things out.”

“And if you can’t?” Clint asks from his spot on the floor. He has one of Steve’s old sketchbooks in his lap, and has been casually flipping through it while they talk. Tony doesn't dare spare him more than a glance because of that.

“I’m trying not to think about it, thanks,” Tony dismisses with a wave of his hand.

The knock at the door is unexpected, startling, even, to the point where Tony is so caught off guard that he doesn't even rise from the sofa to answer it at first. There’s only one person in his company to adhere to such manners as knocking when unsure of their welcome. The sound is hesitant, even more so the second time after Tony’s stunned failure to respond. “It’s too soon,” he hisses when Natasha shoots him an urgent look. “This is better. It will feel more real if you’re unprepared, unpracticed. You wanted honesty and now you’re going to give it. Go.” She flutters her hands at Clint and Bruce, who obediently stand and scuttle back into the spare room at her command. “Remember,” she warns Tony before she disappears in their wake, “This could be your only chance. Don’t fuck it up.”

“That vote of confidence was so helpful,” Tony mutters before going along with her shooing gesture and making his way towards the door.

When he opens it his first feeling of anxiety is replaced with immediate concern. Steve stands in the hall, soot stained and weary. Despite his mind pleading with him to be rational Tony follows his gut instinct and places his hands on either side of Steve’s face, thumbs wiping away the ash smudged under his eyes. “Oh, god,” he gasps, “What happened? Was it bad? Are you hurt? Were any
civilians hurt? Look at you you’re absolutely filthy, get inside.” He pulls Steve over the threshold and into the living room, dusting his hands over the other’s shoulders as he does so.

“No one got hurt,” Steve says quietly. “The fire collapsed a house, though. Got pretty messy by the time we’d put it out.”

“I’ll bet,” Tony soothes. Now that he’s closer and in proper light he can see that Steve’s eyes are red, most likely from smoke, and he worries for a moment about lung damage before giving in to the impulse to pull Steve down and kiss him. It’s not Tony’s brightest idea of all time, but Steve leans into it anyways, relaxing into the familiar motion despite himself.

After a heartbeat or two Tony feels hands on his shoulders, gently pushing him back and forcing him to break contact. He can’t help but tense as he remembers the circumstances preceding this action. “Tony-” Steve begins, voice cracking.

Tony snags him by the front of his coat and draws him in again, too scared to hear what has to be said. “Don’t,” he pleads against Steve’s lips, “say my name like that. It sounds too final.” The rush of air that escapes Tony’s lungs when Steve moves to press him against the nearest wall leaves him breathless so that when Steve kisses him, a biting, bruising, desperate action, his vision swims out of focus. “Steve,” he pants, fingers gripping the blackened fabric at the blonde’s sides. There’s something off about all this, and his heart races in alarm rather than pleasure. “Steve, wait.”

Steve draws back, just enough to let Tony suck in a much needed breath, “I can’t,” he whispers hoarsely, “Tony, I can’t do this to you anymore. It’s not right, it’s not-”

Tony hisses between his teeth, “Quit saying ‘can’t’! Weren’t you the one who told me we could work through whatever hang ups we had? I wasn't just jumping through hoops for you, Steve! I wasn't a fucking trained dog! I was doing it for me, too! I needed you!” He scrabbles at Steve’s arms, his shoulders, his ribs to find enough purchase to push him away, but Steve remains resilient, his stance firm where he brackets Tony against the wall. “I needed you so much that it hurt!” Tony bites out, “Don’t you get that? And needing you, that desperation to be by your side for as long as you could stand me made me want to be better! For the first time in a long time I wanted to be someone who could feel like they deserved something, I wanted to be worth enough to you that you wouldn’t leave! And that’s exactly what you did!”

Steve snarls, a sound that causes a sharp tremor throughout his body, “Deserve me? You thought you didn’t deserve me? Why the hell do you think I ran, Tony? Because you didn't deserve me? I was the one who was selfish, pushing you and pulling you to meet my stupid standards! I did nothing but take from you! You worked to change, to fit a mold I’d set for you, and what did I do in return? Nothing! I’m the same person I was a year ago, still wallowing in lost love instead of focusing on you! If anyone didn't deserve something it was me! I couldn't change, I couldn't let go and now look where we are!”

Grabbing him by the collar of his shirt, Tony snaps, “You’re changing now! This! This is change! And yeah, it god damn hurts, but there aren’t many changes that don’t!” He tugs at Steve when the contact between their eyes is broken, “Look at me! I don’t love you because I have to, you idiot! I love you because I want to! My emotions aren't ruled by old war ghosts!”

“But mine are!” Steve steps back, freeing Tony from his position against the wall. “And until I can let go of that,” he says, “I can not ever claim to be enough for you.” He stiffens when Tony attempts to close the gap between them again. “You don’t... You don’t have to take any more bullets for me, Tony. This is something I have to work out on my own.”

Tony freezes. This time the comparison is clear, intentional, and undeniable. “Steve,” he whispers,
“It’s not a bullet, it’s a vow. It’s not a sacrifice, damn it. I want this with you, not for you. Yes, things are going to change because of it, change for the better. Why don’t you get that? Because you don’t deserve me, or some bullshit like that? Can’t we just admit that we’re both fucked up and thus suit each other perfectly?”

“No,” Steve says sharply, “We can’t. I can’t.”

“Is ‘can’t’ the only fucking word you know?!” Tony screams. “Can’t, can’t, can’t! Every time you say it hurts, Steve! And it’s getting hard for me to take!” He lunges to tug Steve forward again, drawing him in for another damaging kiss. There’s a hint of blood this time, a copper tang on Tony’s tongue when he pulls away for a breath. Steve doesn’t attempt to stop him this time, doesn’t resist when Tony tangles his fingers into blond hair. There’s a tense uncertainty in the atmosphere now, Tony’s fingers clenching against the back of Steve’s neck as if it’s the only way to keep him there, to stall him just a moment more before the inevitable happens. He understands now why Steve dropped by, and the reason wasn’t to make amends.

“Don’t leave,” he begs when he finally breaks away. His forehead rests against Steve’s for a heartbeat as Steve had done to him in London, something that now seems like lifetimes ago. “Please don’t leave.”

“I have to fix this,” Steve murmurs, more hushed now than the raised tones of just a moment prior. “I can’t make any promises that I can, but I at least have to try, Tony, I.”

Tony shudders, “Then try, Steve. Because I don’t know what to do anymore.”

OoOoOoOoOoO

In the aftermath of Steve’s departure Tony sits with his back against the door, knees pulled up to his chest and his arms folded over top of them to cushion his head. Exhaustion makes itself known every time he blinks, fading his world in and out for longer and longer periods. In the darkness between consciousness he imagines he can hear Steve on the stairs, can make out the dragging steps down the flights until he hits city sidewalk. He doesn’t chase them, neither wants to nor needs to, because even without assurances he trusts Steve to return. The time it might take is currently incomprehensible, and Tony dreads the forthcoming days that will likely turn into weeks. Letting go, he knows, is no simple matter, and there’s nothing more he can do to aid Steve in that. He’s done enough, he decides. He’s said enough.

Part of him pricks with urgency to make his own amends, to visit the grave he still feels he has no right to stand before and apologize for stealing Steve’s affections. It’s an irrational thought, but it stems from the knowledge that that’s the source of Steve’s agony. The already difficult process of letting is all the more complicated when death is the cause of separation. There’s no chance of reaching neutral ground, of settling or agreeing because the dead can not consent to either. It’s a one-sided understanding born on the hopes that the deceased would want the living to be happy. And while Tony is almost certain that’s where Peggy would stand on the issue, he finds himself indebted to make apologize regardless, if only to ease his own conscience. “I’m sorry,” he whispers, a repent that is almost a prayer. He struggles with the words, having not held confessions with the dead since his admission about Stark Industries’ hand in Peggy’s passing. “I’m sorry for everything, but holding Steve like this, binding him to this guilt, isn't fair.”

Tony Stark is not a believer of gods or the afterlife. That does not make him unaware of the power graves and their occupants can hold over the living. To him, ghosts are just echoes inside one’s own head, no more real than any other nightmare that pervades the mind. The effects of them, however, are tangible. And if he can reason with the shreds of doubt in his own thoughts, then Steve can conquer the guilt in his.
Look at me being all timely and shit. Woohoo! Hopefully the next chapter will be up just as quick, if not quicker.
Chapter Summary

Sometimes it seems things go by too quickly. We're so busy looking at what we've already passed by that we don't take time to enjoy where we are. Often times it takes some calamity to make us live in the present.

Chapter Notes

The summary is a slightly altered quote from Bill Waterson's Calvin And Hobbes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The first thing Steve does when he gets back to Bucky’s apartment is throw the gumball capsule against the wall. Part of him wants to follow Logan’s advice completely, and for a heartbeat he contemplates crushing the entire thing under his foot. The hesitation to do so gives him away, and before he can stop himself he’s scooped the thing back into his palm to cradle it between is fingers. “Damn it,” he curses as the plastic cracks in his grip. “Damn it, damn it!”

“You’re a walking disaster,” Bucky says sternly. He’s standing in the doorway to the bedroom, his shirt creased and his hair tussled as if he’d been asleep . . . Or something. “And you’re getting ash all over the carpet,” he reprimands. “Go change and then tell me what happened.”

Steve takes a step towards the bedroom but Bucky suddenly stiffens, barring his way with a hand thrown against the doorknob. “Uh, not in here.”

“My clean clothes are in there,” Steve reminds.

Bucky tenses even more before mumbling a quick, “Fine, one second,” and darting into the room. He returns a second later, leaving Steve no time to peek inside after him, and throws a shirt and pair of pants at the blond. “Chop chop,” he shoos with a wave of his hand towards the bathroom.

Steve doesn’t ask any questions until he’s in fresh clothes, his hair damp from a quick rinse in the shower. “Got a girl over?” he inquires when he finds Bucky making coffee in the kitchen, the bedroom door now firmly shut.

“Not, uh, exactly,” Bucky says, wincing at the way he stumbles over the words. “We were worried, you know, we weren’t sure you were going to come back here if you decided to take off entirely. It’s almost three in the morning, now, you know, and with the stress of fretting whether you did something reckless at the fire site or dumped Tony entirely afterwards would wear anyone down. She fell asleep and I put her in the bed because my couch is like a sack of bricks that no one but me should ever have to suffer on.”

It takes a moment for Steve to comprehend what he’s saying, and when he does he stares at Bucky in shock. “Sharon?!”
“Ssshh!” Bucky hisses, “I just told you she’s asleep!”

Steve gestures towards Bucky’s mussed hair and shirt, “And, what, you fell asleep next to her?”

“Did you miss the part where I said worrying about your stupid ass is exhausting?” Bucky grumbles. “I was tired, too. And sitting on the edge of the bed I haven’t slept on in a week did me in.” He makes a face when Steve just levels him with a look, “I’m not that skeevy, okay?”

Steve sighs, “I know, sorry, I’m just . . .”

“Wound up?” Bucky supplies. “Cause you look it. What happened with Tony?”

“How did you even know I went over there?” Steve asks, suspicious.

“You have GPS in your cell and I’m a trained in the various branches of the special ops,” Bucky deadpans, “Guess.”

Steve makes a halfhearted swat at him that Bucky dodges easily and sits at the low kitchen table. He accepts the mug of coffee Bucky hands to him, gathering his words together in his mind while Bucky takes the chair across from him, turning it around to straddle the seat and lazily rest his arms on the back. “Tell me everything,” he insists, “I’m guessing you two had a row.” Steve blinks at the term, and Bucky mumbles a hasty, “Sharon made us watch Doctor Who while we waited for you, leave me alone.”

“We didn’t exactly have a normal discussion,” Steve agrees once Bucky’s done being embarrassed.

“Yeah, I can tell,” Bucky says knowingly, “You came back looking a thoroughly, and violently kissed.” He taps his own lip, “Bit of blood here still, by the way.” Steve scrubs a hand over his mouth, allowing Bucky a minute to chuckle to himself. “So did Tony jump you or something?”

Steve flushes and looks away, “Um, he moved first and I kinda pushed him against the wall so I’m not too sure who would be at fault.”

“Wow,” Bucky exhales.

“Tony made his point, though,” Steve admits. “He much told me that if I didn’t figure things out soon that I’d lose him, too.” He shudders at the thought and glances at Bucky, eyebrows furrowing together. “And of all things, of all the can’ts,” he says the word with more malice than Bucky expects, like it’s poison, “Of all the things I’m unable to do, I can’t lose Tony. Not to something as stupid as this.”

Bucky frowns, “It’s not stupid.” Steve frowns and Bucky sighs, “Okay, maybe a little bit, but mostly it’s just . . . Heartbreaking. I don’t know how else to describe it. I don’t really understand as well as I’d like, because Peggy wasn’t . . . She wasn’t to me what she was to you, so her death didn’t linger with me as long. Not like it did you. But I get that you’re hurting, a lot. But Tony’s right, too. And he’s going to pack his bags if you don’t get your shit together.”

Steve swallows, “I know.”

OoOoOoOoOoO

Natasha has to physically hold Clint and Bruce down after they hear Steve leave. The repercussions of the blow up that occurred in the living room are undetermined, and the lack of sound that can be heard through the door is as much of a relief as it is disconcerting. Bruce struggles in vain to reach the door handle, held back by one of Natasha’s arms locked around his stomach, “It’s too quiet,” he
reasons, high pitched and nervous, “What if Tony’s tying up a noose or something?” Natasha raises an eyebrow and Bruce settles slightly with a sigh, “I’m not implying that he’s unstable, you know, I just have a tendency to jump to the worst conclusions.”

“Jump,” Clint says calmly, a complete contrast to the way he seems to be trying to claw his way under the door. Unfortunately if he intends to succeed he’ll have to figure out a way from removing Natasha from where she’s sitting on his back, her free hand tangled in the collar of his t-shirt. “Tony’s not the hanging type, he’d totally jump.”

“He’s not going to do either,” Natasha chides them both. “Give him a little bit of credit. And breathing room. We have to give him a few minutes to get himself together before we go out there.”

Clint snorts and struggles to shake her off, deterred when Natasha pulls Bruce down into her lap to apply extra weight on him. “Get it together?” he says, “Are you nuts? You heard what happened out there! The plan was for them to talk reasonably, not fight until they both broke! Jesus Christ, get off of me!”

“The plan was to put everything out in the open,” Natasha corrects. Bruce is starting to simmer down now that she has him firmly in her grip, but Clint is still fired up with rage, even if he’s in no position (literally) to do anything about it. “While much of this is something Steve needs to work out on his own, making sure he heard everything Tony had to say was just as crucial. He knows, now, he understands.”

“That doesn’t change anything, though!” Clint spits, “Everything’s still fucked up! And if Tony had any sense left in him he’d count his burned bridges and get the hell out!”

“Like you?” Bruce says quietly. He narrows his eyes when Clint cranes his head back to stare at him.

Clint heaves in a shaky breath before responding, “No. I didn’t mean it like that, Bruce. I just . . . Fuck.”

“Didn’t you?” Bruce whispers, bitter.

Natasha curls her arm a little tighter around Bruce before she smacks both him and Clint upside the head. “Cut it out, you two.”

“You’re right,” Clint groans into the carpet, rubbing at the back of his head, “This whole disaster is going to end up tearing us all apart if we’re not careful.”

The door eases open then and bonks Clint in the face. Tony pokes his head in and stares at the tangled mess they’ve made of themselves on the floor for a moment. “It sounded like a cat was being tortured in here,” he says, eyeing Clint pointedly.

“Clint thought you were gonna be a jumper and Bruce was convinced you were making a noose,” Natasha informs him.

Tony rolls his eyes, “Really, guys?”

“We were concerned,” Bruce says simply.

“Also I think you’re an idiot,” Clint adds from the floor, hand over his nose where the door hit it. “We heard everything, you know,” he says when Tony gives him an offended look. “What are you going to do, wait around for him forever? That’s just plain stupid, dude.”
Tony edges the door open a little further, forcing Natasha to let Clint up so he can scramble out of the way. Once he has room enough to step inside, Tony crouches in front of Clint, a small curve of a frown upon his face. “I’m sure any sane person would dick off into the sunset by now,” he states, “then again, I’m not exactly one to be labeled as sane, am I?” He waits for Clint to shake his head and quirks a faint smile. “I know this seems like a dumb decision to you, I’m sure, and sometimes it is to me too. I have no intentions to wait ‘forever,’ Barton, I’m not unreasonable. But if I allow myself to give up now I’m definitely going to hate both myself, and Steve, forever. So between us, I’d rather stick around for just a little longer to see how this all plays out.”

“You have some guts,” Clint admits. “I still think you’re nuts, though.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Tony laughs.

Natasha watches this exchange from where she’s pulled Bruce with her onto Tony and Steve’s bed. “You’re oddly chipper for the circumstances,” she remarks, dubious about the sincerity in his smile. “Did something happen that we didn’t hear?”

Clint slaps his hands over his ears with a clipped, “I don’t want to know!” that Tony ignores. “It could have gone a hell of a lot worse,” Tony confesses, “So right now I’m taking what I can get out of the whole thing. He said he couldn’t make promises. And, to be honest, I’m not sure I wanted promises. I’ve thought about it, and I know that if he’d made them they would have been done just for show, a condolence card to hold the place of actual comfort. But he did say he’d try, and that’s something.”

“A really feeble something,” Clint mutters. “You’re smiling because if you don’t you’re going to have a complete mental breakdown, aren’t you.”

Tony grins, “Yep.”

OoOoOoOoOoO

Sharon wakes up to curtain-shuttered darkness. There’s a leak of light along the bottom of the windowsill, flickers of dust dancing in the soft dawn rays that are making themselves known. She’d fallen asleep, she thinks, in Bucky’s living room shortly after two in the morning. They’d been waiting for Steve, she remembers with a jolt that causes her to sit up. Had he even returned? She’s up and untangling herself from the sheets as she pads across the room to crack open the door, unsure of what sort of scene she might walk in on on the other side.

Steve and Bucky are seated at the small kitchen table, heads bent low in conversation. Sharon decides it’s best not to make herself known for the moment, and peers through the gap between door and frame with curiosity.

“The most obvious solution,” Bucky says, “would be to get rid of this.” He taps a finger against what looks like a little gumball prize capsule, and Steve practically flinches when he does so.

“I was supposed to give it to her when I was ready to propose,” Steve whispers. “I never got the chance.”

“Hanging onto it is only going to make things worse,” Bucky says gently. “I think, if anything, letting go of this will help.”

Steve nods mutely in return and Bucky pushes the plastic capsule into his hands. “Yeah. So I’ve been told.”
“Take a nap,” Bucky advises, “It’ll calm you down and help you to have a clear head when you wake up and need to make a decision.”

Steve starts, “A decision? So soon?”

“By the end of the day,” Bucky nods. “Any longer and Tony’s going to be gone. Now get some sleep.”

Sharon takes this as her cue and emerges from the bedroom, a hand covering a false yawn as if she’s only just risen. “Good to see you’re okay,” she says to Steve with a pat to his arm. “You had us worried.”

“So I heard.” Steve doesn’t resist when Bucky ushers him towards the bedroom, the slump in his shoulders and the tired drooping of his eyelids giving away his fatigue.

Sharon says nothing for over ten minutes, occupying herself with brewing a cup of coffee and grabbing a few eggs from Bucky’s fridge to fry. “Scrambled or sunnyside?” is the first thing from her mouth once she can be fairly certain Steve’s drifted off in the other room.

Bucky glances at her, obviously surprised, “Uh, scrambled I guess. Isn’t it a bit early for breakfast? And you don’t have to stick around, you know. Steve’s back, and I know you find spending time with me to be annoying.”

Sharon reads the clock over the stove, while she cracks the eggs into a pan “Just after six, it’s not that early. Well, for you, maybe. Did you sleep at all?”

Bucky clears his throat and stares at the table, “I slept a little. Dozed off for a second or two.”

“Oh, so you actually did catch a few winks? I thought you were just being a creep and watching me sleep.” She smirks as Bucky sputters. “I’m kidding you know,” she says lightly. Bucky groans into his hands, mortified regardless. “I was the one hogging your bed, which technically classifies me as the rude one.” With a flick of her wrist and a twist of the spatula she flips the eggs, listening to begin to sizzle as they cook.

“Please stop talking about it,” Bucky begs. “I’m already about to die of mortification, there’s no need to torment me.”

Sharon lifts an eyebrow, “You’re not usually so embarrassed around your girls. And don’t lie, I’ve seen you being all smooth with them.”

Bucky mumbles something Sharon doesn’t catch. “What was that?” she teases, “Some statement about the quality of your booty calls?”

“No!” Bucky protests, slamming his hands down on the table, “I said that you’re not one of ‘my girls’! They’re just hookups! I’m allowed to put on facades in front of them because I never have to see them after the night is over!”

She studies him for a moment, unfazed by the outburst. “Good,” she says, and pauses to scoop some of the eggs onto a plate and hand them to him.

“What the hell does that mean?”

“It means I haven’t heard that god awful ‘How you doin’ in awhile and you’re learning,” she tells him, a second plate in hand as she takes a seat across from him.
Bucky has nothing to say to that, too confused and tired to form a proper retort, and he chews his eggs without further comment. Sharon, however, has a few things besides Bucky’s tangled up feelings on her mind. “That gumball prize,” she pries, “it has a ring in it, right?”

Bucky glares at her over his eggs, “What’s it to you?”

“Peggy was my aunt,” Sharon says, “I have a right to know.”

“Debatable,” Bucky decides, “But I’m pooped and have lost most of my energy to care. Yes, it’s a ring. She gave it to Steve when they were first dating and he was supposed to give it back to her after their last tour together.”

“And you think the fact that he never gave it to her, but was ready to marry Tony, is the root of his guilt?” she presses.

“Seems likely.” Bucky pokes at his eggs with his fork when they both fall quiet. Sharon’s studying her own breakfast as if seeing it from a distance, unfocused and distracted. “I . . .” Bucky begins, stalling when she raises her eyes to meet his, “I’m not sure if he’ll be able to, though. And it’s not for lack of faith in him that I’m saying that either,” he defends. “I just know how his mind works. He has to know it’s okay before he does it, and I don’t know how to convince him that it will be. I’m not . . .” He fiddles with his fork, eyes averted from Sharon once more, “I think he’s scared that this will be hurting her somehow. He’s not afraid to let go for himself so much as for her. She has no say, she gets no choice, and he knows that. It’s like . . . I think he sees it as abandonment.”

Sharon says nothing for a moment, but she reaches across the table to take Bucky’s fork from him so he’ll cease continuing to mangle up the disaster on his plate that used to be some very nice scrambled eggs. “Let’s see what he decides after he wakes up before we do anything drastic,” she advises after some thought.

Bucky purses his lips, “Drastic?” There’s a wariness in his tone that’s all but masked under an inflection of apprehension. “What are you thinking?”

Sharon dismisses his question by taking both their plates to the sink, occupying herself until Bucky rises from his chair to dump the rest of his long-cold coffee down the drain. “You better not be planning anything stupid,” he warns, troubled by how quickly she’s fallen into silence again. “Steve can work this out by himself, has to, we can’t-”

“I’m sure he can,” Sharon murmurs, “But if he truly believes that in letting go he’d be abandoning Aunt Peggy somehow, there’s no way to convince him otherwise.” She brandishes one of the wet dishes at him for drying, waiting until he takes it to continue. “And anyways, stupidity is your area.”

Bucky grumbles under his breath as he dries, unintelligible until he firmly says, “I don’t want you to get hurt.”

Sharon’s eyebrows furrow, “I’m not a pansy, Barnes.”

“Not physically,” he amends, “Believe me, I’m well aware that you can hand me my ass on a platter any day. I mean mentally. We’re dealing with some, well, some pretty fucked up stuff here, and if we’re not careful it could get more ugly than it already is.”

OoOoOoOoOoO

“He’s totally going to pack his bags,” Clint remarks after Tony shoos them out of his apartment again. “And rightly so. I mean, Steve and I are bros but this whole thing has just gotten out of hand.”
Natasha scowls, “Ye of little faith.”

They’re seated on their sofa, Bruce taking up the middle cushion in order to maintain his favored position as the peacekeeper.

“You’re not holding out for much either and you know it,” Clint says.

“Maybe not,” Natasha complies, “But coming from someone who knows, I’ve learned that even the worst mistakes can be righted if given the chance.”

“Stop,” Bruce groans, “Both of you just stop. You’re stressing me out.”

Clint leans against Bruce’s shoulder, “Sorry.”

“After a week of this crap it’s starting to freak all of us out,” Natasha agrees. “We’re going to end up stuck between a machete and a machine gun if this keeps up.”

Bruce pales, “I think the phrase is ‘Between a rock and a hard place.’”

Natasha quirks a smile, “Not in my world.” She turns her attention to Clint, who appears mildly less alarmed by the analogy, and states, “A hundred bucks says Tony toughs this out.”

Clint perks up, intrigued, “Fifty. I work at a coffee shop in case you’ve forgotten. And does any part of this bet include Steve? Because if Tony sticks it out and Steve bails I’m going to feel like an asshole for betting anything.”

“You should both be ashamed of yourself,” Bruce mutters, arms folding over his chest. Natasha patronizingly pecks him on the cheek. She enjoys it when he simmers just below his occasional outburst of intense anger. It’s the perfect mix of his usual calm demeanor and his locked away rage. He huffs at her dismissal, but doesn’t attempt to disband the bet again.

Natasha smirks and drapes an arm around Bruce’s shoulder as she reaches out the other to shake Clint’s hand. “My wager is that, despite the impossible odds stacked against them, Tony and Steve will make it.”

Clint bites the inside of his cheek consideringly, “Usually I’m not one to poop on my friends’ troubles, but in this case I’m pretty sure you’re out of your league. If Tony has any sanity left, or is even a little bit like me, he’ll book it out of town by the end of the night. And as for Steve, he’s long gone, I’m sure.”

Natasha chuckles at the certainty in his words. It’s a sound that would set most people running for the hills, and even Clint freezes up for a heartbeat, experienced with the fact that Natasha plus laughter are never a good combination. Bruce, however, looks absolutely delighted. “You just sentenced your own downfall with that,” she says slyly, snagging Clint’s hand in her own for a very wobbly handshake on Clint’s part.

“She’s right,” Bruce smiles. “That was an awful comparison to make, considering.”

Clint balks and lets go of Natasha’s hand as if he’s been burned, “Considering what, exactly?”

“Well the furthest you’ve run away is the coffee shop,” Bruce states coolly, “And you’ve always come back, which spells doom on you predictions of Tony based on your own experiences. And Steve may have gotten himself into this mess, but he’s definitely not the type to claw his way back out of it despite the odds.”
“Checkmate,” Natasha hums. “And when I win I’m spending the prize money on those handcuffs we saw online last week.”

Clint gawks, horrified, “Not the pink ones.”

“Definitely the pink ones.”

“I’m suddenly enjoying this bet immensely,” Bruce grins.

OoOoOoOoOoO

The first time Steve wakes up he pulls himself out of bed as if his limbs weigh a hundred pounds each, slow, sluggish movements that leave him sitting on the edge of the mattress with his head in his hands. The gumball capsule rests on the nightstand, but he can’t bring himself to reach for it. Holding it, picking it up and pocketing it will just be the first step to leaving it behind for good. The next time he holds it will be the last, of that he’s sure. Because of that he doesn’t yet dare to touch it. Outside of the room he can hear muffled tones of an argument, and the thought that he’s the cause of it works its way into his mind. Refusing to leap a week ago had only been the first ripple in a series of waves, and now everything was falling apart as a result.

“God damn it,” he curses, palms pressing against his eyes until he sees stars.

He knows they must have heard him, as almost instantly the voices outside fall quiet. Sharon sticks her head in the room a moment later. “You didn’t sleep for too long,” she says.

“Couldn’t sleep,” Steve tells her, and it’s true. It had been nothing more than a restless doze, fitful and haunted by what he’d have to do once he woke.

Sharon gives him a small, sympathetic smile, “That’s okay. It’s not even noon yet, a little more down time won’t hurt anyone.” Steve looks as if he wants to disagree, but Sharon is already ducking back out of the room. “I’ll get you some tea and milk,” she says.

He has no heart left to turn down the drink when she brings it to him, and just the smell of warm tea and milk is starting to make him yawn. When she sits down beside him on the mattress he can’t help but start. His eyes follow her hands as she picks the gumball capsule up from the nightstand and cups it between her fingers like a dying flame. “Are you going to get rid of it?” she asks with nothing but idle curiosity.

Steve takes a sip of his tea before he answers, almost choking as he finds it difficult to swallow around the lump that has formed in his throat at her words. “I should have done it a long time ago,” he says. “Hanging on to it has brought me nothing but grief. Except . . .” He draws off and takes another long sip of his tea.

Sharon nods, understanding, “Except that it’s more or less a final admission that she’s gone. And since she is, you’re unable to ask her if . . . If she’s okay, right? If she’s fine, and that by moving on you’re not disappointing or upsetting her somehow.” Steve doesn’t respond, his eyes fixed on the gumball capsule in Sharon’s hands. “I don’t think she’d be anything of the sort, you know,” she says. “If she was disappointed about anything, it would be that you took this long to get over her. Actually, she’d probably smack you.”

“I know,” Steve agrees. “But I still . . .” He rubs at the back of his neck and sighs, “I feel like a jerk anyways, because of that and because of what I’m putting Tony through while I sort this out.”

“You kind of are a jerk,” Sharon agrees without hesitation.
Steve lets out a half-hearted laugh, “Yeah, I’m aware.” He casts her a quick, almost nervous glance before taking another swallow of tea. “Can I ask you something?”

“Shoot,” Sharon encourages.

“Do you ever . . . Do you ever get so caught up in the world, in the here and now that you forget her? That you find that you haven’t thought about her in hours or, heck, days?”

Sharon stares at him, bewildered, “Of course I do. I can’t spend every second of my life thinking about what’s already gone. If I did I wouldn’t have any time left for living.” She lays a hand on Steve’s arm, “Forgetting and living aren’t synonyms, Steve, even if they sometimes do go hand in hand.”

Steve grits his teeth, frustration and anguish practically rolling off of him in waves. “I know that. I just . . . Sharon, what does that say about me if I forget? Did she really mean so little to me that I could forget her so easily?”

And, really, Sharon doesn’t have an answer for that. It spikes a pang of guilt in her, too, when Steve says it. She wishes she had some way to explain to him that that’s not how things worked, that love wasn’t measured on scales, but it wouldn’t do any good. It’s a feeling she understands all too well, the regret that comes with each year that distances her from Peggy. “We kind of grew up together,” she says suddenly, catching Steve’s attention. “I think she was an accident, really, with how far apart in age her and my father were. Even though she was technically my aunt, with the handful of years between us she was more like my sister.” She laughs, “That’s what we were mistaken for most of the time, actually. And every once in awhile I still wake up and think I should call her because I haven’t seen in her in so long, make a lunch date, and it takes me a second to remember why I can’t. I don’t think that sort of thing will ever go away, the dysphoria of it all. But that’s okay, there’s nothing wrong with that. And the same thing goes for the rest of it, forgetting and finding that you haven’t thought about her in days. The more years pass the more it’s going to happen, it’s inevitable, it would have happened whether you loved Tony or not.”

She presses the gumball capsule into his hands, “Don’t wait too long,” she whispers, “The longer you linger here, the harder it’s going to be.”

OoOoOoOoOoO

Sharon leaves Bucky dozing on the sofa and Steve drifting back to sleep in the bedroom. It doesn’t take her much time to decide what she has to do, and the trip back to her own apartment is short. Gathering the necessary items is a bit tougher, however, and she spends an extra hour shifting painstakingly through her wardrobe. She’s going on nothing but memory, the feel of the material, the type of buttons, the smell of perfume, and even when she’s done and dressed she’s still not entirely sure she’s gotten it right. It’s the hair, she thinks, that betrays her, a few shades too light and a few inches too long.

The difference is what gives her pause, startles her enough that she has to take a second look at her reflection. She wonders why the variances aren’t as obvious to everyone as they are to her. In her opinion the things that set her apart from Peggy far out number the similarities. The way she carries herself is off somehow, the cause not something she can determine. Her face isn’t the right shape, her nose the wrong angle, her eyes too dark. For the first time she wonders if the likenesses were nothing more than illusions for the grieving.

If that’s so, however, then Steve won’t notice. And that’s all the assurance she needs before she returns to Bucky’s apartment.
While Steve doesn’t appear to have left the bedroom by the time she’s knocking on Bucky’s door, Bucky himself is wide awake once more. He starts when he steps back to allow her entrance, eyes wide. “What the fuck,” he hisses.

Sharon brushes past him, “Don’t say anything. Just help me with my hair. It’s the only part I can’t seem to get right.” She sits on the end of the couch and spreads out a menagerie of hair clips, ties, combs, and products on the cushion to her left. “I think I should go for a ribbon chignon, but I’m going to need you to judge whether or not I’m pulling it off correctly, okay?”

Bucky makes his way around the couch slowly, unease echoing in every step he takes. “And why, exactly, do I need to do that?” He narrows his eyes in preparation for the response he knows will follow.

“Steve needs reassurance from Aunt Peggy,” Sharon says resolutely. “And while I’m not capable of raising the dead, I am capable of looking like one.” She slips a few hair ties around either wrist for easy access and hands Bucky a couple of clips as soon as he’s within range.

“That’s the stupidest-“ Bucky starts.

“I don’t need you to restate what I’m already aware of,” Sharon cuts him off sharply. “I didn’t come here to be reprimanded.” She runs a comb through her hair as she speaks, painstakingly parting it in the back a few strands at a time. “I couldn’t do anything for him before. I felt that I should have been able to, you know, because Aunt Peggy loved him so much. Everyone has always told me how much I look like her, and after she died that was all I ever heard. My dad . . . He’s older, Aunt Peggy’s elder brother by more than a twenty years, and sometimes he forgets. Sometimes I’m not even called Sharon in my own house,” she laughs at this, an icy, resentful sound while she twists her hair behind her. “So I thought that if I picked up after her, started cleaning up all the damage she’d left behind when she’d died, I’d finally get to be me again. They’d stop seeing ghosts instead of the living but I . . . I couldn’t do anything for Steve. And now I can.”

Bucky’s breath catches in his throat at this, forcing his words out with more harsh anger than he intends, “You shouldn’t have to!”

Her hands shake when she takes a clip from him, and her whole frame trembles as she uses it to pin her two twisted ponytails together, “Yes I do! I have to because no one else is around to do it anymore! She isn’t here, Bucky! She isn’t here when he needs her most, and this isn’t something Tony can fix! I don’t even know if it’s something Steve can fix by himself! And if he does manage to do it on his own you and I both know that won’t accomplish anything! He’ll still think he’s abandoning her because she can’t tell him it’s okay! There’s no one who can convince him but her, and if that’s what he needs to move on then I do have to! Peggy died, and left nothing but agony and her useless replica of a niece behind! If I can do something to mend all this, then I will!”

Bucky shakes his head, teeth clacking together painfully as he bites back a snarl of fury. “And what about you? Will it be worth it? Will what this will do to you be worth it?”

“I’m stronger than I look,” Sharon retorts, shoving him aside so she can head towards the bedroom. “And you won’t stop me,” she adds when Bucky takes a step towards her to do just that, “Because you know I’m right. You know this is the solution.” She smiles sadly when Bucky halts in mid step, conflicted. “This won’t take too long,” she promises.

Sharon leaves the bedroom door open a crack behind her, if only to quell any temptations Bucky might have to bust it down should she close it entirely. For awhile she merely sits on the edge of the mattress, cautious about rousing Steve from sleep too suddenly. If she’s not careful he’ll easily see through her farce, and it’s crucial that he doesn’t. It’s better that he thinks he’s dreaming. She waits in
silence for a few minutes and waits for the telltale signs that will help her to succeed. She’d dabbled in psychology for a semester of college, so she’s not completely unfamiliar with the steps she should take to create the deception of dreams.

She lays a hand on Steve’s shoulder a minute after his eyelids begin to flicker in REM sleep. For a heartbeat she fears she’s done it wrong because of how hard he jolts to consciousness, eyes snapping open and his breathing picking up pace. “My apologies,” she says, voice barely more than the softest of whispers. “I didn’t mean to disturb you.” This is the part she knows how to do, the right inflections to add to her speech, the right tone to take, the right amount of subtlety to apply to the accent. She grew up listening to Peggy talk, wishing she could sound even half as sophisticated as her aunt could, she knows the patterns required to imitate it well.

Steve attempts and fails to fully blink the sleep from is eyes, his gaze focusing on her with hazy confusion. “Peggy?”

Although she was prepared to hear him mistake her, as that was sort of the entire point of donning this façade, it still hurts. “Go back to sleep,” she urges, unintentionally choking on her own words. This was easier in theory. “It’s just a dream.” She smooths a hand over his forehead soothingly, “It’s okay,” she whispers. “To leave me behind. You should have done so years ago.” Steve swallows hard but doesn’t respond, already drifting off again. He fights to keep his eyes open, but it’s clear to Sharon that it’s a useless endeavor. “I’ll take this,” she murmurs against his ear when she leans over to pluck the gumball capsule off the night stand. “If you’re ready. You are ready, right, soldier?” She smiles around the endearing syllables. That part she knows far too well, remembers they special curve the word was written with in letters home, and the way Peggy’s lips had turned around it in between tours. “Whenever you’re ready you can give that back.”

“But,” Steve tries, unable to finish through the fog of sleep.

“No buts, soldier. I’ll be okay.” Sharon holds up the plastic encased ring between her fingers, “As for this silly thing, I think I told you to give it back when you’re ready. I didn’t place any qualifications on that, Steve. Whether you were ready to hitch our wagons together, or make the leap with someone else, that was all up to you. And you are ready, right?” She closes her hand over the capsule. “I’ll be okay,” she repeats, “And so will you.”

Steve attempts to blink himself into full wakefulness again and push himself into sitting position to view her more clearly. Sharon stalls him with a firm hand to his chest. “You still have doubts,” she guesses, confirmed by Steve’s tired nod. “You shouldn’t. Tony is a good man, Steve.”

“I know,” Steve mumbles sleepily.

Sharon smiles, “I’m sure you do. And there is little comparison to be made between the way we were, and the way you and Tony are. And there is no rule that you must give up one love in place of another. However,” she warns, a finger to his nose, “focusing on one over the other is in bad taste. Tony is alive, Steve. He’s alive and breathing and waiting for you, and he loves you just as dearly as you love him. Don’t waste that because of your misplaced guilt over me. I made my choice, and I don’t regret it, so neither should you. You are not indebted to love only one person in your lifetime.”

She threads her fingers through his hair, brushing it back from his forehead over and over again until his eyes slip closed and his breathing evens into sleep. It’s not much, she knows, and the likelihood that he won’t recall any of it when he wakes is high. She places the capsule on the dresser before she goes, somewhere he can find it while still noticing that it has been moved.

Bucky’s waiting for her in the living room, fingers steepled under his chin and his shoulders hunched. He doesn’t even twitch when Sharon takes a seat beside him, does nothing to acknowledge
her presence for nearly five minutes. “I can’t look at you,” he says harshly after awhile, and Sharon flinches. “It wigs me out, seeing you look so much like her. You usually don’t, at least not to me, but when you try and intentionally emulate it’s not hard to see her in you. I hate that.” With one hand, and without meeting her eyes, he reaches and undoes her hair, lets it part where it’s tied off and fall across her shoulders. Sharon stares at him when he casts her a fleeting glance and grabs a t-shirt off of the arm of the couch, “Put this on,” he orders.

She turns her back to him while she undoes the buttons on the garment she’s already wearing, fingers roaming over the little detailed designs on each that were similar to the sort Peggy used to wear. Pulling the t-shirt over her head she faces him again, unsure of what the point of changing her clothes was. When he reaches for her it takes a great deal of self restraint not to recoil. He still looks angry, and though she knows Bucky isn’t the type to lash out generations of instinct urge her to flee. He tangles his fingers in her hair and begins to meticulously undo the twists she put into it, unthreading them until he can remove the hair ties and spread it out as she usually wears it. She realizes what he’s trying to do then, and can’t help the flicker of surprise that must cross her face when she does, something that doesn’t pass by Bucky’s detection. “Can’t do much about that skirt,” he says, “I’m afraid any jeans in this place would be too big, but, hey, close enough.” He runs his fingers through her hair again, brushing them from temple down to shoulder until he’s satisfied. “There you are.”

It’s an act, she recognizes, of restoration, but as an opposite to the one she’d performed earlier. Bucky isn’t fixing her hair and outfitting her to appear like the dead, and is rather doing what he can to rid her of the dolling up she’d done, banishing the traces of Peggy from her. In truth, it’s something no one else has ever tried to do. Watching him lean in is like viewing her life through a pane of glass, distant and without control so that when he presses his lips against hers it’s just as much expected as it is a shock.

The effect of it all takes a moment to sink in completely, the conclusion that he didn’t kiss her until after he was sure she looked like herself again, looked like Sharon, shakes her to the core. It takes everything she has to push him away. “Wait.”

Bucky pulls back immediately, hands obediently falling back to his sides. He doesn’t appear to be taken aback by her request, which makes her pause. “It’s not . . .” she falters, biting her lip when she can’t think of a way to explain.

“I think the phrase goes, ‘It’s not you, it’s me,’” Bucky supplies. He still doesn’t seem hurt by this, even when he speaks it.

Sharon shakes her head, “No, not that. I was going to say that it’s not . . . Not the best time,” she tries.

“I get that,” Bucky readily agrees.

“You do?” Sharon asks incredulously.

“Sure. Steve’s going through a tough time and needs our help. We don’t need any distractions.” He shrugs, “I can wait.”

“You have the patience of a squirrel,” Sharon can’t help but point out.

Bucky laughs, “I never said I’d wait forever, but I’ve had a hell of a lot of self control these past few months, so I’ll survive.”

Sharon raises an eyebrow, “That’s going to be a very open waiting period for you, isn’t it.”
“I’ve never claimed celibacy,” Bucky reminds with a smile, “But if you want me to, I know how to keep my pants on.”

“We’ll see.”

OoOoOoOoO

The ring is on the dresser when Steve blinks back into wakefulness. At first this confuses him, having not remembered moving it himself, and chasing down dreams is often times harder than trying to catch smoke in bare hands. For a moment he just stares at it, unwilling to pick it up and confirm what he already suspects. When he does, plastic held carefully against the skin of his palm, it’s all too easy to set it back down. There’s no guilt behind the motion, no weight settling in his heart when he places it back where it was. For the first time in years he can recall the sound of Peggy’s voice with utmost clarity, as if he’d only just heard it. At the same time, he feels no need to do so, dispelling the memory as easy as interrupting ripples on water’s surface. Once she does so, the only thing on his mind is Tony. A single glance at the clock alerts him to how many hours he’s wasted, and he pockets the ring without a second thought.

“I’m going out,” he calls to Bucky as he all but sprints from the bedroom to the front door, coat in one hand and motorcycle keys in the other.

“Go get him!” Bucky yells after him, “And make it grand! You owe him!”

“Whenever you’re ready you can give this back.”

The words are still ringing in Steve’s ears when he pulls his bike up outside the graveyard gates. It’s after hours, so he has to climb over the fence, and once inside he keeps a lookout for any night guards that might be patrolling the area. He knows that even if he’s caught he won’t be suspect for anything more than a late graveside visit, as he’s too well dressed for a typical grave robber, and completely unequipped in terms of the usual vandal. So it is that he makes to Peggy’s grave, seven rows down and four headstones in, gumball capsule clutched tight in hand. Whatever lingering doubt he’d had disappears the moment he finds himself standing in front of it.

“This is so stupid,” he whispers. “It’s ridiculous that it took this long for me to get over myself. That’s what it is, isn’t it. It’s not getting over you, or getting over my guilt. I blamed myself for something so stupid, something I should have been happy about, and that’s where the fault lies. I was drowning in my own selfish anguish while everyone else moved on, and I tried to drag Tony down with me. I’m sorry. I’m sorry to you for blaming you and allowing my heart to stay broken so long. And I’m sorry to Tony for not realizing how much he’d helped me fix it. I’m so sorry.”

Despite the knowledge that the gumball ring is nothing more than a trinket, that it holds no part in binding him to Peggy, leaving it on the headstone is one of the hardest things he’s ever had to do. “I don’t know whether I’ll make it on December Second this year,” he confesses, hand hovering over where he’s placed the plastic capsule. “If all goes well I think the honeymoon might interfere. And I . . . I don’t think that’s a bad thing, is it. I don’t think it’s bad to schedule visits to a grave around your life instead of the other way around. I shouldn’t be letting my life revolve what I’ve already lost, it just makes it that much harder to appreciate what I have. And I have a lot, Peggy, more than I ever realized. I have Tony and he’s way too good for me, you know. He doesn’t think that, but he is. I probably would have given up a long time ago if it wasn’t for him.” He sucks in a shuddering breath, hand falling to his side to once and for all leave the gumball capsule resting on top of the headstone. “And I have my friends, and Bucky, and Sharon—” His eyebrows furrow in contemplation and he lets out a startled laugh, “Oh, geeze. It was her, wasn’t it. I thought I was dreaming but . . . It had to have been. I’ll have to thank her, I guess, although I’m not too sure she’d appreciate it.”
He smiles, “I don’t . . . I don’t think our time together was meaningless, yours and mine. But that was then, and this is now. It’s going to be hard to accept that for awhile. Eventually, though, I will. So you don’t need to worry about me any longer. I’ll be fine.”

The tears, as most tend to be, are unbidden, and he wipes them away with the back of his hand as he swallows down the last pangs of grief that threaten to overwhelm him. “I'll be fine,” he repeats. “I’ll be fine.”

And this time, despite the way he chokes on the words and the way his vision blurs, he knows that vow is true.

OoOoOoOoOoO

The first thing Tony notices when he gets back from that evening’s board meeting (companies can’t be put on hold for lovers’ quarrels, Mr. Stark), is that there are still ashen footprints in the hall. For a moment he contemplates calling one of the building janitors up to clean them, ultimately deciding against it when he realizes he’ll probably be held accountable for them. The second thing he notices is that Clint is sitting in the hallway, alone, with the biggest frown on his face Tony has ever seen. “What the hell is eating you?” Tony asks him, “And why can’t you sulk about it in your own apartment building?”

Clint raises his eyes to glare at Tony, “I lost a bet,” he grumbles. “So now I have to be the bearer of the news.”

Tony tenses, “Oh, Jesus, what news. Do I even want to know? Wait, shit, of course I want to know. What happened? Did something happen to Steve? Where is he, is he here? Did he come here and then leave? Crap, did he come here and move out his stuff? He can’t move out his stuff this was his apartment first!” Tony’s seconds away from full-out hyperventilating now, and Clint makes no move to stop him.

“Dude, don’t hit me, but,” Clint says slowly, “I decided to be a dick and bet against you, so . . .”

“So Steve moved out?!” Tony practically screeches, horrified. He fumbles for his keys, dropping them on the floor in his haste to open the door.

“You seriously didn’t listen to a single word I just said, did you,” Clint deadpans, “I lost the bet.” By that time, Tony’s finally fit the key in the lock and thrown the door open, and the truth speaks for itself and then some.

The apartment is entirely lit by candles. And not just a few candles here and there, either, but a what looks to be an entire factory’s stock of candles. They’re on the tables, the floor, the chairs, every shelf and stand between the door and the back wall, all brightly lit. At first Tony’s so startled by them that he wonders if Steve set the place on fire before he left, only registering that the source of the flames are perfectly safe candles at a second glance. The second look also crosses over where Steve himself is currently attempting to relight one of the few that have already started to burn out.

“This is very unsafe behavior for a fire fighter,” Tony says, dazed from the sight of it all.

Steve jumps a bit, whirling to face him, “You’re early,” he gasps, “I haven’t had time to prepare what I was going to say or . . .” He sighs and sweeps a nervous hand over the back of his neck, “Okay. Okay, so, I’m going to try and do this right and I’m probably going to make a fool of myself, so don’t laugh.” He points warningly at a still very confused Tony, and then promptly drops down on one knee.
“Holy shit,” Tony breathes.

“Tony,” Steve says, interrupting himself by taking a deep, calming breath. “Tony, in all my life I never thought I’d be so lucky as to fall in love with my best friend.”

“Bucky’s going to cry,” Tony says.

Steve glares at him, “You are seriously ruining the moment. I meant you.”

“He’s still going to cry.” Steve frowns and Tony makes a zipping motion over his lips, “Shutting up now. I am shutting up.”

“We both messed up and made mistakes a few times on the way,” Steve continues, this time without disruption, “and undeniably I made the worst mistake last week. So, while I’ll understand if you want nothing more to do with me, I’ve had a lot of time to think about how horrible that would be. There are a lot of things I can stand to lose in this world, and a lot of things I have lost, but of all of them the one thing I can’t live without is you. Being with you has made me happier than I ever thought I could be again, and if you’ll let me, if you can forgive me, I will spend the rest of my life trying to make this past week up to you a thousand times over.”

Tony stands there as Steve finishes his speech, letting the seconds following it tick by before he says, “No.” He crouches down in front of Steve before the blond can look too crushed, a silencing finger falling over his lips. “Not until you make the leap with me.”

Steve lets out a sigh of relief, “On the roof? That’s what your condition is?”

“Yep,” Tony smiles, “To make up for this week. And then we will proceed to the joys of makeup sex.”

“You’re killing the mood, you know.”

“Good. It’s revenge for all the bullshit you put me through.”

Once the candles are blown out Tony drags Steve up to the rooftop. The sun has long dipped below the building-lined horizon, and the opposite roof is lit only by a single light above the door leading to the stairwell. This time when Steve steps up to the ledge, Tony practically vibrating with excitement beside him, there’s no hesitation. He could, he knows, take a moment to look back, to step down from the ledge and linger forever where he no longer belongs. But he has no desire to, no regret in his heart to hold him back. It’s a light, almost elated feeling that washes over him when he realizes that. “I’m ready,” he says when Tony looks at him for confirmation. “This time I’m ready.”

Tony grins, “Then prove it,” and jumps, Steve’s hand gripped too tightly in his to do anything but follow.

They land on the opposite roof with a trip and a stumble before righting themselves, Tony beaming in triumph and Steve laughing, breathless with amazement. “Looked a lot harder than it was, huh?” Tony chuckles. Steve nods. “And I didn’t even get a chance to give you the ring either,” he adds, slightly distressed by this revelation, “I was the one who was supposed to do the whole romantic baloney spiel! You messed it all up!”

“Sorry,” Steve says. He blinks when Tony suddenly grabs him by the hips, pulling him close until there’s barely an inch of space between them.

“As much as I like to hear you apologize,” Tony relents in good humor, “I should probably clarify that you’re off the hook. For now. We’ll see how that makeup sex goes.”
“Tony . . .”

Tony smirks, “You always say my name so exasperated like that, but I know you like it. Wait, new rule. You’re not forgiven until you tell me that you like it.”

“Tony!”

“I’m going to hold this over your head for at least the rest of the week, you know that, right?” Tony says gleefully.

Steve sighs, “Yes.”

“It’s your punishment,” Tony persists, “And after the end of the week when you’ve satisfied my -”

“Tony!”

“- needs . . . Then I’ll drop it because I’m a good and dashing husband-to-be who does not hold petty grudges.”

“Thank you.”

OoOoOoOoOoO

He stands just beyond the broad window of the coffeehouse, hands buried in his pockets and chin burrowed down in his scarf.

The interior of SHIELD Coffee is alight with celebration, though its doors had closed to customers hours ago. The music from within leaks out onto the streets well into the night, causing passerby to pause and relish in it before continuing on their way. The party inside is clearly a private affair, as private as something can be to include a dozen guests and then some. Drinks are passed around, most of the alcoholic sort the place is probably not permitted to host but does so regardless. In the center of it all sits a soldier and his partner, glad to drink in the compliments and praises of their comrades after the longest week of their lives. Despite the noise, it’s relaxing, comforting because they’ve fallen back into what for them is considered normality. The differences, even as subtle as they are, don’t go unnoticed. The soldier’s eyes are brighter than ever, unclouded by the past and fixed entirely on the future. There’s still a tenseness in his partner’s posture, one that makes itself known every now and then because he’s prone to disbelieve the fortunes he’s been gifted, a habit long ingrained into his heart. But the soldier, still known as such though his dog tags now rest in a box under their bed, slips an arm around his partner’s waist and all uncertainty melts away within seconds.

The evening of such merriment is warm, muggy with soft, humid heat that rolls off of the nearby ocean on the wind. It’s not hot enough, however, to cause him to unfurl the scarf from his neck, or withdraw his hands from their homes in the compartments of his well worn coat. “They seem to be enjoying themselves,” he remarks, voice all but lost amidst the endless sounds of New York streets.

His companion, who had been hanging back until he spoke, approaches and threads her arm through his. “It looks like they have reason to. Do you see it? The ring on Steve’s finger?” He squints, noticing for the first time the glint of silver on the soldier’s left hand that wasn’t there when he’d left. It’s acknowledged with a condescending hum, and the girl laughs. “Don’t be bitter. I told you that would happen, those two are lobsters.”

“You analogies will never cease to confuse me,” he mumbles into his scarf.

“Good.”
They stand there outside the coffee shop for a moment or two longer, out of sight to the occupants within and bathed within the soft glow of the lights beaming through the broad window. “Do you want to go in?” she asks after awhile. “Decide, because my iPod is in desperate need of a charge.”

He shakes his head, “No. Not yet. While spoiling their festivities would be amusing, there are a few people in there I’m not quite sure I can face right now.” With a gentle tug they’re off again, making their way down the sidewalk and away into the darkness.

Chapter End Notes

Look at that, three chapters in two weeks! Now you can't complain when I take awhile to get the next chapter finished because I have to work on my creative writing project for school. :P
The One With Clint's Dirty Day

Chapter Summary

There’s a price for loyalty and waiting, and sometimes it’s too much to pay. In other news, Clint regrets getting out of bed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It only takes a matter of hours for everyone to figure out that Tony was deadly serious about taking an entire week off from everything and locking himself and Steve in their apartment. The word deadly is key here, as when Clint tries to get into said apartment the next morning to steal some of Tony’s Buffy DVDs he’s attacked by some sort of mobile, sentient blender. Which is how he returns to his own place covered in some sort of grotesque carrot, beef, yogurt, and god knows what else mixture (it’s bright yellow, and he’s trying really hard not to think about where that coloring came from), and ripped pants. Bruce and Natasha spend a good ten minutes howling in laughter at the sight of him.

“This really isn’t funny,” he growls, slimy toxic-yellow blender juice dripping off him and onto the carpet. “That thing tried to kill me!”

“With leftovers from Steve’s fridge?” Bruce asks, still hiccupping out little chuckles every time he so much as glances in Clint’s direction.

“Yes!” Clint snaps. “First it spat this crap all over me, and then when I didn’t leave it tried to eat me!” He gestures to the shredded mess of his jeans, “I was lucky I made it out alive!”

Natasha, whose version of hysterical laughter is a subtle huff of amusement or two behind her hands, just raises an eyebrow. “It was a blender.”

“An evil blender,” Clint corrects darkly. “What the hell is Tony’s problem, anyways, leaving a thing like that just inside the door?”

“He probably wants some well deserved alone time with Steve,” Natasha says. “And besides, you’d have been more traumatized if you’d gotten far enough into the apartment to see or hear what they were doing.”

Clint winces at the thought, “I suppose . . . But that doesn’t excuse this bullshit.” He picks at his shirt, flicking bits of carrot and beef and no-one-wants-to-know off his sleeve. “I still have to go to work today, too,” he complains.

“Better get on that,” Bruce says unsympathetically. Clint frowns. “Natasha and I already called dibs on the shower, you’re out of luck.”

“Ah, what?” Clint whines, “That’s not fair! Neither of you have anywhere to go today! Bruce doesn’t even have lectures during the summer!”

“Start pitching in for the spa shower installation and then we’ll talk,” Natasha hums. She gets up from her place on the sofa and pulls Bruce to his feet so she can pointedly drag him towards the
bathroom.

Clint opens his mouth to protest until Bruce waves a gleeful hand at him. “You shared with me yesterday, you big baby,” he reminds. “Just go shower at Thor’s if you really need it.”

Clint makes a face, “But Thor’s shower is scary. I’m pretty sure it hasn’t been cleaned since Loki left. Or longer. Possibly since the dawn of time.” But Natasha and Bruce have already disappeared into the bathroom and left him dripping on the carpet. He stands there for a minute or two more, simply out of spite.

OoOoOoOoOoO

Showering at Thor’s turns out to be an ordeal all its own. When Clint walks in to the apartment he’s greeted by Thor bustling around with what looks like an oddly shaped and extremely lumpy baby carrier strapped to his chest. Jane is sitting on the counter, eating peanut butter off a spoon and watching him. She waves her spoon at Clint when he enters, “Look, look! Isn’t this so cute? The birds are following him around.” She points at where Chick and Duck are trotting after Thor as he wanders around the room and laughs.

Clint just raises an eyebrow, “Uh . . . Yeah. Sure. I just need to borrow your shower so-”

Thor looks up from whatever the hell he was doing (cleaning? Dusting? Clint’s not entirely sure. He does seem to be holding a feather duster though) and shoots him a broad grin. “Feel free to make use of my washroom facilities,” he booms, duster thing waving about in the air. He pauses to look Clint up and down, as though just now noticing that he’s dripping yellow goop onto the floor. “I would recommend using Duck’s feather shampoo for that. It’s very good at removing grease and other such unwanted substances.

“Oh my god,” Clint mutters, already making his way towards the bathroom, “Bird jokes. It’s always bird jokes.”

It takes approximately seven minutes for all hell to break loose, in this case “all hell” meaning Duck. Clint’s still trying to scrub yellow slime off his neck when Duck jumps in to the shower, unnoticed until she pecks at Clint’s ankles causing him to scream, flail, fall, and take the shower curtain down with him.

“This is just really not my day,” he relents from the bottom of the tub, his limbs tangled up in the shower curtain. “I should just go back to bed and sleep until tomorrow.”

Thor eventually has to come in and separate Clint from the curtain. “You are a mighty warrior, my friend,” Thor soothes when Clint looks like he’s going to rip the plastic curtain apart in revenge, “But destroying the curtain will not bring you peace.”

Clint growls, “Yeah, okay, sure. So how about I rip apart your stupid birds instead?”

To say he’s stunned when Thor just laughs is a bit of an understatement. “You really freak me out sometimes, you know that?” Clint says, more than a little alarmed.

“Ah,” Thor says, much too amused by all of this for Clint’s liking (he is, after all, still standing there with nothing but a towel around his waist with a mangled shower curtain at his feet). “But there is no need to be ‘freaked out,’ today is a glorious day!”

“. . . How so?” Clint asks warily. He knows better, he really does, but sometimes his mouth just opens without his permission.
Thor guffaws, literally *guffaws* and Clint freezes where he stands, too startled to slip in even the quickest of snarky comments. “Well,” Thor begins heartily, “with the eggs due to hatch soon, I’m in need of new living arrangements. The restrictions on this place of residence allow only two pets per unit, and I fear Chick and Duck would be devastated if I gave up their children.”

Clint stares, eyes finding the weird baby carrier Thor is still sporting on his chest. “Wait. Are you carrying those half a dozen eggs in *that*?” Thor smiles and holds the carrier open for Clint to look into, revealing six cream-white eggs nestled down in what appears to be a piece of a foam egg crate. “You know that stuff is meant for beds, right?” Clint asks.


“I’m sure it did.”

Thor nods, “Unfortunately, Jane and I have been told that neither the animals nor the eggs can come along while we search for new living quarters.”

“The realtor is allergic to birds!” Jane calls from the next room.

“Aye,” Thor says, “I was actually hoping you might be willing to help me in that area.”

Clint blinks, “The bird area? What? I mean I’ll totally help seeing as I did just borrow and mess up your shower but I’m really not following.”

“I would be most grateful,” Thor sighs in relief.

Five minutes later, Clint finds himself with the baby-turned-egg carrier strapped to his chest, and holding on to a pair of leashes with Chick and Duck at the end of them. “Good luck!” Jane says unsympathetically, patting him on the shoulder as she ushers Thor out the door ahead of her. “Thanks so much! Call us if there’s any problems!”

“I really should have just gone back to bed,” Clint relents as the door closes.

OoOoOoOoOo

“So,” Bucky says without looking up from his morning coffee, “I get the feeling that you want to set up some ground rules about this whole thing.”

“You could at least let me get through the door before you start making accusations,” Sharon huffs. Her arms are laden with at least eight different pies, and Bucky moves to help her when she stumbles a bit on her way in. “These were in the hall. I think Steve sent them over,” she explains while Bucky starts taking the pies lining them up on the kitchen table. “There’s a sticky note on the top of the blueberry one.”

Bucky snatches up said sticky note. “Thanks for everything, Steve and Tony,” he reads aloud. “That’s cute, but I’m not sure pies are a proper wedding invitation.”

Sharon chuckles and takes a seat at the table, “Give them awhile, they’re taking some well deserved time off. I’m sure the invitations will be sent out soon.”

“But they totally had time to make eight pies,” Bucky says. “What am I going to do with eight pies?”

“Eat them, I hope,” Sharon replies, sounding a tad concerned. “And I really don’t want to know what else you would do with them.”
“Your suspicious words hurt me deeply,” Bucky deadpans. He leans over her and grabs his cup of coffee off the table, one arm over her shoulder and his palm pressed against the wood while he takes a sip. “As I was saying though, I’m sure you didn’t come here to bring Steve’s pies in for me.”

Sharon leans back to study him a moment, “I’m not allowed to come over and hang out with a friend?”

“Not after last night,” Bucky says resolutely. She takes a second to let that sink into both her mind and Bucky’s, a smirk working its way into the corners of her mouth when he covers his face with his hands and groans. “And now I’m aware that I sound like a douche.”

“How insightful of you,” she says. “But enough, I’m done torturing you.” He raises his head again, a hopeful look in his eyes, and Sharon shakes hers. “Sit. I’m not going to have this discussion with you while you’re hanging off the back of my chair.”

Bucky sits across from her, straight backed and stiff with attention under her gaze. “Relax,” Sharon scolds, “I’m not going to be bite you.”

“I’d be up for that too,” Bucky grins.

“Down, boy.” Sharon points at him. “This is serious.” She hooks a finger in the handle of his coffee cup, pulling it towards her so she can take a lingering sip from it. Bucky watches her, entranced; there’s no doubt that she has his undivided attention now. “So here’s the thing,” she begins, “I like you.” There’s a pause then, as she has to take a second because Bucky’s eyes are so big with surprise it’s almost enough to break the tense atmosphere all together, and she chokes down a laugh. “I like you a lot,” she continues, gaze averted just slightly because she can almost see his metaphorical tail wagging now. “But you knew Aunt Peggy, and after Steve I . . . I’m not so sure I can be with someone who has.”

Almost immediately Bucky’s face shuts down. He folds his hands in his lap and looks down pointedly at the table, looking intently at the wood whorls as if they’re the most interesting thing he’s seen that morning. “I get that,” he says. “You deserve to be with someone who will see you first. I totally get that.”

“Okay, good. And I do like you,” she reiterates, “I just . . . I need to make sure . . .”

“Make sure that I’m not chasing ghosts?” Bucky tries, a tinge of hope in his tone.

Sharon narrows her eyes, “Are you?”

“Cross my heart and hope to die, I am not,” Bucky swears. “But you and I both know that sort of thing can’t be proved with words.” He shrugs, leaning back in his chair a bit, “We can do the whole friends shindig again, I’m fine with that.”

She snorts, “No, we can’t. And you know it. There’s no such thing as friends who are aware of their mutual affections for one another that can stay within friendly boundaries.” Bucky’s lips curl just slightly at the word “mutual,” Sharon deigns to ignore this. “So I’d like to propose something slightly different.”

“Please say friends with benefits,” Bucky whispers under his breath.

Sharon plucks a sugar cube from the dish on the table and chucks it at his head. “No. I was thinking more like friends who are conscious of their feelings for one another and can go on friend dates until one of them can get figure out whether a furthered relationship would be in their best interests.” Bucky raises a hand almost instantly. Sharon sighs, “Questions?”
“Do friendship dates include kissing?”

“Not unless I say so.”

“What about . . . Hugs?”

“As long as you keep your hands in places that would be appropriate for hugging.”

“Cuddling?”

Sharon’s jaw drops a bit, and she stares at him for a moment before saying, “I never took you for a cuddler, Bucky.”

Bucky smiles at her innocently, “No one is a cuddler until they meet the right person.”

“You’re making me nauseous,” Sharon states, “Which brings us to topic number two. If you’re serious about all this-”

“You want me to keep my pants on,” Bucky concludes readily. “I already suspected you might.” He raises a hand again, “Does that include the occasional strip club foray?”

Sharon scowls, “Seriously?”

“Seriously. It’s a seriously serious question,” Bucky smirks.

She considers this, chin balanced on her hand while she mulls it over. “Well I suppose strip club adventures could count as friend dates . . .”


“Maybe I can rope Natasha into coming along this time, too. She knows you well, and you’re sane enough to be scared of her, so-”


“Then no strip clubs for you.”

Bucky sighs into his hands and tries not to cry. “I’ll pick the club, you go get Natasha.”

OoOoOoOoO

“No birds,” is the first thing out of Coulson’s mouth when Clint shows up for his shift.

Clint groans, the sound drowned out by Chick’s territorial squawking. “Come on, dude.” Coulson’s eyebrow raises, clearly unamused by Clint’s pronoun of choice. “I’m stuck with these things all day, and I need the money so I can pitch in for the sauna shower Bruce and Tasha want. Please.”

Coulson crosses his arms and gives Clint a forceful, unwavering, “No. It’s unsanitary.”

Gesturing towards the corner of the dining area Clint pleads, “What if I just penned them in with a few tables, set it up like a weird petting zoo for the kids.”

Lips pursed, Coulson asks, “And why, exactly, do you think children would be in a coffee house?”

“The words ‘Family Establishment’ on the door,” Clint deadpans. “Come on, please, boss.”
That catches Coulson’s attention, and he focuses on Clint again at the title, “Well . . . I do have a few errands that need doing, and I suppose if I give them to you you’ll be out of my hair.” He scowls when Clint has the gall to raise a skeptical eyebrow and glance at Coulson’s hairline. “I’ll make a list for you. And I swear, Barton, if you don’t get everything on it done I’m taking the time out of your paycheck.”

Clint whines and shuffles his feet a little, but doesn’t argue when Coulson scribbles down a hasty list and hands it to him. “This is a lot of stuff,” he mutters while he reads it over. “You do realize I have to take these freaking birds with me, right? And that I don’t own a car?”

“You do realize you work in an establishment that serves edibles and beverages, and thus it is highly unsanitary for animals to be in the premises, and are not allowed unless they’re service animals,” Coulson counters smoothly.

“This could totally be a seeing-eye . . . Rooster . . .” Clint says, not even buying into his own bullshit as he shakes the leash Chick is currently attached to in Coulson’s face. “You know, I’ve been through enough today between these birds and Tony’s antichrist blender. I don’t need to take this.”

Coulson’s expression doesn’t change in the slightest, and apparently neither does his stance on the matter. “If you want to get paid, then you’ll run these errands. Otherwise you’re not working today, not with those things.”

Clint sizes him up, puffing out his chest a bit in an effort to make himself seem tougher than he feels. He knows, having worked at SHIELD Coffee for a good few years, that Coulson’s prowess is never to be underestimated, and quite frankly he’s seen more than enough things that have been cause to be at least wary of his boss, if not down right terrified. He once stopped a man from stealing the drawer of the cash register by braining him with a muffin. A muffin. It wouldn’t surprise him in the least if Coulson turned out to be the one person who could give Natasha a run for her money (that is if such a person existed, but Clint was a firm believer that every strength had its opposition, if not its equal). “You’re just grumpy because Steve pulled in a bunch of his stocked up vacation days to take the week off.”

“Barton,” Coulson says slowly, coldly lingering over each syllable. “You have ten seconds to get going before I suspend you for disrespectful conduct. Ten, nine, eight-”

Clint’s out the door before Coulson gets to five.

OoOoOoOoOoO

“Why are you under the impression that strip clubs are some sort of boy’s only establishment?” Natasha asks as they take their seats at a table a few feet from the stage at Sapphire. “I mean, besides basic misogyny.”

Bucky makes a face at her and sinks down into his chair until his eyes are level with the table. “Because it’s weird. I come to these places to relax and see some skin, you’re going to ruin it.” He points at her, “You specifically. I know that you make it your life’s goal to fuck with me.”

“How intuitive of you.”

Sharon runs up to them then, waving a wad of bills over her head. “I got some ones! Let’s put them in girls’ panties!” She slaps a bunch of them onto the table in front of Bucky and receives a glower in return. “Oh, don’t be that way,” she scolds, already slipping a dollar into the g-strap of the stripper on the stage in front of them. “We came here to have fun.” She makes a motion towards one of the waitresses approaching with drinks, “Watch out, your top,” she tugs on the collar of her own blouse.
and the waitress obligingly mirrors the motion and pulls her bra up a bit. “Almost had a nip-slip there,” Sharon says.

“Oh, come on!” Bucky blurts. “Nip-slips are half the point of coming to the club! They lean over to take your empty glasses and BAM! A boob!”

“You’re really gross,” Natasha muses aloud, fingers steepled under her chin.

Bucky glares at her, “Really. And it would totally be just as gross of you to be ecstatic if some guy’s dick escaped his pants?”

Natasha smiles, “Come talk to be when men are over sexualized in every TV commercial, whether it’s about panties or a bag of chips, and then I’ll pretend the situations are equal.”

“You’re a monster.”

“Thank you.”

Sharon, distracted by the dancers and her roll of ones, doesn’t feel like tuning in to their conversation and is instead stuffing more bills into another girl’s leopard patterned corset. “Good. Very exotic,” she compliments cheerfully. Bucky bangs his head against the table, an action that barely even makes Sharon glance at him before she turns back to the dancer. “Who does your wax? That’s quality right there.”

“Aaaaahhh,” Bucky screams halfheartedly against the table.

“I wouldn’t put your face on that. This place may be pretty classy as strip clubs go, but still,” Natasha warns.

Bucky pretends not to hear her, though he folds his arms on the table to pillow his head anyways. “I hate my life.”

Sharon doesn’t look away from the dancers as she replies, “What? Look where you are!”

Natasha nods in agreement, a motion which Bucky catches out of the corner of his eyes and groans at. “You look like you need a lap dance,” she says, patting his back with hearty mock sympathy. “And you know what? I’ll get one too. Emma over there is working to support her two toddlers, so why not.” She holds up a pair of fifties between her fingers and waves them at the nearest two strippers milling about on the floor. “My treat.”

“Your treat, my torture,” Bucky hisses. He’s momentarily distracted as one of the strippers begins grinding up against him, but focuses again when he notices Natasha leering at him. “I’m not sure whether the kick you get out of this is perverted or psychotic,” he grumbles in her direction.

“Bit of both,” Natasha hums, unsurprisingly content with his remark. Her own gaze doesn’t divert from the woman gyrating on her lap, and Bucky is forced to flush and look away after a moment, unsure whether he should be turned on or seriously concerned.

He clears his throat, “Isn’t this supposed to be some sort of demented test of my loyalty or something? So shouldn’t you be setting an example, as the only person out of the three of us who’s in a committed relationship?”

This time Natasha does give him her attention, her eyes narrowed with subtle annoyance, “You’re an idiot.”
“So you’ve told me,” Bucky deadpans.

“What sort of healthy relationship can sustain itself in the same round, clean little bubble?” she continues. “There’s no harm in looking, or even a bit of this sort of thing now and then. Loyalty isn’t restrictions and binds, Bucky, though those can be nice too.” Bucky makes the appropriate face at this, which Natasha ignores. “Loyalty is having all this at your fingertips,” she places her hands on the stripper’s hips and smirks slightly when the woman lets out a gasp of pleasant surprise, “and staying with the person, or people, you care about anyways.”

Sharon, who is still rather entranced by everything going on around her, turns at this and whispers in awe, “That’s beautiful.”

“Thank you,” Natasha smiles. “I’ve had a lot of time to think about it.”

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

The first thing on Coulson’s list is to pick up a dozen boxes of baked goods from Blaue Bakery. It seems like a simple task, as the place is only about two blocks from the coffee shop, but further investigation reveals a series of obstacles Clint just isn’t prepared for. Previously simple things like crosswalks, dogs, and shortcuts through subway platforms suddenly seem like insurmountable tasks. Just getting across the first crosswalk is a hassle, and Clint has to scoop Chick and Duck up off the white-striped road before the gets to the other side, suddenly afraid that the old jokes won’t bode as true for these pampered foul after they both take flapping leaps at a taxi.

After that he finds himself too aware of all the little pitfalls that Thor’s birds could get caught in, and ends up skipping his usual divert through the subway for the option of continuing on foot. God forbid one of them should jump out in front of a train. Clint feels a little ill at the thought of having to explain that one to Thor, so it’s best to avoid it all together.

And because it’s just his luck, a good portion of the block Blaue Bakery is located on is cordoned off for construction. He takes one look at the bright orange traffic cones and nearly gives up right there. It doesn’t help matters when Duck decides to take a detour through some still drying cement and Clint has to stop and buy a bottle of water to wash the stuff off with before it dries.

Using an alternate route that costs him an extra two blocks and then some, Clint finally makes it onto the correct street and finds himself face to face with some numbskull’s Doberman. Which is how he finds out that it’s one thing to carry two calm birds under each arm, and another to attempt to do the same while they’re screeching and flailing while a dog bites at his heels. By the time he reaches Blaue Bakery he might as well have not showered at all, as the splatters of cement, dog saliva, bird poop, and feathers is almost as bad as Tony’s evil blender vomit.

“I think I’ll trade the birds for a trip to Mordor now, thanks,” he despairs while he ties them to the bike rack outside the bakery. Though he’d been cocky enough to bring Thor’s pets into the coffee shop, he does not hold the same bravery to do so in Blaue Bakery. Mostly because he’s fairly sure the owner’s company will skin him alive if he does.

Kurt is already leaning over the counter with excitement when Clint sulkily drags himself inside. “Good, good. I didn’t think you’d make it! The construction has been nasty since this morning and Coulson is usually a bit more timely when collecting the orders himself.”

Clint raises an eyebrow, for once annoyed by someone else’s cheerfulness in light of his own horrendous experiences of the day. “I didn’t even know we got our muffins and crap from you. I thought you guys were competing.”
Kurt waves a flippant hand at him, “In a friendly fire type of deal. But Coulson conceded that I produced better muffins and doughnuts, while I admitted he could bake a finer strudel.”

“A strudel,” Clint repeats in disbelief. “Aren’t strudels from . . . From wherever the fuck you’re from? That doesn’t make any sense.”

Not amused, Kurt scowls, “Oh, and you can cook a perfect apple pie?”

Clint balks, “What? Of course not I would burn water if that was possible.”

“Then there you go,” Kurt huffs. “Now wait here while I get your boxes.”

It’s only after he’s dashed off into the kitchen that Clint notices he’s not alone. The jump he does once he sees the burly man in the corner of the room would make any high-strung cat envious. The odd thing is that he’d be less startled if he was unfamiliar with the man. It’s the fact that he is that makes him skittish. A slight bought of fear, however, does little to curb his sharp tongue.

“Way to be a creep, Logan,” he snaps while unconsciously trying to dust off the feathers that are still sticking out of his clothes.

Logan gruffs out a wordless sound of greeting before launching into, “You look like you got attacked by a pigeon parade.”

Clint rolls his eyes, “Thanks, Captain Obvious. Don’t you have somewhere to be? You don’t even work here.”

“No, I don’t,” Logan agrees. “But I do own this building.”

That’s enough to make Clint do a double take, “Huh? No you don’t. This is Kurt’s-”

“It’s a nice bakery in a well-off neighborhood, bub,” Logan cuts him off. “Use your head. Kurt’s younger than you are. Not everyone is born a Stark or Xavier. Do the math.”

Clint eyes Logan’s faded leather jacket, tussled hair, and overall scary-trucker-from-hell look with skepticism. “Right . . . So you live here?”

“Yes.”

“I thought Kurt lived with that cat girl,” Clint pries doubtfully.

“Kitty lives here too. When she’s not at school,” Logan clarifies.

Clint pauses for a minute, choosing his next words carefully. “So this is like your creepy little house for misfit toys or something? What, do you collect kids and offer them a place to stay? Gross.”

“You have a knack for assuming the worst about people,” Kurt says as he returns with Clint’s boxes. “Now, do you want me to tie these together so they’ll be easier to carry?”

Clint stares at him, “Blink if you’re being held captive by grumpy bear over there.”

Kurt laughs, “Hardly. And be careful what you say, he’s not afraid to stab people that piss him off.” Clint casts a wary glance at Logan and Kurt chuckles again. “I’ll tie these in two bundles of six for you, okay? One second.”

He disappears into the kitchen again, leaving Clint to scream, “No! Don’t leave me here with him!” in his wake. Logan smirks to himself and takes a great amount of pleasure in nonchalantly striding
past Clint towards the door, causing the ex-archer to screech and skitter to the other side of the room.

**OoOoOoOoOoOoO**

“That was fun!” Sharon exclaims when they troop back in to Bucky’s apartment. They’re currently Natasha-less, as she had left early so she could meet up with Bruce for grocery shopping.

Bucky reaches the sofa and slumps over the back of it until he’s laying flat and stomach-down against the cushions. The proper position for groaning in mental agony. “Yeah, it was great,” he quips darkly, “It’s not as if you convinced the hottest cocktail waitress there to kindergartener instead.”

“Third graders,” Sharon corrects. “And what’s wrong with encouraging others to follow their dreams?” Bucky lets out a loud, frustrated noise and Sharon folds her arms over her chest. “Very mature,” she commends shortly.

“I’m not trying to be mature,” Bucky snaps. “I’m trying to wrap my head around everything.” He throws his hands in the air with a huff and plops down on the sofa. “On one hand, you and Natasha fawning over the strippers; hot. On the other, I’m well aware that today’s field trip didn’t do jack shit to change your mind. I thought maybe what Natasha said would at least . . . But no. I know it didn’t.”

Sharon’s eyebrows furrow and she struggles to react for a heartbeat. “What are you talking about?” Bucky gestures at her, “You. Your stubborn fear that I’m going to somehow let you down. To you, today only proved that I’d still be interested a few months, or years down the road, strip clubs or not. But all I saw was that you would be content with letting me wait around that long.” He straightens a bit, hands linked under his chin so that when she looks at him she’s immediately caught by his sharp gaze. “I can’t wait that long, Sharon, no matter what I feel. Waiting like that, wallowing without certainty is the sort of thing that can kill a guy. You’re asking for an eternal loyalty I can’t consent to provide. I saw what that sort of thing can do to someone, okay. How that unrequited loyalty can bring someone to their knees in the end.” Bucky swallows, “You want me to be different than Steve, right? Well then don’t ask me to do what he did.”

Sharon flinches, a subtle tick of a movement that Bucky doesn’t miss. “I’m not-”

“You are,” Bucky cuts her off. “I’ve done my thinking, got it? I know what I want. But you don’t.”

“Yes I do!” Sharon cries. “I want someone who won’t-”

“There it is,” Bucky growls, “‘Someone.’” He snorts at the word, his hands falling to clench against his knees, “Don’t you realize how vague that is? ‘Someone?’ I’m sitting here thinking, ‘You,’ while you’re still stuck on ‘Someone.’ Maybe this would work if you started placing some actual faith in me that I can be that someone, but until then . . . I’m done, Sharon. This was short and sweet, but I’m not going to Rapunzel myself up in a tower to wait for you until you’ve sorted things out. I don’t have that kind of time. And, quite frankly, I’m just not that kind of guy. I’ve already tried that whole one-sided affections thing, and I’m not about to jump into it again.” He sighs and stands, stiff postured and uncomfortable. “I’m sorry.”

And then he leaves. Sharon watches him go, the door slamming behind him before she can remind him that this is his apartment. For awhile she just stands there, heart in her throat and tears stinging the corners of her eyes. At first she would excuse them as products of fury, as her mind is shrieking at her that he’s wrong, that she has no reason to feel scorched by his harsh truths. Then again, that’s exactly what they are, as she knows all too well.
Bucky has spoken the truth, and Sharon doesn’t have the strength left to argue it.

She contemplates waiting for him, and she fiddles with his collection of DVDs for a bit, finding the seasons of *Doctor Who* she lent him and pausing at the idea of popping a disk in. Except that, she guesses, she’s no longer so welcome here, though it had been just a few nights ago that she’d fallen asleep on this sofa and slept in the bed just a room over. The realization that it only took a matter of hours, a simple kiss, and a few voiced aloud insecurities to make everything fall apart shocks her. In the world she’s more familiar with it takes far longer for things to break. Tensions are supposed to be formed over cracks that already exist, are supposed to strain and weigh down until it all finally crumbles to pieces. This time, she can not plot out the moments that lead up to this one.

If she tries, she supposes, she could lead everything back to similar sources; messy relationships and unreciprocated affections. Though there’s little point in that, this isn’t the same at all. It’s not the heavy burden of all of that giving way over time. In reality, it’s Bucky cutting the strings before that happens. And if she looks at way, Sharon can see that he did what was best. In many ways, he’s sparing them, both her and himself, of whatever future agony would have been to come.

That doesn’t mean it hurts any less.

OoOoOoOoOoO

For the first time in a long time, Clint finds himself thinking of Darcy. Mostly because the fact that he’s completely incapable of accomplishing everything on Coulson’s list in one trip would have been the height of hilarity for her. After retrieving Kurt’s baked goods and hauling them back to the coffee shop he’s off to the supply store Coulson gets his coffee grounds from. Previously, Clint had been of the mindset that hobos who pilfered Walmart shopping carts were idiots. That is until the prospect of carrying twelve bags of coffee grounds back to SHIELD Coffee is enough to make him feel a little ill. Of course he would have preferred to take a taxi, but alas, every cab he’d hailed down on his way here had refused to accommodate him . . . And Thor’s birds.

So pushing a stolen shopping cart piled high with forty pound coffee bags it was. It was slow going, especially as he had to stop every few minutes to wrangle in an adventures Chick or Duck. The fact that he hadn’t fallen on his face yet and squashed the eggs still papoose-strapped to his chest was a miracle all it’s own, and Clint wasn’t going to test his luck by thinking about that too hard and tempting another bought of Karma down upon himself.

By the time he’s half pushed, half dragged the cart back to Coulson’s shop he's ready to call it quits, pay or no pay.

“I’ll admit that’s impressive,” Coulson says when Clint hauls the cart through the door. One of the bags had been punctured by Chick a few blocks down, and it let out a large puff of powdered coffee beans on Clint before he could patch it up with duct tape. Coulson is currently eyeing the dark spray of brown dusting most of Clint’s front. Technically there’s about thirty cups of lost product on his employee at the moment, but it’s worth the cost. If Coulson were the type to laugh over such things, he’d be wheezing. As he’s not, a faint curl of his lips is all Clint receives, which is just as mortifying as it is terrifying for Clint.

“I’m done,” Clint proclaims, a bit quieter than he’d originally intended as Coulson’s little smile is currently freaking him the fuck out. “I can’t finish the list. I’m tapping out.”

Coulson’s smirk grows a tad wider, “That’s too bad. I was going to pay you overtime.”

Clint takes a second to calculate that and how much of it he could put forward into Natasha and Bruce’s shower fund. “Well . . .”
“Plus your usual cut of server’s tips.”

“Deal,” Clint blurts, unable to help himself.

“Good. Then you can go fetch all the bottles of flavoring, there’s going to be eighteen sets of five, and then pick up all the uniforms at the dry cleaner’s. And don’t spill anything on them or it’s coming out of your paycheck,” Coulson says. If Clint weren’t too busy freaking out about these directions, he’d be a bit more unnerved by the glee in his boss’s tone.

OoOoOoOoOoOoOoO

The place they decide on is closer to a condo than an apartment. It’s large and a little out of the way compared to where the rest of their friends live. The current owner had listed it as a rental, as he’s planning on returning every so often to use the upper floor in between overseas jobs. And luckily, the place is very pet friendly.

Thor and Jane sign the papers almost immediately.

They don’t discuss it much, what that means for them, as there’s really no need. Jane had spent the afternoon gushing over one of the smaller back rooms she could use as a lab for her research, and Thor had marveled at the tiny gated backyard with a few scraggly bushes and a skinny tree. He was already making plans to start a proper garden.

They don’t discuss it, or the changes it would bring. They don’t discuss what is being left behind.

Thor is tempted to. He almost says something as they climb back into the taxi, his mind on the color green and cold, dark hair, and cold, slim fingers. But in the end he says nothing. What good would it do, anyways, to remind Jane, and himself, of how long he’s been waiting? It’s been awhile since he’s outgrown the lonely corners of his apartment, and truth be told he would have fled long ago if it were not for the crumpled promises he felt the need to stubbornly cling to.

He doesn’t have to say anything, however, for Jane to understand. She folds a hand over his in the back seat of the taxi, gracefully wordless, and that’s more than enough to seal the matter for Thor.

There’s little harm in moving on so long as you do it in your own time. And any guilt that he might feel over the matter is dashed when Jane starts to excitedly voice her plans for painting and carpeting the place on their way up the stairs to his current apartment.

“Should we not leave a room available?” he asks when they’re still two flights away from his doorstep.

Jane’s currently engrossed in strategizing how to fill each and every room, and she falters a bit when Thor suggests this. “Why?”

Thor is not one for blushing, at least not in situations like this, so he doesn’t balk at her inquiry, though Jane thinks the tips of his ears might be just a little bit pink. “I was merely planning a little further ahead, think nothing of it.”

Jane smiles, “It wouldn’t hurt. But I don’t want to fight about paint colors for that just yet, that’s a bit too much looking ahead for my tastes.”

Confused, Thor says, “Fight? But I assumed the appropriate pinks or blues were customary to-”

“Way too far into the future,” Jane shushes, a hand to her forehead as if she means to halt an oncoming headache. “We’ll talk about it when the time comes.”
“But we’ll spare a room just in case?”

“Sure.”

All talk of plausible futures ceases as soon as Thor opens his door to the view of an almost unrecognizable Clint Barton. The former archer is slumped over one of the recliners, his front half covered in coffee grounds, and his back in various feathers, bits of cement, and bird poop. The air around him smells like an ungodly mixture of cinnamon, peppermint, cherry, and espresso, to which Jane covers her nose and mouth to stifle a gag.

“You seem to have been through a . . . Mighty ordeal, my friend,” Thor tries, mildly concerned.

Clint lets out a whine of a huff before saying, “I’ve underestimated you, Thor. You obviously have the patience of a fucking saint. There’s no other explanation for why you keep these damn birds around.”

Jane coughs, still overwhelmed by the smells. “What happened? Did you trip into a construction area full of coffee and nasty perfume?”

“It’s coffee flavor shot liquid,” Clint says, which does very little to clarify what happened. “Luckily I didn’t get any on the dry cleaning, but it cost me my dignity to do so. Oh, and the eggs are safe. Not a crack on them. You can thank my sprained ankle for that.”

Thor does so swiftly before diverting his attention to the basket of eggs in the other armchair. “. . . This one is cracked,” he whispers while Jane attempts to brush the coffee out of Clint’s hair.

Clint bolts upright, alarmed, “What? No way, I just checked them all an hour ago! They’re fine!” He leans over to catch a glimpse and groans in horror, “Oh no. It is cracked. Oh god, I’m so sorry.”

Taking a peek herself, Jane rolls her eyes, “I’m no vet, but I can assure the both of you that crack is entirely natural.”

Thor brightens, worried frown fading to an excited grin. “They’re hatching?”

“Looks like it.”

The three of them (five if you count Chick and Duck clutched in Thor’s arms) gather around the basket. Clint crosses his fingers and mutters, “Chucks. Chucks. Chucks,” under his breath while the first hatchling’s egg tooth breaks through the shell.

“I should probably go get some towels,” Jane decides after five minutes pass with nothing but very faint cracking sounds coming from the egg. She returns just as the first large piece of eggshell pops free to reveal a bit of slicked feathers.

“Shouldn’t we help it?” Clint asks, already reaching forward to do just that.

Jane slaps his hand away, “No. Let it be, it’s fine.”

Eventually, after many encouraging cheers and a few worried gasps, the first “Chuck’’ breaks free, floundering and covered in egg goop. “It looks like you did this morning,” Jane remarks to Clint.

If he wasn’t so distracted by the tiny miracle bird in the basket he’d be a little more irritated, but Clint’s focus is all on the baby bird. “I think it’s just an ordinary duck,” he announces after a bit. “Duck feet, duck bill, duck shaped body . . .”
“Of course it is,” Jane scolds. “Chickens and Ducks can’t mate, I’ve explained this to you two at least a dozen times.”

“Then how did these eggs come to be?” Thor asked.

Jane stared at him for a moment, “You really weren’t paying attention when Loki watched those Animal Planet shows, were you. Remember when you insisted on taking Duck for a walk in the park and she got into a ‘fight’ with that mallard? There you go.”

Thor narrows his eyes in disbelief, “The drake was only upon her for a few seconds. That is pitiful.”

“Not everything in the animal kingdom has your stamina,” Jane mock sighs.

Clint makes a face, “Yeah, okay, gross. I’m leaving now. I’ve completed my allotted favors to you guys and your crazy birds for a lifetime, thanks.”

Chapter End Notes

I could write out my usual list of shit I got caught up with to explain why this chapter was late, but instead I will just profusely apologize. I never meant for it to take this long, I was just crazy busy.

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

Anywho, gonna try and finish Arc 2 before I go back to school in mid January, so there should be more new chapters soon.
The One With The Vows

Chapter Summary

The wedding planning is in full swing. Full, ridiculous, possibly disastrous swing.

Waking up, in many ways, is no different from the first few seconds of a dream. It’s disorienting, slow, sharp in the sense that it makes you notice things you never have before; like the specific shade of the curtains drawn over the window, or the exact beat of a lover’s breath against your neck. These are the sort of things Thor takes in when he drifts back into the land of the conscious after a long night’s sleep.

The first thing he observes upon waking is that he doesn’t recognize the color of the wallpaper, let alone the rather hideous pattern. He stares at it for a moment, confused by the ugly purple flowers and shockingly bright pink kittens before remembering that this isn’t his apartment above SHIELD Coffee. The realization is, at first, mildly alarming. It’s only been a few days since he’s moved in, not yet long enough to do away with the former owner’s nauseating tastes in wallpaper (he tries not to think about what he remembers of the carpet, it’s too painful), and not yet long enough for him to feel at home when opening his eyes after a sound slumber. The disorientation of waking is only increased by the new and yet to be familiar surroundings, and for a heartbeat, Thor questions his decision to move.

Almost instantly, he does regret a few things; the first of which is that his brother will be returning (should he ever return, a thought which Thor rarely dwells on) to a next-to-empty apartment. All of Loki’s things are still there, mixed in with the odd magazine or squirreled away bundle of wires and doo-dads Tony had left behind, but now all of Thor’s belongings reside a few streets down and over. He questions whether his brother will know where to find him, or understand why he left. He dares not linger on such thoughts for too long. There’s little point.

The simple truth of the matter is that Thor, proud and stubborn as he is, had grown tired of the empty spaces in his old adobe. Chick and Duck needing more room and new quarters with which to raise their family in was more of an excuse than a driving force. The other truth, perhaps more strikingly honest than any pangs of regret his brother had left in his absence, is that Thor had been putting many things off for far too long. There’s little point.

It was more of a habit, really, than a conscious action. He set things aside, always in an effort to appease his brother in some way, and had continually put his life on hold. Loki needed constant supervision after his first nearly-deadly bought with substance abuse, so Thor had never bothered to get a job, and was complacent and content enough to survive off of his family’s money alone (His former college funds for the most part, but that was a sore subject). When Loki had started to level out a bit, he’d been uncomfortable with Thor’s newfound friends, so Thor had tended to remain on the outside ring of the group, hesitating to join in at times when Loki would feel left behind. After he’d met Jane, he’d scheduled dates and outings around when he predicted Loki to be in a bad mood, careful to try and never put her before his brother’s needs.

Such a lifestyle was, by very definition, unhealthy. Jane had pointed it out to him only a few weeks into their relationship. She had not been harsh, nor had she been unsympathetic to his situation. Instead, she had merely offered a comforting presence and a reassurance that she understood, even if
Thor did not at the time. The thought that he’s been putting pressure on her because of all of this, been making her wait without certainty of anything, makes Thor feel vaguely ill. If anything, Thor is a man who chooses to shoulder his own burdens, rather than passing them on to others. He is not, at first, a confider, a sharer of secrets and bad turns. Almost always, he would prefer to keep such things to himself, hoard them close to his heart so that no one else can suffer his pains. He realized too late that he’d already broken his hard kept rules with Jane, and that probably made it all the worse.

She reassures him, daily, that it did not. “That’s how relationships work, Thor,” she laughs whenever he brings it up, guilt outweighing his self-held pacts not to share such insecurities. “And there’s nothing wrong with being a good older brother.”

That part especially makes things hurt. He’s not sure yet if it’s a good hurt or a bad one. In many ways it’s the latter, a reminder that he feels he has been anything but. Brothers, older ones at least, are supposed to be protectors, barriers to stand fast between the younger sibling and the world. Thor thinks he’s failed in that regard, takes the marks on Loki’s wrists and arms, the red rims of his eyes, bloodshot whites and dilated pupils as proof. The way Loki carries himself, withdrawn, wrapped up, huddled, his hair fairly unkempt and his skin far too pale over a frame far too thin is much of the same. He did not do as a brother should, could not protect Loki the way he’d tried so hard to do.

And above all that stands the one, single indisputable fact. The fact that he’d most likely failed to do so because they were not, as Loki had been lead to believe, brothers. Thor still wars with this, and it’s the one issue where his conscience can not be quelled by Jane’s gentle hands or kind, wise words. The truth, strikingly dangerous in every way, is that Thor had taken Loki. He’d led him away by the hand and brought him home. People, he knows now, are not like puppies, they can not and should not be picked up from the side of the road or a playground and taken into the house with the hopes that parents will be swayed by pleading eyes and let them stay.

But stay Loki had. Thor can’t remember much about the decisions that were made between his parents over the matter, as he’d been too focused on the tantalizing idea of brotherhood at that young age to notice or care. He thinks there were some papers signed, and he recalls a few nights when Loki had been placed in a temporary home until things were sorted out. Whatever had occurred hadn’t taken long, however, that much he knows for certain. The whole affair had gone by in a rush fast enough that Loki still could not remember it, as far as Thor knew.

Legality aside, Thor does recall that Loki had claimed to be waiting for someone. “I’m supposed to wait,” he’d mumbled when Thor had asked why he’d been sitting on the same swing for two days straight. So the possibility that Thor had, in a way, stolen Loki from whoever he’d waiting for is not as ridiculous as it sounds.

He does not let his thoughts stray too far into such things at the moment, though, as his hang-ups over his brother are what he’s been working to put behind him. What he chooses to focus on are the brighter bits; the flush of Jane’s cheek on his chest, the tickle of her breath on his skin, and the warmth where her hand is clenched against his side in her sleep. It’s those sorts of things that he’s happy to let his mind linger on, things that set him drifting into thoughts about the wallpaper they’re going out to buy that afternoon and what patterns (all more delightful to the eyes than the current monstrosity) they might bicker over. Yesterday they discussed what color to paint the kitchen, which is currently the most sickening shade of mauve to ever exist, and whether or not they should put in tile or linoleum. There is very little to be passive about in this new environment. Between his life with Jane, looking for a job, and caring for his feathered pets, Thor has no time to remain in a state of indifference, as he’d previously been satisfied with. He has things to do, pieces of his life to pick up and mend back together where he can, and build anew where he can not.
And he will do so with or without Loki at his side.

The comprehension, when it comes to him, that he’s okay with that doesn’t strike him with guilt, or pain, as much as he thought it would.

“We have got to get rid of these highlighter-colored cats,” Jane mumbles as she wakes, eyes squinting at the offensive creatures decorating the master bedroom’s wallpaper. “I don’t know what went wrong in the previous owner’s mind when they decided this wallpaper was a good idea. Other than a bucket of crazy.”

Thor snorts out a soft laugh, “We can purchase something more pleasing after breakfast.”

Jane rests her chin on his collarbone, a frown set on her face, “Not until you peel this crap off, first. If we just cover it up I’m scared those creepy cats will start clawing their way out.”

His laugh grows louder, fonder, and he huffs, “Aye, that would be quite frightening.”

“Don’t mock me,” she yawns. “I saw you side-eyeing them last night while you were putting your clothes in the dresser. They freak you out too.”

“. . . They’re very . . . Pink . . .” Thor confesses, “And their eyes . . .”

“Seem to follow you around the room?” Jane finishes for him, a smirk making its way into the corners of her lips. “Is that why you took so long deciding where to put the bed?”

Thor doesn’t reply, as any feigned denial would be seen through immediately. Jane chuckles at his expense and whispers, “Wait till you see the cat tile on the shower wall.”

His eyes widen, “What?”

“Nope,” she giggles, “I’m making breakfast, you can figure it out for yourself.” She hops out of bed without another word, picking up a discarded bathrobe from the floor and throwing it on before heading towards the kitchen.

The aforementioned tile, Thor decides after he spends the majority of his shower making sure he never breaks eye contact with the thing where it sits amongst the other tiles on the far wall from the faucet, is going to be the first to go. Even before the wallpaper in the bedroom.

OoOoOoOoOoO

Tony is sitting at the table, his tablet in one hand and an oversized mug of coffee in the other. To his right Steve is busy flipping pancakes and humming something under his breath. It’s not annoying, per say, and usually Tony would enjoy Steve’s absentminded morning tunes. Or at least he would if Steve wasn’t humming a butchered version of the Here Comes The Bride. “You realize we’re getting married in four weeks, right?” Tony asks, a little more shrill than he intended. “Four weeks?!”

“I realize you get louder about it every week,” Steve replies warmly.

“I have a right to,” Tony mutters, still a bit on edge. Steve places a couple of pancakes on his waiting plate and sits beside him, close enough that their knees brush under the small table, and Tony slumps a bit in his seat. “There’s still so much to do,” he whines, hands going to fist in his hair. Steve pries them away out of fear that Tony might actually start pulling at it. “I mean, we’ve only just finished sending out invitations and commissioning the cake and we still haven’t finished the gift registry or picked out who’s wearing what and . . . And the vows!” He latches onto the front of Steve’s shirt,
which is still a bit damp from the blonde’s morning jog, “Steve! The vows! We haven’t written vows yet! Oh god, the vows!”

Steve smiles, “We can write them today.”

“Between picking out the clothes?” Tony asks, looking a bit like a fish with how he’s opening and closing his mouth in confusion.

“Yes,” Steve assures, “Besides, I already know what I’m going to say.”

Tony eyes him, “. . . Okay. But do you know what I’m going to say?”

“Tony . . .” Steve reaches over to the counter where a cup stuffed with pens sits on top of a notebook and grabs them both, thrusting them at Tony with a sigh. “Start writing. And just say what’s in your heart. I’ll go out with Clint and the girls to pick out the clothes.”

Tony raises an eyebrow, “But your fashion sense is abysmal.”

“I’ll have Natasha with me,” Steve reminds. “And besides, last time we went to pick out bridesmaid dresses you had a break down in the middle of the store and started screaming about how you didn’t understand why we needed bridesmaids since ‘We’re both dudes.’”

“And?” Tony scowls. “That was a perfectly reasonable point, you know.”

“The answer to which was, ‘Natasha will wring your neck if she’s not in the wedding party,’” Steve says calmly. Tony nods with grim and reluctant agreement. “I’ll be fine.”

“Kay,” Tony says sulkily. “But you better bring me back donuts. Lots of donuts.”

“One donut,” Steve hums, earning a sputtering protest when he gives Tony a quick, argument ending kiss on his way to the shower. “And do you care what color your suit is?”

“Not white,” Tony calls after him. “It would just be grossly ironic. And no white for you either! You’re definitely not a virgin!” He sits back again as Steve disappears into the bathroom, a put-upon sigh escaping him. “He already knows what he’ll say, huh? What the hell. He must love me more than I love him or something. What’s wrong with me?” He pauses and grimaces, “Ugh, no, don’t open that door. Right, vows, okay, here we go.”

Two cups of coffee, five pancakes, and six penis doodles later and Tony’s page is still completely blank (aside from the penis doodles). And Steve is only slightly amused. “Mine’ll probably be at least four pages,” he comments when he sees Tony’s handiwork after he emerges from the shower.

“Is that some sort of subtle, manipulating challenge?” Tony asks, pen sticking out of one corner of his mouth like a cigar. “Because I bet once I get going I could write, like, six pages. Or eight.”

Steve just smiles, “Then do it.”

“Maybe I will.”

Words hardly equal actions, as Tony is quick to discover once Steve leaves. He retreats downstairs to the coffee shop and takes up one of the barstools as he stares at the notebook page with ever growing frustration. “There are no words,” he writes after deciding clichés are unavoidable at this point. “. . . There are no words! There are literally no words!”

Coulson slams a cup of coffee down in front of him, “You’d do best to keep your screaming to a
minimum, Stark. I run a family establishment here.”

Tony glares at him, “Yeah, I don’t know why you keep saying that. I’ve never seen a kid here before in my life.” He gestures around the room, which is currently, and as usual, occupied only by people over the age of sixteen. “And besides, I’m allowed to scream. There’re four weeks to go before my wedding and I’m an incompetent nincompoop who can’t come up with his own vows.”

Coulson raises an eyebrow, “I’m not a bartender who gets paid to pretend to listen to your less-than-sober woes, you know. I really don’t care.”

“You’re going to care when you’re sitting in the pews while I flub up the entire wedding,” Tony gripes. “You got the invitation, right?”

“Correction,” Coulson says evenly, “I’ll be delighted to watch you make a disaster of yourself. And yes, I got it. And I checked off the Plus One box and sent it back. Or did you miss that.”

“Steve does all that guest crap,” Tony dismisses with a wave of his hand, “And I swear to god, if you bring Fury after I made sure that Steve didn’t send him an invitation . . .” He falters as Coulson just gives him a snide smile. “. . . You fucker.”

“Fury wants to know if cats are allowed at the reception.”

“Only if he’ll let me serve it as an appetizer,” Tony growls. He ducks his head back down over his still-blank vows, “Now go away, Satan, I’m doing very important stuff here.”

OoOoOoOoOoO

Pepper’s not entirely sure how she got shafted with the duty of being Tony and Steve’s Maid of Honor. Steve has, rather hastily and suspiciously assured her that it is, in fact, an honor, and one that Tony bestowed on her because of how much he values her and their friendship. Pepper’s not an idiot, though. And while that might be what Tony tells himself and Steve believes, she knows full well she was assigned the position because of the fact that she’s the most organized person in their ragtag group of friends. Also, Tony couldn’t plan his way out of a box (as seen by the shoves he had to be given to ask Steve out, not to mention the other shoves to tie the knot). She suspects that Natasha might have been vying for the position, competitive to the last even against one of her closest friends, but they both recognize how much of a disaster Natasha as Maid of Honor would have been.

Sometimes, Pepper pictures the results of such a situation (gun flower bouquets. They exist, okay. Pepper knows this better than anyone. Natasha had been her Maid of Honor minus the planning duties) and has a nice, frightened little laugh to herself. So, despite the burdens placed upon her such as the tedious task of overseeing absolutely everything, including shopping, Pepper does feel just a little bit honored. Clint, eloquent as ever, had described the whole affair as, “Like that one scene in Lord Of The Rings. But instead of ‘No man can kill me,’ it’s ‘No man can plan this crazy wedding,’ and then BAM! Pepper is no man, bitches!”

Natasha assures her that this isn’t how the scene actually goes, but agrees that it’s an accurate comparison all the same. Pepper takes it as a compliment.

“I spent six months planning my wedding.” Pepper laments while they’re stuffed into a cramped little bridal shop, the title of which, Happily Ever After, is currently making the boys wig out. The hairs on the back of Steve’s neck have been standing up ever since they entered, while Clint and Happy are pointedly picking at the complimentary cake and talking about football scores in overly gruff voices. It should be noted that neither of them watch football. “Six months,” she reiterates when
Steve turns to face her, a high nervous flush in his cheeks, “And now I’m packing the same amount of crap into two. Where is Tony, anyways? I’d like to kick him in the butt.”

Steve swallows, “Uh, he’s writing his vows.”

Pepper softens a bit at this, the idea of Tony attempting to sit still for a few hours and pen out some meaningful words of love too endearing (and at the same time utterly hysterical) to remain mad at. “And how’s that going?” she asks.

The expected answer falls from Steve’s lips, “He texted me twelve times in the last fifteen minutes.”

“Writer’s block or boredom?” She can guess which it is already, Steve’s confirmation is only the icing on the cake.

“Boredom,” Steve sighs. He fidgets a bit, “You’ve done this before, maybe you could give him some tips?”

From his seat next to Clint, Happy lets out a loud, quickly choked back laugh. “Good one,” he winks at Steve, bravely ignoring Pepper’s death glare. “Pepper fumbled with hers for weeks. And they still were . . .” He falters as Pepper’s moves to stand menacingly over his shoulder, “ . . . Were very beautiful?” Happy finishes lamely. He puts on his best innocent smile when he glances over his shoulder at his wife, who in turn rolls her eyes. “Just tell Tony to write what he feels,” he advises.

“I did,” Steve says, “He asked me what words rhyme with love.” Steve’s worried grimace mirrors that on Pepper’s face.

“That sounds . . . Atrocious. Did you tell him it doesn’t have to rhyme? No vows should rhyme. Ever.”

Natasha waves a hand at them, “No, no. Don’t say anything. I want to see Tony’s attempt at poetry read in front of all of his family, friends, and distant rich acquaintances.”

Steve goes a little green at the thought, and Pepper gives him a consoling pat on the back. “Don’t worry,” she soothes, “We’ll knock the aspiring bard out of him before you guys walk down the aisle. In the meantime, dresses.”

“I vote we burn the dresses,” Natasha deadpans, completely serious. “The ones Tony picked out are ugly and should be incinerated immediately.” She eyes the example dress, which is currently being modeled on a scarily-thin mannequin. Upon further inspection Steve has to admit that the dress is extremely unsightly. It’s a nauseating shade of yellow; decorated with a menagerie of gaudy little red flowers and topped off with a large crimson belt that’s been coronated with golden plastic . . . Somethings . . .

“What are those, anyways?” he dares to ask while he studies the dress from a safe distance.

Clint glances at them and mumbles, “Bedazzles,” around a mouthful of cake.

“I’m not wearing it,” Natasha states.

“Tony picked them out,” Steve reminds gently. He may not like the dress himself, but Tony had been a bit adamant about how he was the one of the two of them who knew about current fashion, so Steve’s willing to give him the benefit of the doubt.

“He picked them out because he thinks it’ll be amusing to watch us squirm,” Natasha and Pepper say together.
Clint snorts and quickly covers the sound with a cough. “It’s not that bad,” he tries, heedless of the way Natasha is twirling the cake knife between her fingers. “I mean, it’s-”

“Then you can wear it,” she interrupts. Clint’s eyes widen and Natasha continues, unabated, “You wear the ungodly excuse for a dress, and I’ll go in the suit.” She points at Steve, “What do you think?”

“Er . . .” Steve fumbles, “I . . .”

“Or,” Natasha continues, “You or Tony can wear one of these froofy gowns, and I’ll willingly don this dress.”

Neither of these options seem reasonable to Steve. “Look, why don’t we just try it on and-”

Pepper claps her hands together, “Oh, yes! Try it on! Definitely!” She snaps for the saleswoman, ordering, “Can we get one of the brides maid dresses in his size,” she motions to where Clint is sitting, still stiff as stone with eyes like saucers, “and three of your best gowns in his,” she moves to Steve with a flourishing gesture. “Oh, hell, get us three more of those new Kay’s in mine.” She glances at Natasha, “You’re about my size, right? And Sharon’s supposed to be here by lunch, and I think she’s a size up but we can fix that when she gets here.”

Steve, confused and at a loss for words, simply watches Pepper and Natasha bustle about after the saleswoman, holding the requested dress and gowns as they’re fetched. He wonders for a moment why the woman, who had barely batted an eye when told to find the gowns for him and Clint, had been so unphased, and decides he really doesn’t want to know. If other customers ordered designer wedding gowns for men, that was none of his business.

OoOoOoOoO

Tony shows up on Thor’s doorstep at just after one. “Please,” he begs while Thor dusts bits of wall and kitten-patterned paper off his hands and clothes. “Please help me. You’re a dude who’s good with words and I am a dude who . . . Who is really not so good with words, and I need help.”

“We’re a bit busy,” Jane says, brushing past the both of them to toss an armful of the kitten and flower wallpaper in the trashcan on the front walk.

“I need help with my vows,” Tony pleads, hands clasped together. For a moment, Jane thinks he might resort to falling to his knees, but then she reminds herself that only the direst of circumstances would provoke such an action from Tony Stark. The puppy-dog begging is as close as it gets. “I’m stuck on dove.”

Thor stares at him a moment before speaking. “Dove? What do birds have to do with vows of matrimony?”

“Dove rhymes with love and above and I ran out of words to keep the thing going and . . .” Thor holds up a hand, halting any further idiocy.

“Why,” Thor says slowly, clearly in some sort of stunned disbelief, “are you attempting to compose your vows in verse? You are not a lyricist, my friend, and that statement is not made with ill will so much as good intentions.”

Tony frowns, “Natasha said - wait, fuck.” He smacks his hand to his forehead as he realizes he’s been played, a frustrated groan escaping him. “I just wasted a whole morning on this crap cause Natasha texted me and said it’s tradition for them to rhyme! And Steve’s a traditional sort of guy so I thought . . . Rargh!” He tears the piece of paper apart and begins ripping it into confetti-sized pieces.
“I knew there was a reason I picked those fugly dresses! I knew it!”

Thor lays a hand on Tony’s shoulder, “There’s no need to be so enraged.”

“Yes there is!” Tony snaps, “Steve already knows what he’s going to say and I’ve got jack shit! What the hell do I write? ‘Oh, hey, I love you and stuff and this was a great idea to get hitched so we can spend the rest of our lives together thank you and goodnight’? That’s gonna go over terribly.”

“Sounds short and sweet to me,” Jane muses. She smiles when Thor casts her a concerned look, “What? As if you’ve never sat through a wedding and thought, ‘God when is this going to end?’ That was simple and to the point. All vows should be like that.”

Tony grins at her, “Exactly!”

“Steve will not approve of such things,” Thor advises. “It would probably upset him if you presented such vows during the ceremony.”

“I’m well aware,” Tony groans, “Which is why you have to help me. You’re all . . . Gooshy, and stuff. But still a manly dude.”

“Your implications that emotions can hinder manhood, or are strictly female characteristics, are offensive,” Thor says calmly.

“Fine, you know how to word things, like feelings, in a way that sounds elegant and oddly tough, and I could use some guidance in figuring out how to do the same in my vows.”

Thor considers this from where he leans against the doorframe, bits of tacky wallpaper still stuck to his sleeves. “I can spare an hour or two,” he decides after a pause, smiling slightly when Tony lets out a relieved whoop of triumph. “But I will not write them for you, as that would be dishonest. I will merely advise you.”

“I’ll make coffee,” Jane volunteers, “But after that I’m getting back to work. Those kittens have to be gone by bedtime, otherwise I’m sleeping on the couch.”

“You forget that there are kittens on the sofa cushions,” Thor says gently.

Jane scoffs, “No way. It’s spotted, not kitten patterned.” She goes over to the couch and examines it anyways, letting out a horrified gasp as she all but presses her nose to one of the cushions. “They are kittens! Itty-bitty ones! What! I thought we got a steal when the realtor said the sofa came with the place! Free furniture!” She grabs the sofa by the arm and starts dragging it across the hardwood towards where Thor and Tony are still lingering in the doorway. “Throw it on the curb! Get rid of it on some unsuspecting college nincompoop!”

Thor obediently deposits the offending piece of furniture on the sidewalk before joining Tony inside at the table. Jane is inspecting the cabinets now, one nail scraping on the finishing as if she expects to scratch too hard and reveal yet another kitten curtsey of the previous owner. “So,” Tony begins, a new piece of paper spread out in front of him, “where should I start?”

Thor purses his lips in contemplation, “At the beginning, perhaps? You might open with a statement about how when you first met Steve you knew you loved him.”

Tony starts to laugh almost before Thor even finishes the idea. “No way. When I met him I thought he was an asshole! And I know he thought similar of me!”

“You acted favorably towards him,” Thor says, puzzled.
“Not all of us are as honestly nice to people as you are,” Tony commends. “Most people just pretend to tolerate other people, when all they really want to do is punch them in the face.”

Thor’s expression shifts to one of semi-annoyance, “I was referring to your body language that night I introduced you two, not your words or repressed violence. You leaned towards him in a manner that was not consistent with anger or irritation but rather sexual attraction.”

“You scare me sometimes,” Tony says, a little stunned. “You scare me a lot. But yeah, no, that won’t do much either. We started fighting after a few drinks, remember, he called me a ‘Man in a monkey suit’ and I called him a long list of inappropriate military slurs. So I’d kinda be a dick to bring it up in the vows.” He taps his pen against the table, impatient, “What else you got?”

“You could explain that even though you were friends for a long time you knew you wanted more?” Thor suggests.

Tony makes a face, “Urgh. That implies some stuff I’d rather not proclaim in front of a museum full of people. No thanks. And also there was a time where we, er, fought about that too. Before we told everyone we were together.” He tugs at his collar at the memory of their first trip to the beach house, and the argument that had occurred on the shore. “Are we allowed to lie in the vows? Because I’m great at that.”

“As we are all familiar,” Thor says blandly. “Mayhaps could talk about the things he’s taught you during your time together?”

There’s a thoughtful breath from Tony and the tapping of his pencil stalls. “That’s an idea . . .”

“What he’s taught you in bed,” Jane mumbles over the coffee machine. Tony and Thor jerk their heads up to glare at her. “What? Come on, it was waiting for me, like a bad fortune cookie where you have to say that afterwards because it’s so cheesy it hurts.”

“Cheesy?” Tony whines. “I don’t want to be cheesy. I want to sound cool and suave!”

“Then make it so,” Thor encourages. “Your words do not have to bear the air of cheese. And even if they do, Steve will love them all the same.”

“Steve will love them, and the rest of us will be slipping them into our jokes for the remainder of eternity,” Jane says wisely. “Why don’t you just go for classic, Tony? Something like, “Steve, when I look back over our time together . . .”

“Good,” Tony agrees, jotting that down on the paper. “Now what?”

Jane rolls her eyes, “What, do I have to do everything for you? Look back over your time together!” She slams two mugs of coffee down on the table between him and Thor, scooping up a third for herself as she heads back towards the master bedroom. “I have kitten wallpaper to maim and destroy. Have fun with your vows, boys.”

Tony stares after her for a moment before turning to Thor and saying, “Your guys’ relationship is very weird, did you know that?”

“Aye,” Thor says proudly.

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

“I can’t believe it’s been a year,” Natasha says as she admires herself in one of the many tall mirrors in the shop. She’s currently garbed in a very nice poof-less wedding gown. “A year and a half if you
“Morons,” Pepper hums, running a hand down her stomach to smooth out the slight wrinkle in the white fabric of her identical gown. “What would they have even done without us?”

“Flailed about like headless chickens forever and died alone,” Natasha concludes.

Pepper nods and twirls so she can get a full look at the dress, “This one is better than the one I had for my wedding. Why can’t these be what we wear next month?”

“Because I’d rather die than be out in public in something like this.” Natasha picks at the veil she’s refused to put on. “And besides, it would give my boys weird and impossible ideas.” She tilts her chin to her right to indicate Clint, who is too distracted by what Natasha is wearing to care that he’s currently sporting the ugly bridesmaid dress, bedazzles and all. “See?”

“You could buy one for roleplaying,” Pepper recommends. “It could be the new husband, his wife, and the best man who was having a scandalous affair with both of them separately but decides to confront them together on their honeymoon.”

Natasha’s eyebrows furrow, “Should I be concerned by how well thought out that is?”

“Nope,” Pepper says. “You should just take it as good advice and do it.”

“It’s a fifteen-hundred dollar dress.”

“That you can enjoy ripping apart in the troughs of passion.”

Clint makes a strangled sounding noise from his seat and promptly crosses his legs. “You guys!” he says, his voice cracking a bit, “I’m in a dress! A very tight dress! Shut up!”

Natasha eyes him and then her reflection, “It might be worth the investment.”

Pepper smirks and begins to make her way towards the row of dressing rooms on the opposite wall. “It doesn’t take that long to put on a wedding dress, Steve! Quit hiding!”

She’s met with silence for a long minute before a voice on the other side of one of the changing room doors whispers, “I really don’t see the point of all this.”

“It’s just for fun,” Pepper assures, “Come on. No one has to know. And by wearing it you’ll feel a small margin of the pain Natasha and I will feel if you keep the bridesmaid dresses Tony picked.”

There’s a drawn-out beat of stubborn nothingness from the dressing room before Steve grumbles, “This doesn’t leave the shop.”

“What happens in the bridal shop stays in the bridal shop,” Pepper says.

The general reaction when Steve finally shuffles out of the dressing room is a loud one, to say the least. Clint, having no sense of self preservation or care for the general courtesy rules of brohood, promptly falls out of his chair laughing, and takes the chair down with him, resulting in a resounding crash. Happy chokes on his cake, previously fairly neutral towards the insanity going on around him as he was the only one not subjected to the dress extravaganza, and Pepper has to smack him a few times between the shoulders to make sure he doesn’t die. Once that’s taken care of, Pepper can’t help but give Steve a once over and giggle a few times, unable to help herself. Natasha, eerily composed as ever, circles around the fidgeting Steve with calm calculation. “Glad we went for strapless. It really brings out your bust,” she observes.
Steve hastily covers his chest area and lets out an abnormally squeaky, “What?”


“I do not have . . . Have boobs,” Steve stutters.

“Muscle boobs are still boobs,” Natasha insists.

Pepper nods and Clint adds, “Dude, your boobs are the envy of most men your age, treasure them.”

Steve keeps his arms where they are, blocking any further muscle-boob oggling. “Can I get out of this now? I feel silly.”

Natasha snorts, “You only feel silly because you were raised in a society that teaches that skirts and dresses are for women. Relish in the freedom of the air between your legs and the unrestricting roominess of it all.”

“Dresses are cool, man,” Clint sing-songs from his chair, legs still firmly crossed. “Although I like my bedazzles better than your cake dress. Seriously, you look like you’ve been frosted.”

“You should toss the flowers,” Pepper says from Happy’s side, her eyes on the fake bouquet displayed amongst the other wedding-themed knickknacks on the table. “I know you and Tony aren’t doing any of that, ‘because of reasons’ according to Tony, but it’s no fun if you don’t throw it at least once. And I mean, seeing as your catch at my wedding predicted this happy outcome,” she picks up the flowers and waves them at Steve, “you should throw them too.”

Steve’s eyebrows furrow together as he takes the plastic flowers from her, “But the only ones who could catch it are Clint and Natasha and they’re not getting married . . .”

“It’s for fun,” Clint says. “Just throw the damn thing and we can pretend to be crazy girls and catch it after tackling other bitches to the floor.” He stands and flexes pointedly. “Bring it on. I will catch the fuck out of that shit.”

Natasha scoffs, “Who do you think you are? You’re not half as nimble as me, even when you used to try to be. I’m gonna cream you.”

“It’s just a bouquet,” Steve says, though he’s a bit scared of it all the same. The last time he’d been in contact with one of these things had resulted in quite the mess. Just at first, of course, but a mess none the less. Although Clint and Natasha were already in a relationship, of sorts, so there wasn’t much harm. “Fine,” he says, successfully capturing the pair’s attention. “I’ll throw it. But no tackling.”

“No promises,” Clint grins.

Steve sighs and turns around, bouquet clutched tight in hand. “Right, you ready?”

“Just throw it!” Natasha barks.

With a twist and jerk of his arm, Steve tosses the plastic floral over his shoulder. Without looking he can hear the scramble and scuffle that results, the distinct ripping of fabric, and the stumbling bang as Natasha and Clint tumble onto the cake table, dresses and all. When Steve finally dares to turn and peek at the disaster he knows will greet him, Natasha and Clint are sprawled over the now collapsed table, smears of red velvet on the dresses, Pepper and Happy are staring with startled, though not entirely shocked expressions, and Sharon is standing in the entrance holding her phone in one hand and the bouquet in the other.
“Did I miss something?” Sharon asks incredulously, gaze shifting between the catastrophe on the broken table, the bouquet, and Steve in a wedding gown.

Steve points a shaky hand at her phone, “Did you just snap a picture?”

Sharon taps her screen a few times, “Yes. Why, should I not have? I figured Tony and Bucky would want to see this hilarity for themselves.”

“You sent it to Tony and Bucky?!” Steve shouts, hands already moving to cover his face in mortification before everyone can see the bright flush that works its way from neck to ears.

“Just now,” Sharon affirms with a few more taps.

“Oh my god.”

She starts to throw the bouquet in Natasha and Clint’s direction, which causes them to sit up and begin harmlessly batting at each other. “It’s mine,” Natasha growls, “Sharon’s my friend, so it’s mine.”

“Whatever, that’s not the rule. If it was then it should be mine cause Steve is my friend.”

“You can both have it as you’ll be paying for it, as well as those dresses you’re wearing, in their entirety,” the saleswoman says as she reenters the room.

Clint and Natasha take a second to admire the cake smudged across the dresses. “Oooohh . . .” Clint smears a bit of the cake from his dress to his finger and licks it. “Welp, I found what I’m wearing to the wedding, I guess.”

Natasha leers, “Since it’s already dirty we can have the bride and her two bisexual lovers settle their disputes with cake and frosting.”

Steve makes a distressed sound that can be heard even over Clint’s obnoxiously gleeful laughter.

OoOoOoOoOoO

Tony throws away a good thirty balled up wads of paper before he finally settles on what he hopes is his final draft. It’s a bit shoddy, and not as elegant as he would like. But it’s honest, and it’s heartfelt. He thinks Steve probably cares more about that than how fancy the prose is. It stands with just a few pages, rather than the challenged six or eight. That isn’t the point, though. He’s finished, and he’s just a little proud of what he’s written, even though he suspects it probably falls under Jane’s label of cheese. “As long as it doesn’t have any of the lyrics from the Titanic or Walk To Remember soundtracks, cheese is fine,” she says after Thor dozes off at the kitchen table and Tony decides to pack it up for the night. “Steve won’t care if it’s cheesy, he’ll just want it to be real.”

And that, Tony knows, is definitely true. He carefully folds the pages into his pocket and waits on the front stoop for Steve to pick him up on the motorcycle, nervously fiddling with his engagement band all the while. It’s a lot more simple than the one he’d purchased for Steve, a single silver ring with a small ruby pressed into its center, and he could spend days admiring it with yet-to-fade disbelief. When Steve had given it to him, two weeks after their official engagement, Clint had appropriately commented, “He liked it and put a ring on it.” Steve didn’t think it was that funny.

Tony, however, was still awed by the almost comical truth (at least in his mind) of it all. Steve did like it, or, er, him, that much was fairly obvious. And he had indeed put a ring on it. Though Tony had done the same, the return gesture had still come as a slight shock of reality. A person can only think about all the maybes and possiblys of the future before they actually start to happen, and once
they do the dream effect still lingers, confusing the authenticity of it all. If it wasn’t for the ring, a cool, sure weight on his finger, Tony guesses that he might still be drifting on the high of playing make-believe.

It’s a different kind of high, realizing it’s all dangerously real. Except that for once Tony isn’t focused on the danger of it, if there’s any at all (he might have thought so a year ago), but instead on the exhilaration. Four weeks isn’t so much a mantra as it is a cheer that’s pitched with anticipation.

A year before, Tony would have said that there was nothing beyond the I Dos and the Honeymoon, that the story stopped as soon as the vows were spoken and the reception was concluded. In comparison, he finds himself looking ahead rather than at the fumbled past and the bliss-soaked present. Whether he’ll be ready for whatever is to come is another matter, but he thinks he will be.

The difference, he sees now, depends upon the person’s state of mind. Tony no longer thinks in I’s. Instead, his brain is full of We’s. How will we do this, how will we do that, what hurdles do we still have to jump over together. The leap, he understands, is not a metaphor, but rather the first step of many into a new and permanent life of plurals.

“Finish your vows?” Steve asks, jolting Tony out of his thoughts. He’s standing in front of him, a helmet on his head and an identical one in his hands.

“Almost,” Tony smiles. “I just thought of a few more things I can add. It’s nothing compared to your epic of four pages, but I think it’ll do.”

“You could have written a sentence I wouldn’t have cared,” Steve murmurs with a quick peck on Tony’s cheek.

Tony throws his hands up with mock indignation, “Sheesh! Why didn’t you tell me that earlier! I could have saved myself hours of wasted time!” Steve laughs, quickly sobering up as Tony fishes his phone out of his pocket and holds it up to reveal a snapshot of the fiasco at the bridal shop.

“So, you had fun,” Tony smirks.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”
The One With The Football

Chapter Summary

Fresh words are just a temporary bandage over a long borne wound. In the meantime, there’s a wedding to plan and a Thanksgiving dinner to ruin.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The mind operates on language. Whether that language is spoken in letters, colors, sounds, or signs is of little concern, as they all translate the same.

Thor thinks in images, as those of bolder, broader mind often do. He runs them through his head like a fast-paced movie reel, forming the ones he wishes to voice aloud into words, and tucking the others away in the corners of his heart for safekeeping.

Natasha thinks in characters, italicized lettering that tack out across her brain in more than one tongue. Her thoughts move on different wavelengths, shifting between sharp toned Russian and smoother, snake-like English. There’re other languages tossed in there too, though she does not think in those unless it is absolutely necessary. She considers the blood in her heart to be of two parts, not dozens, and she lets her mind linger between endless tundra and towering skyscrapers, and nothing more.

Bucky thinks in signs. Born for a field where silence was necessary rather than sound, the gears of his psyche is comfortably littered with gestures, signals, and wordless commands. For Bucky, go is not green, but rather a swift point in the needed direction, while stop is an open palm.

Bruce, well, Bruce thinks in numbers. It’s a bit odd, and the task of translating the inner workings of his mind, should they be printed out, would give most mathematicians a headache. And the more literary inclined would be sent screaming for the hills. Many other scientists, Bruce suspects, are not of his like mind. He hypothesizes that they may think in images, like Thor, or characters, like Natasha, both of which would result in boisterous academic papers he has no care to waste time on. (Why read about what he already knows?) More specifically than mere figures, Bruce thinks in equations. Sometimes, when he’s particularly bored, it’s simple. Like Sudoku squares. Other times, most times in fact, it’s more complex. As someone who had discovered at an early age that all things in the world could be explained through long-winded theorems (Except for the coveted reconciliation between quantum mechanics and general relativity, but he’s working on that), the need for the more commonly spoken and written language had not been much of a concern. Why describe a flower by its colors when he could shape it with the equation that formed the curve in its petals and the exact number of its shade of yellow on the color pallet (255.216.61)?

Because Bruce thought like this, he solved problems (human problems, not math problems) as one might expect from such mind workings.

The current issue, one that Bruce had been allowing to simmer just under the surface for far too long, is as follows.

\[ B \times N \times C = BNC \]
At first glance it might seem like a redundant, self-solving problem.

It is anything but.

When Bruce takes the time to actually lay out the numbers, form them into their proper patterns and equations so he can view them in a way that made more sense, he sees the difficult to acknowledge conclusion. Usually, the answer would be referred to as a solution, but currently Bruce does not possess that. What he does have is a series of events that allows him to make a distressing deduction, and that is all.

Though high school English tends to imply that conclusions are the same as answers, Bruce knows this is not so. A conclusion is an explanation, a wrap-up of the data and proof meant to further the topic in some way. Bruce is rapidly running out of desire to continue his investigations, as the information spells it all out clear enough for him to understand as it is.

However, dwelling on it for long isn’t an option at this time. He’s too busy, too preoccupied with other things to let his thoughts get caught up in the equations he dreads contemplating anymore than he already has. From conclusions, specifically scientific and mathematical ones, must come concrete answers.

And, quite honestly, Bruce knows he’s not prepared to face those.

His mind is currently far too focused with other matters to dwell on such things. This is a common tactic of temporary respite for him, a method used to push back his fears for the foreseeable future. Or at least for as long as possible. At this time, he’d much rather focus on his work, the upcoming holidays, and the wedding of his friends.

It isn’t much of a surprise that, in light of all he was working to hide and repress, Bruce volunteers to be in charge of Thanksgiving. As the dinner is just a mere three days before Steve and Tony’s wedding, the pair are too busy and exhausted to host the event as they would usually do. In fact, Tony hadn’t even remembered that Thanksgiving was just around the corner until Bruce had asked whether he’d bought a turkey yet. The answer had been a flat, and rather confused no. Steve, who had similarly forgotten that Thanksgiving was a thing that existed, took a moment to despair about his overlooking of the patriotic holiday.

Bruce is more than happy to assist, and not just because it’s a welcome distraction. He isn’t fond of the way Steve basted the turkeys in years past, so the chance to share his own flair of spices, herbs, and gravy was an opportunity he couldn’t pass up. To be honest, Bruce was quite fond of his culinary talents, especially as his college and working doctorate years had been wasted away on ramen and TV dinners. The best thing that had come out of his necessary suspension from fieldwork was that he had finally acquired a taste and skill for real food. Thus, the small kitchen in the apartment he shared with Natasha and Clint was almost entirely his area alone.

Natasha an whip up an admirable variety of deserts ranging from puddings to cakes, but give her a box of Kraft macaroni and cheese and she’ll most certainly turn it black it within a few minutes. Clint
is impossibly worse, and Bruce will swear upon his life that he’d once seen the former archer burn water. Which, considering the hydrogen bonds involved and the boiling point of H2O, was a feat all its own. Clint is capable of fashioning a fair sandwich though, even if Bruce finds the contents he chooses to fill the space between bread slices a little nauseating. Even the idea of a Leftover Sandwich, as Clint has dubbed it, stuffed with things like pizza, noodles, fish, and whatever else Clint can dig out of their fridge is enough to make him queasy. The general rule is that Clint was not allowed to make such devilish meals when Bruce and Natasha are home in order to avoid Bruce’s well warranted retching.

Unfortunately, Thanksgiving dinner for eight is not a one-man job, and Bruce’s pickings for assistants are slim. Thor, it seems, is the best option to aid Bruce in the arduous task of preparing the meal. Bruce is thankful for his help, as he hadn’t been looking forward to mashing up an entire ten pound bag of potatoes.

This is what Thor is currently doing while Bruce pokes at the half-finished turkey in the oven. “I think it needs more basil,” Bruce voices to no one in particular, as the rest of their friends are too busy focusing (or pretending to focus) on the football game being broadcast. “And maybe a bit of garlic powder.”

“I am fond of chili pepper,” Thor says.

Bruce stares at him a moment, a bit taken aback by the suddenness of this information. “Okay . . . But chili pepper doesn’t go on turkey . . .”

“It can if you apply it properly,” Thor hums.

On the seemingly off chance Thor is right, Bruce tosses a dash of chili pepper on as well. He doesn’t see how it could hurt. Afterwards he makes sure to put the shaker containing it away where Thor will be hard pressed to find it, as he’s positive chili flavored potatoes would not be very pleasant. At the sound of a loud, obnoxious cheer from the rest of the group crowded around the television, Bruce is tempted to point out that they’ll be eating the meal he’s cooking, and thus should help. The thought of actually receiving such help, however, is not worth the outburst. He shudders at the mental image of Clint ruining the stuffing, or Jane mangling the cranberries. Technically, he would very much appreciate it if Steve lent a hand, but the blond is currently passed out against Tony’s shoulder, exhausted from the last few days of last minute wedding preparations.

“I do not understand your game of feet and balls,” Thor comments over the wave of cheering that has erupted as the latest touchdown is scored on the screen. “The judge always halts everything after the person holding the ball has been downed by multiple enemies.” He continues mashing the potatoes as he speaks, a thoughtful expression on his face. “Wouldn’t the wiser tactic be to prove you could rise above the numbers and lead your fellows to victory despite the odds.”

Tony twists in his seat so he can stare at Thor, “Yeah . . . That sounds really heroic when you put it like that, but that’s not how it works, buddy.”

Natasha scoffs and averts her attention away from the game to Tony with a disbelieving frown, “As if you know how it works, Stark. You can’t even name the teams that are playing today.”

“Sure I can,” Tony says, waving a hand at the screen where the little team emblems are embezzled on the score across the bottom. “They’re the . . . The Big Cs and the Horse Shoes.”

Even Bruce, who has no care for professional sports in the slightest, laughs at this. “That’s the Bears and the Colts, Tony.”
Tony scowls, “Whatever. Like knowing the teams means you can play the game well.”

Raising an eyebrow, Natasha inquires, “Did you just imply you know how to play football?”

“Did I stutter?” Tony deadpans.

“So you wouldn’t mind playing a little game then?” Natasha smirks, a spark of challenge in her eyes.

“Bring it on,” Tony goads.

Bruce is between them less than a second later, a ladle held within striking distance of either of their hands. “No. We’re having a nice Thanksgiving dinner tonight, not rolling around in the dirt like heathens.”

“Heathens?” Tony mouths incredulously at Natasha, who just rolls her eyes in response.

Natasha shifts her cool gaze to Bruce, meeting his unwavering stubborn one with a calm, devilish quirk of a smile. “What if I lifted the ban on contact sports?”

At this, Bruce starts a bit, both surprised and alarmed by the offer. “On both of us?” he asks, nodding towards where Clint has suddenly become interested in the conversation.

“On both of you,” Natasha confirms. “And we’ll play real football, too. None of that two-hand touch bullshit.”

Clint raises a tentative, but excited hand, “This is just a temporary lift, right? Because I’m not signing up for the eternal allowance of contact sports in Bruce’s company.”

Tony, who has at this point nudged Steve awake, says, “I’m totally lost now. What exactly is being negotiated here?”

“Natasha is giving Bruce permission to beat the shit out of the rest of us,” Clint summarizes, earning a well deserved scowl from Bruce.

“That is not what she’s saying,” Bruce says. “She’s saying we can have a friendly game of football.”

“With bruises as trophies,” Clint can’t help but add.

Fresh into the land of the conscious, Steve yawns, “That doesn’t sound like fun.”

Tony, who chooses to ask the most obvious question, says, “Bruce, you know how to play football?”

Bruce huffs, “It’s just math, it’s not that hard.”

Steve asks the other obvious question, “Why were you and Clint banned from contact sports?”

“Because Clint and Bruce are idiots,” Natasha says evenly. “And once got so competitive they broke a window, hit my superior’s cat, and ruined an antique ship in a bottle, as well as gave each other black eyes.”

“Emphasis on eyes,” Clint smiles proudly, “We both got two of them.” He pauses, “Wasn’t that the game that decided whether or not we would-”

“Stop talking,” Bruce hastily cuts him off. “That doesn’t need to be public information.”
Clint glowers, but doesn’t continue his earlier remark. Instead, he gleefully focuses on Natasha again. “So we can play, right? How are we going to divide up the teams?” He casts a quick glance around the room to determine a headcount. “We have eight people, so four on four?”

Jane raises a tentative hand, “I’m not really a sports person. And I’m pretty sure Thor doesn’t know the rules.”

“One does not need rules to compete in a tournament of valor!” Thor laughs heartily. Jane side-eyes him with semi-concern.

“It’s not that easy, you know. Football isn’t something you can participate in while running around like a headless chicken,” she states.

As expected, Thor only hears the part about decapitated birds. “That seems like a form of animal cruelty of the vilest nature,” he muses, faintly horrified. Jane sighs.

Tony shushes any further debate over Thor’s level of skill with a furtive flapping of his hands. “No, no. Thor, you can totally play. And Jane, you’re in too. Otherwise the teams will be unfairly balanced. I need a day out, okay? Do you know how long Steve and I have been bent over the table doing - don’t look at me like that let me finish - all the last minute preparations and finalizing the little details? We spent four hours trying to figure out where the hell to sit Bucky at the reception yesterday. And that was just one person. You don’t even want to know how long the rest of the seating chart took. We are playing football, okay? All of us.”

“Sounds like a good argument to me,” Natasha smiles. “But what took you so long with Bucky’s seating?”

Bucky innocently glances at the ceiling when Tony turns a sharp glare in his direction. “Well,” Tony grumps, “let’s just say certain nincompoops put in last minute requests to not be seated next to specific people they’ve fucked it up with.”

Natasha raises a knowing eyebrow that makes Bucky flinch. “How tedious,” she sympathizes. “And what was the eventual solution?”

“Sitting him next to the aforementioned person anyways because he’s a moron who didn’t think to ask us for this favor sooner.”

“What?!” Bucky shrieks, turning a pleading glance at Steve.

Steve shrugs apologetically, “The only seat we could move you to would be right next to Natasha, and she refused to sit by you. Said it was for your own good.”

Bucky gapes at them, “Oh, so Natasha is allowed to have seating preferences, but I’m not?”

“Natasha has guns,” Tony says flatly, “And could probably kill me with a piece of bread if she wanted to. Anyways, football!” He claps his hands together, eagerly grinning at the rest of the group piled in Natasha’s living room. “Who’s gonna be the team captains?”

“Dibs!”

“I will!!”

Clint and Bruce volunteer simultaneously with no protesting remarks. Bruce, deciding that the typical protocol of good sportsmanship is important here despite his personal feelings, offers, “Clint can pick first.”
With a whoop, Clint flails a hand in Natasha’s direction. “Tasha! I pick Natasha!”

Bruce frowns, a soft, subtle, but deeply set twist of his mouth. “I see,” he says, collected enough that no one seems to notice the shift in his demeanor. “Then I pick Tony.”

“Science bros!” Tony declares, fist raising for an expected bump of the knuckles. Bruce ignores the motion, and Tony lowers his hand with a confused glance at Steve.

“Then I get Steve,” Clint decides, patting Steve’s shoulder. “He’s got the brains and the muscle. We’re a shoe-in now.”

Steve flushes slightly. “Thanks? I think?”

Bruce stares Clint down for a heartbeat, teeth gritted, before snapping, “Bucky! I get Bucky.”

Bucky blinks in surprise. “Huh?”

Natasha glances around the room as this unfolds, concern making itself known in the quiet furrow of her eyebrows. As far as things still stood, she had expected Bucky to be the last picked, if only because of the rocky relationship he still held with Clint and Bruce. His being an earlier pick of the lot was not due to whatever athletic talent he possessed so much as a personal statement. She isn’t sure she likes where this is going anymore. Any comments to be made, however, are bit back when Clint scoffs, “Whatever. Then I get Thor. It’s like team blond hunks over here, sucker.”

She nudges him in the ribs for that unnecessary insult. Clint barely acknowledges the impact, letting out an annoyed sound before saying, “Guess that means you’re stuck with Jane, then.”

“Hey!” Jane shouts.

Bruce turns to her with a shake of his head, “Ignore him, he’s just being an asshole. I was going to choose you anyways. I want to prove that mind is more valuable over matter, even when it comes to idiotic social pastimes like football.”

Bucky wrinkles his nose. “Then why the hell am I on this team?”

“Brawn,” Bruce smiles, “and reasons of personal vendetta.”

OoOoOoOoOoOoOoO

Dinner forgotten, they arrive at the park with tempers still intact. Natasha, for all her usual stoniness and skill with keeping everything under control, is on edge from the moment the goal lines are drawn. And it’s painfully obvious to the point where everyone is starting to notice. “It’s just a game,” Steve tries when he catches her biting her lip while Bruce and Clint argue over whether their game should stay between the trashcan and the tree, or the trashcan and the sidewalk.

“No,” Natasha says carefully. “I’m not sure it is anymore. Bruce hasn’t been this wound up in . . . In months.” She falts as she tries to remember when the last incident was, failing to recall anything happening since Clint had moved in with them. “I told them they could play because I thought it would be a fairly safe way for Bruce to let things out. In hindsight, it wasn’t the best idea.”

Steve tilts his head, a motion that urges Natasha into a hushed explanation. Or at least as much of an explanation that can be given about such tightly lipped secrets. “Remember when Bruce wrecked your Pacman game?”

“Ms. Pacman,” Steve says, quieting again when Natasha narrows her eyes at him.
“It’s not often,” she continues, “but sometimes Bruce can . . . Well, his handle on his emotions slips. And it usually doesn’t end very well. The Pacman game being one of the more memorable examples.” She shrugs a shoulder in Bruce and Clint’s general direction. “This is probably going to be one of those times. I’d step in, except it’s usually worse if he’s not allowed to let it all out. Hopefully he’ll remember it’s a game that doesn’t involve just him and Clint.”

“Is there a reason he might, uh, snap?” Steve asks, concerned.

“Stress, maybe,” Natasha says thoughtfully. “Though in this case I doubt that’s the only cause. Something about Clint’s choice in team members ticked him off today, I don’t know why. Maybe-”

She’s cut off as Clint approaches and puts a hand on her shoulder. “Quit gossiping, ladies. It’s time to huddle.” He waves Thor, who’s hanging out on the wrong side of the field with Jane, over to join them. “Come on! Huddle time!”

Thor practically bounces into their little circle, which causes the rest of the team to stare at him a moment as he gleefully proclaims, “I have never participated in the pastime of ‘the huddle,’ we do not use it when conversing over any of the sports I’ve competed in.”

Clint’s face scrunches up a little, “Okay . . . What sports have you played then?”

“Swimming,” Thor says, “track, wrestling, rowing, and skating.”

“Sounds great,” Clint mutters. “Right then, Nat and I will catch, Steve, you can go long, and Thor you can . . .” He glances at their goal area behind him, “You can stand there like a wall. Just make sure the ball doesn’t get past you, okay? Don’t let them score on us. Got it?”

“Verily,” Thor grins. “I will barricade that area from the enemies.”

“What does ‘Go Long’ mean?” Steve asks.

Clint’s jaw drops, “What?”

“Is it sort of like the outfield?’

“The outfield is baseball, Steve,” Clint says slowly.

“Baseball is my sport,” Steve huffs. “I only know the basics of football.”

Clint, looking a bit pale, says, “Please tell me said basics weren’t learned from old Peanuts comics.” Steve has the gall to look sheepish and Clint groans, “Oh my god, we’re fucked.” He rubs a hand over his eyes and sighs, “Fine. Steve, go stand a few yards in front of the other goal and be prepared to catch the ball if Natasha or I get blocked in by Bruce’s team, kapeesh?”

They break while Bruce still has Tony, Jane, and Bucky trapped in a very close-knit huddle. “Does everyone understand?” he asks.

Tony and Bucky nod, but Jane whispers, “This seems a little brutal for a friendly game.”

“It’s simple sportsmanship,” Bruce reassures. “Just a bit of friendly fire.”

He claps his hands for the huddle to break while Jane gasps, “But friendly fire still kills people!”

“Don’t try and protest,” Tony advises as he and Jane make their way to the area designated as the center line. “The less fighting that goes on, the better for the rest of us. And besides, the more we play along the smaller the chance that Bruce will resort to more violent means of anger
management.”

Skeptical, Jane says, “So you’ve dealt with this before?”

Tony laughs, “No, not really. Though we did call Bruce ‘Extremely Angry Guy’ before we became friends for a reason. Keep that in mind and we probably won’t be making too much of a scene tonight.”

Bruce kicks the ball while they’re talking and sends it flying onto Clint’s side of the field to be caught by Natasha. “Back up, guard the goal,” Bruce orders, “Bucky and I will intercept.”

“Fun,” Bucky says, and he moves to stand further down field while Tony and Jane hastily make their way towards the goal line. “I can’t wait to get my ass reamed in this game by Natasha, it’s something I’ve been looking forward to my whole life.” With perfect timing, Natasha sweeps past him, ball tucked under one arm, and somehow manages to knock Bucky’s legs out from under him without slowing. Bucky crashes to the ground with a howl, leaving Bruce to chase after her.

“Temper got your tongue today?” Natasha asks, running rings around Bruce on her way to the goal line. “If so, you know I’d rather we all talked about it in private, instead o dragging everyone else into it.”

“It’s nothing,” Bruce snaps. He eyes her circling and lashes a hand out to snag the ball from her grip before she can react.

More than a little stunned, Natasha watches him dash off towards the other goal in a daze before trying to catch up. “He’s got the ball, Clint!” He warns when Clint steps in front of him.

“How the hell?” Clint yells. Bruce knocks him down a second later, leaving only Thor between him and the goal. “Thor! Thor block him! Block him!”

Bruce runs straight over the goal line, completely uninhibited, and Thor doesn’t so much as twitch to stop him. Clint screams in frustration. “What the hell was that? Thor! Why didn’t you stop him?”

Thor, bemused, answers, “Because I was instructed to block the ball. Bruce is a man.”

Natasha quickly shoves a handful of grass into Clint’s mouth to stall the stream of profanities she knows he’s about to spew. “You need to keep it cool,” she hisses above his angry spitting. “I can’t have both you and Bruce freaking out on me right now, okay? And you’re supposed to be more in control than him so cut it out.”

Still choking on grass, Clint whispers, “So, what, you want me to lose? Is that it?”

“Preferably, yes.”

“But happening.”

Natasha fixes him with her patented “I will make sure you suffer for the rest of your life” look, but Clint doesn’t even bat an eye. “You get to deal with the results, then,” she warns, “Whatever they may be.”

“Bring it.”

They reset, each team huddling on their side of the field. “Sooo . . .” Tony begins uncertainly. Though huddles are technically just circles, he’s purposefully placed himself so that Jane is furthest from Bruce and he and Bucky are on either side of him. “I thought the motto was ‘It’s not how you
win or lose, it's how you play the game’ or whatever. Not ‘We’re going to beat the ever loving shit out of the other team.’” He frowns when Bruce doesn’t respond. “Look, whatever is eating you, you can tell me. And I’d rather play counselor than see this go too far. Because if you hurt Steve in the middle of your rage fit, I will end you.” Bruce blinks at him, startled by the deadly seriousness in Tony’s tone. “And I’m not going to pretend to understand how your wackadoodle relationship functions,” Tony says, “it only ends in migraines. But I do like to think I’ve learned a thing or two about commitment lately, so I can lend an ear.”

Bruce swallows, a tinge of guilt lacing his words when he speaks, “I can’t. A lot of it is still classified and I . . .”

“Then I’ll tell Natasha to listen,” Tony says.

Bruce cracks a wry, bitter smile, “It’s not going to help anything if I blatantly point it out to them. If they don’t realize what’s wrong, then they’re just proving my hypothesis. Interfering would alter the results.”

Tony opens his mouth to protest but Jane covers it with a hand. “Bruce is right. Whatever the problem is, forcing it won’t fix it, it’ll make it worse. And drawing attention to the issue will cause Clint and Natasha to feel obligated to repair it. And obligation isn’t how real relationships work.”

“I lost focus when you guys started talking sciencey,” Bucky mutters. “So what’s the deal, are we playing or not?”


“- And I’ll play goal. It'll give me some time to cool off,” Bruce finishes.

They break, Tony giving one last reassuring nod to Bruce before jogging towards center field.

Clint kicks off almost straight into Tony’s waiting arms. Tony makes a bee-line for the goal only to be cut off by a very shirtless Steve. This is, unsurprisingly, enough to give him pause, and Steve snatches up the ball and tosses it to Clint. “That’s dirty!” Tony screams after Steve laughs and goes back to guard the goal at Thor’s side. “In more ways than one! Dirty playing and dirty . . . I am going to sit down now.” And he does. Tony plops himself down in the middle of the grass and pulls up a stray dandelion to distract himself. “Weeds. Okay, weeds are non-erotic. Think about weeds.”

Meanwhile, Clint is dancing towards Bruce’s goal. Literally dancing. He twirls past Jane and bounces the football off of Bucky’s face only to catch it again and continue on his way with one too many skips in his steps. It isn’t until he gets to Bruce that he halts.

“Might as well move,” Clint jeers. “Because I’m gonna score whether you get out of the way or not. If not me, then Natasha will. You know we were only banned from football because you were too much of a sore loser last time we played.”

He doesn’t have enough time to react before Bruce lunges for him, and the ball drops between them, unnoticed, as Bruce grabs Clint by the front of his shirt. “Of course Natasha will help you, she always does,” Bruce grits out between his teeth, “She always does. You two go together like a couple of peas in a pod, don’t you. Like the animals on the arc. Two by two. I get it, okay? I’ve understood that for a long time.”

Clint scrabbles at the hands twisted in the collar of his shirt, “What the heck are you talking about? You’re not making any sense!”
He lets Clint go, as suddenly as he had grabbed him, and steps back just far enough to kick the ball onto the other side of the field. “I wasn’t trying to make sense,” Bruce bites out, “If I did, you two would try to reassure me that I’m wrong, and I don’t want it. I don’t want words, Clint, I want proof.”

“Proof of what?”

“. . . Of nothing I suppose.”

“Touchdown!”

They look up, shaken out of their conversation by Steve crossing the goal line to their right. The blond has the ball held aloft over his head, a pleased grin on his face. “Now throw the ball on the ground,” Clint instructs, “Spike it.” Steve does, and a cheer from the other team, plus Tony, goes up.

Bruce peers around Clint’s shoulder to spot Tony still seated on the field, and Bucky laying on the ground not too far away with his hands over his face. “Why didn’t anybody block him?”

“I have issues,” Tony says.

“I got a ball to the face,” Bucky whines. “What’s in that thing, rocks?”

“I was distracted because Steve has no shirt on,” Jane supplies from the other side of the field. Thor makes a mildly distressed noise at this confession. “And also you told me to go long,” she adds sourly.

Bruce makes a frustrated noise and moves to regroup his ragtag team. He’s stopped by Clint’s hand on his arm. “What.”

Clint raises an eyebrow, “What do you mean, ‘what.’ We’re not done here. You can’t just spout cryptic nonsense and leave.”

“It’s good to know that you consider the things I say nonsense,” Bruce mumbles.

“That’s not . . .” Clint exhales loudly and grips Bruce’s arm tighter. “That’s not what I meant. Look, whatever I did to upset you, I’m sorry.”

“It’s not that simple,” Bruce says.

“Why? Why isn’t it that simple? Nothing is going to get better if you don’t fucking tell me what’s bothering you!”

Bruce twists his arm out of Clint’s grip, “I shouldn’t have to! I shouldn’t have to point out everything you’ve done wrong, Clint!”

Clint balks, “Done wrong? Are you still hung up over me breaking the toaster last week? Because I already-“

“If you really think this is over something so trivial,” Bruce hisses, “then you’re only proving me right.” As he says this, Bruce is sure he feels the world crack beneath him. It doesn’t open up and swallow him whole, not yet, but it shifts. The axis tilts, the ground tears, and he stumbles atop it, thrown by his own remark.

In the end, it all adds up. And Bruce knows that. The data has been laid out before him for years now, and his hypothesis tested and confirmed multiple times. By all definitions, Bruce knows he’s
the outlier. The thought, though he’s been aware that that was the case for awhile now, makes him feel sick. A solution isn’t so simple, though. It’s an easy matter to figure out what it is, but a difficult one to go through with. Even at his worst, Bruce would not have the heart to do it.

Anyways, where else would he go?

“Snap out of it!”

Bruce jolts as Clint’s hands land on either side of his face, forcing him to focus on surface rather than the undercurrent of turmoil that’s rising in his gut. “Whatever you’re thinking right now, it’s stupid,” Clint says.

“Clint-” Bruce starts, teeth gritted in frustration.

“Not stupid as in dumb, stupid as in wrong,” Clint snaps. “Now get your head in the game and show me why Natasha banned us from playing in the first place.” There’s concern in his eyes, thinly veiled under the pretense of competitive fire. Bruce studies it for a moment. He wishes, more than anything, that he could believe in it, that he could let himself be carried away by such things again. But the math still adds up, far too clearly for Bruce to continue to ignore.

Clint and Natasha come as a set. There is no one without the other. They came and left him as a pair, and at the end of it all Bruce knows it will happen again. He’s the extra, the bonus, the easily cast aside and forgotten about. And there is nothing, nothing physical or solid or binding that can keep them at his side.

Natasha had been right when she’d said Tony and Steve’s temporary breakup would tear them apart. It was, in summary, the final proof. Clint’s reaction to it, his easy-going attitude about throwing such hard won relationships down the drain at a moment’s notice, had sparked an unintended end. Bruce knew why now, finally understood the reason he’d been left alone in his most crucial and desperate time of need.

It was because, as the formulas suggested, he was not needed.

\[ B \times N \times C = BNC \]

\[ \frac{BNC}{N} = BC \]

\[ \frac{BC}{C} = B \]

\[ B \]

\[ B \times N = BN \]

\[ BN \times C = BNC \]

“I’m not wrong,” Bruce growls out. He can feel himself shaking, can sense the tremor in his frame as he speaks as if it’s all a thousand miles away. This isn’t what he wanted, and now he’s not sure he has the strength to leave.

He’s too tired. Too weary to resist, too exhausted to stare at the reality that’s only just begun to crush him down down down into the earth, and too drained to keep going. The scientific term would be dormant, he thinks. Like a volcano, waiting, watching, cooling and dying with age. The possibility is there, buried deep and hot inside him, stirring up that sick, sweet feeling, but it’s repressed. It’s crushed down underneath his desperation to keep the rest of his very small world in a stasis.
He has control, and he keeps his world in control. For how much longer, he does not know. “I’m not wrong.” Those words, especially, are ruining. They’re tainting the control, catalyzing the reaction. He knows what the results will be, and no amount of further dormancy will change them at this point.

The shout of, “Incoming!” is what fully draws Bruce back to the game, which had apparently carried on without them. He raises a hand, purely on instinct, and intercepts the ball over Clint’s head. Any further need to continue their conversation is lost, overshadowed by the football Bruce holds and the cheers and screams of their teammates.

“Jesus Christ!” Jane shouts, both amazed and horrified, “Thor threw that! It had to be going fifty!”

“Didn’t that hurt your wrist?” Clint asks. He’s bewildered by the shift in events. “An interception like that-”

“Shut up,” Bruce growls, shoving past him, “And watch me win the game.”

The ground has cracked, the earth has moved, and the aftershocks are already rolling out. If Bruce keeps running, keeps going as he is, he can stay ahead of them for awhile longer. He’ll take what little time he can, though he fears it will be a hollow imitation of everything before.

It isn’t until he’s just a yard away from the goal line that someone finally stops him. Bruce had charged past all of them, and they’d stepped willingly out of his way. They were lucky. They knew danger when they saw it, and even Thor had dodged when he’d approached. But Clint, oh, of course Clint is the one to stand in his way. Not only that, but Clint is the one who grips him by the shoulders and throws him into the ground and pins him there.

“Get off!” Bruce yells, the ball hugged tight to his chest so that Clint has no access to it. “You’re just being a sore loser now!”

“No,” Clint says lowly, “you get off. Give me the ball, and get off whatever the hell faults you think you’ve discovered.”

Bruce smirks coldly, “You’re that desperate to keep it together that you want me to just brush it all under the rug? Fine. I’ll do that, I’ll let it all stir up and fester there until you can’t ignore it anymore. But I’m not letting go of the ball.” Clint wiggles a hand underneath him, winning a defiant hold on the leather, and Bruce snarls. “I told you no!”

“Children,” Natasha cuts in above their tangled up position on the grass. “It’s Thanksgiving. Let’s just be reasonable here. And also I’m pretty sure the turkey has been ruined by now. Again.”

Tony raises a hand from where the rest of them have been surveying the scene at a safe distance, “All those in favor of going back and eating dry turkey while they sort out their shit?” Everyone else throws up a hand in solemn agreement and Natasha mutters under her breath before tossing them the keys.

“Don’t trash the place,” she calls after them when they scurry off.

OoOoOoOoOoOoOoO

“I hope the lobster on Saturday isn’t this crunchy,” Tony remarks. They’re all crowded around the table at Natasha’s apartment, gorging on the overcooked turkey amidst a volley of complaints. “And I hope the flowers get there on time, and aren’t gross and wilted. The ones at my dad’s third wedding were like that. Oh, and I swear to god if any of you guys get us a god damn toaster for a gift I’m disowning you as friends.”
Bucky whistles and looks away when Tony shoots him a knowing look.

“You’re worrying too much,” Jane soothes, “Everything will go swimmingly.”

Tony stares at her for a second, “. . . Who the hell says ‘swimmingly’? I’m pretty sure even British people don’t say that shit seriously. At least not since the 19th century.”

“It’s called exercising your vocabulary,” Jane states. “Which for you just means using the word ‘Fuck’ as an adjective or adverb.”

Scowling, Tony returns to his train of thought, “Anyways. I still haven’t gotten a few RSVPs back. Logan,” he glances at Steve who just shrugs, “but I have a feeling he’s just being a dick and tagging along with Kurt and the rest of catering. I haven’t heard back from Hammer either.”

Steve raises an eyebrow, “You sent him an invite? I thought you hated the guy. Or in your words, wanted to ‘manually pull his teeth out one at a time and laugh while he screams.’”

“Correct,” Tony grins, pleased that Steve remembers of one of his grander revenge fantasies. “But I’m also fond of gloating. And showing off my hot soon-to-be husband would be the epitome of the metaphorical, ‘suck it.’” Steve rolls his eyes and Tony pats him consolingly on the shoulder, “It’s okay, babe, trophy spouses get great sex in return for their services.”

“Please stop talking,” Bucky whines. “Get back to the boring shit, like who isn’t showing up and stuff. Anything else, seriously.”

“Luke’s out,” Tony says, “he and Jessica are on their honeymoon, apparently. Beat us to the punch. He said he’d send us a gift though. And then there’s . . .” He trails off, a small frown on his face, “Well, I didn’t expect them to come, but I sent them a text invite anyways. Assuming they still have their phones.” He casts a guilty, sidelong look at Thor, who returns his grim expression.

“There was no reply?”

“No. Not a surprise, but a bit disappointing all the same.”

Steve blinks at this exchange, “Wait, are we talking about Darcy and Loki?” He rummages around in his pocket, extracting his phone, “Because Darcy texted me this morning. She asked whether casual dress was okay.” He holds it up so they can all see the screen.

FROM: Darcy
TO: Me

“so can I wear jeans on sat or wat dude?”

There’s a moment of silence wherein they all intently read the short message before Jane laughs. “Yeah, that’s Darcy.”

“And what of my brother?” Thor inquires, “You haven’t . . .”

“Not a lick,” Steve says honestly. “We’d tell you if we did.”

“I sent him pictures of the ducklings, but he never responded,” Jane sighs.

“Mayhaps his phone is broken,” Thor whispers. He looks vaguely ill as he says it, as though he’s thinking of all the ways a phone could become irreparable and assuming such incidents befell upon
both object and owner.

Jane leans on him and grips his hand, “He’s with Darcy, he’s fine.”

Tony clears his throat, “So, I still have to set up on the play list,” he says, desperate for a lighter subject. “Any requests?”

“If you play At Last or any other bullshit like that I will throw myself out a window,” Bucky mutters.

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

“It’s snowing,” Clint says.

It’s dark now, the invisible New York stars lost amidst the night and the electricity of the city. Whatever keeps the park lit has cast the football, and the two men still struggling over it, into dusk-long shadows. “Cold, too,” Clint adds softly. “Maybe we should pack it up, huh?”

Bruce shakes his head and keeps his grip tight on the ball. Letting go now would be an admission of defeat on multiple levels. If he stands his ground here, stays strong, stays in control, stays stubborn, then Clint won’t let go either. And, right now, that’s all Bruce has left to cling to. He doesn’t have anything else to give, to contribute, to offer, except for this.

He is, after all, the outlier.

“You two are going to catch cold laying on the ground like that,” Natasha scolds. She’s seated on a bench a little ways away, protected from the flurries of snow by the bright, warm beam of a streetlight. “That’s how morons catch hypothermia and frostbite, you know. By letting the dirt suck all the heat out of their bodies.”

“I’ve been through worse,” Bruce mutters before he can stop himself.

Clint freezes beside him, his limbs stiffening from shock rather than the cold. Bruce regrets the comment, but it’s too late to take it back. He can see Natasha go still as well from her position on the bench. And then, despite Bruce’s predictions that his stubbornness would be matched, Clint lets go of the ball. “That’s it, isn’t it,” Clint says, eyes wide, “that’s what you’re on about.”

“No,” Bruce denies. The claim is only partially true after all. He hugs the ball tighter to him, wishing Clint would make a move to try and take it from him. “No, it isn’t.”

He shivers when Clint loops his arms around his neck. “We haven’t talked about it much—” Clint starts.

“No.” Bruce puts a hand to Clint’s mouth. “There’s nothing to talk about. I was dying, and you left. It was years ago. The end.”

There, he’s said it. And as he expected, it doesn’t make it hurt any less. “Bruce—” Clint whispers, “I—”

“No.”

He feels more than sees Clint move this time, feels the brush of Clint’s hair against his cheek and the rush of winter-fogged breath against his neck. “Okay,” Clint chokes as if he’s swallowing down what he truly wants to say. “Okay. We can do that for now. We can get sick together this time, too.”

Bruce makes a move to push him away at the image of that, of the possibility of Clint lying in bed, hooked up to more machines than he dares to count, lifeless and drained. Something in him falters,
though, and he falls short before he can do so. “I don’t want you sick,” he says. “I don’t want to see that.”

He knows that was the reason Clint left, though that does not make what happened any better. Or any more forgivable.

“It’s just gonna be a little cold,” Clint hums, “And then Natasha can make us soup and ice cream. And we can be bundled up under the blankets and watch bad TV together. Unless Natasha gets sick too. Then we’re fucked.”

“I don’t get sick,” Natasha says from the bench.

“There you go,” Clint laughs. “So just you and me then. Okay? Nothing serious.”

Despite himself, and every mathematically, scientifically proven fact still itching at the back of his mind, Bruce nods. “I’m not wiping your nose, though.”

It’s not a solution to the problem, a fix for the formula. Bruce knows this even as he allows Clint to place the flimsy tape over the fault lines between them, between all of them. It’s a temporary remedy, another flip of the hourglass to give him a little more time to pretend everything is alright.

It’s enough, for now, and Bruce can live with that for a little while longer.

Chapter End Notes

It took me a little longer than expected to settle in to the new semester. Apologies.

On another note, nobody freak out. The issues with the OT3 are something I’ve been building up to, and as Bruce suggests they’ll be put on the backburner for a little while longer before everything comes to a head.

And as for any math and science in here, for the love of god TELL ME if I’ve fucked it up because I am shit at that stuff. I’ve had a few people look it over and/or correct me so far (Thanks to Thunderblitz btw, and Tatyana for bearing with my incompetency), but if there’s anything that was missed tell me please so I can fix it ASAP.
The One With Steve And Tony's Wedding Part 1

Chapter Summary

It's always the little things that go terribly wrong. And in one instance, a rather big thing. So it's good that Tony made a list. Sort of.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Things That Could Go Wrong On My Wedding Day

By Tony Stark

- I could freak out (again)
- Steve could freak out (again)
- Bucky could lose the rings
- Thor could forget the camera
- Food poisoning
- Ninjas never mind Natasha says she has that covered
- An old fling could show up claiming her ugly baby is mine
- The nuclear holocaust

In hindsight, Tony should have probably listed a few more probable things, such as waking up late. He really should have at least written down that, or the possibility that there could be a minor blackout in the building sometime between three and four in the morning, resulting in the alarm clock in their room being reset. But, no. Tony wrote down things like ninjas instead.

In order to remain on schedule, Tony and Steve were supposed to wake up at seven. It’s only because Steve is naturally a morning person that they’re conscious before nine. The realization that they’re already two hours behind (and thus late), is a noisy, loud bout of flailing that ends with Steve falling out of bed and Tony tripping over him as he scrambles towards the door. “Rib,” Tony groans when Steve starts laughing at how they’ve landed. “I think I cracked a rib.”

Steve starts and immediately struggles to a sitting position so he can roll Tony over and survey the damage for himself. There’s a bloom of red under Tony’s arm where he hit the hardwood floor, and Steve winces when he sees it. “It looks like it’s a bruise, at least,” he says nervously. “We should go to the hospita-”

“No way!” Tony snaps, “And get on a god damn waiting list for the museum? Again? No thanks. A little shallow breathing never hurt anyone.” He struggles a bit in Steve’s grip so that the blond is forced to let him go to avoid aggravating the injury. “A quick, cold shower and I’ll be fine.”

Five minutes later, when Tony discovers he has trouble lifting his right arm while trying to wash his hair, is when he knows they’re well and truly fucked. After some immensely awkward maneuvering and one-handed hair scrubbing, Tony stumbles out of the shower and into the kitchen to be met by Steve holding out his coat to him. “Doctor. Now,” Steve orders. There’s no amusement in his gaze anymore, and his tone has dropped to a level Tony thinks even Natasha might flinch at.
Tony eyes him, assessing his options. There’s no way in hell Steve’s going to let him go to the wedding this way, that much he’s certain of. His choices slim, he stalls for time he really doesn’t have. “I’m fine, really,” he grins, “barely bruised at all.”

“You were making noises like a kicked dog in the shower,” Steve deadpans.

“Ah,” Tony falters, “Would you believe that was my rendition of the Les Miserables soundtrack?” Steve just stares him down and Tony sighs, taking the offered coat. “Fine, we’ll go to a ‘doctor.’ Don’t come crying to me when we’re late to our own damn wedding.”

OoOoOoOoOoOoOoO

To say Clint is amused when he opens the door to a half-dressed Tony and a glowering Steve at just before ten in the morning is a massive understatement. “Fall out of bed and break something?” he surmises with a choked laugh. Tony scowls, and Clint only laughs harder. The pair is, by all definitions of the term, completely comical at the moment. Tony’s hair is still dripping wet, as he’d been unable to dry it properly, and his coat and shirt only half pulled on and buttoned for the same reasons. Steve is still in his pajamas, too concerned with Tony to remember to get dressed (which wouldn’t be so bad if he was wearing more than just the bottoms). “Do you guys remember you’re getting married in, like, six hours?” Clint opens the door all the way to let them in, and Tony shoves past him to approach the place where Bruce is scrunched down into the sofa with his gameboy.

“You’re technically a doctor,” Tony says without preamble.

“Technically,” Bruce agrees. “Although I’m not too sure how useful a doctor who can’t even cure his own cold can be.” He glances up at Tony with a wry eye so that Tony can fully survey the damage done by Thanksgiving’s bad weather. Bruce’s nose is red and raw, and he sniffs a bit when Tony takes a nervous step back.

“Eeeehhhhh.” Tony jerks a thumb at where Clint is still standing by the door, “I thought both of you got caught out in the snow?”

Bruce shrugs, “I got all the sinus problems, and Clint got the fever.”

Clint nods, looking a bit dizzy as he does so. “It’s great.”

Tony returns his attention to Bruce, “Is he . . .”

“Vicoden,” Bruce explains with a wave of his hand, “His fever needs to stay down just long enough so your wedding doesn’t end up on America’s Funniest Videos. Believe me when I say you don’t want a fainted Clint on your hands. He weighs more than he looks.” Closing his gameboy he peers at Tony’s bedraggled state. “So, you called for a doctor.”

Steve mutters, “Technically I told him to go to a hospital.”

“The first time,” Tony corrects, “The second time you said doctor.”

Bruce raises an eyebrow, “. . . Okay?”

Without further ado, Steve hikes up the left side of Tony’s shirt to fully display the blooming bruise across Tony’s ribs. “What can you do for this?”

Wincing in sympathy, Bruce says, “Not much. I’ve got some more Vicoden to help with the pain, but that’s about it. It’ll get you through the wedding though.”
Steve lets out a frustrated sigh, “Well then we can postpone-”

“Over my dead body!” Tony grits out. “Steve! This is our day!”

“Tony . . .” Steve runs a hand through his hair and over the back of his neck, a frown marring his face. “Are you sure you can-”

“Yes, definitely.” Tony interrupts. “As long as someone helps me into my suit and stuff, I’ll be good. And I’ll go right to the actual doctor’s as soon as the reception is over.”

“You swear?” Steve says.

Tony draws an invisible X over his heart, “Cross it and hope to die. I’ll reschedule our flight to Europe for Monday, too. Sound good?”

Steve nods, “As good as I can expect. You’re stubborn.” Tony opens his mouth, a comeback on the tip of his tongue, but Steve cuts him off, “That wasn’t a compliment.”

“Party pooper,” Tony grumbles.

“You guys are so cute,” Clint giggles from the door. “You should get married.”

The three of them stare at him for a moment, taken aback by the comment until they’re interrupted by a sharp, “I told you not to give him so much, Bruce.”

Natasha is standing in the hall leading towards the bedrooms, a suit draped over each arm. She doesn’t appear at all surprised by the company, or the state they’re in, and as she enters the room she thrusts one suit into Clint’s arms, and the other into Bruce’s. “That amount of Vicoden would make anyone loopy.”

Bruce purses his lips, “I gave him the required dosage.”

“Exactly. Just thank god he made his speech at the rehearsal yesterday.”

“Oh, are we going to have a speech?” Clint pipes up, “I know a speech! Four score and seven-” Natasha promptly slams a hand over his mouth.

“There’s a time and a place, Clint,” she says. “And you two,” she turns to Tony and Steve, “We’re supposed to be at the museum in an hour and a half. Get dressed, get drugged, and whatever else you have to do.” When they just stare at her she releases Clint to clap her hands together in warning.

Steve and Tony just about fall on their faces again as they bolt for the door. Before Tony can get into the hall Natasha snags him by the back of his shirt collar, drawing him to a halt. “You forgot the drugs, Stark. And Steve has to shower still.” She gives Steve, who has paused in his escape at the top of the stairs, a far too friendly wave, “You go on. I’ll make sure this one is buzzed and clothed by the time you get back. I’ll send Clint to fetch his suit coat.”

Steve’s eyebrows furrow together, “Is it safe for Clint to cross the street?” he asks, concerned as Clint hails him with a lopsided salute.

With a roll of her eyes, Natasha pushes Clint towards Steve, dragging Tony behind her as she goes. “Just hold his hand and look both ways, Like he’s five.”

Clint has at least enough wit left in him to look offended, and he sticks his tongue out at Natasha as she hauls Tony back towards her apartment. “I’m at least twice that age, you know!” he calls after her.
“Try nearly six,” Steve corrects. He takes the hand Clint obligingly offers to him and tries not to think about how weird this whole morning has become. “Don’t let go, okay? I don’t need you getting hit by a bus before the ceremony. We’re late as it is.”

“I like busses!” Clint chirps. “The wheels on the bus go round and-”

“Oh my god.”

Back in Natasha’s apartment, Bruce carefully extracts two Vicodin pills from the bottle on top of the fridge. Tony eyes them with trepidation when they’re placed next to a glass of water for him. “I’m not so sure I want to take these now that I’ve seen how loopy it’s made Clint.”

Natasha folds her arms over her chest and glares at him, “Clint’s a case all his own. And he didn’t take two, he took four.”

Tony gapes, “Bruce said two!”

“Bruce said ‘the required dosage,’” Bruce deadpans from the sofa, absorbed in his gameboy again. “Clint has a high tolerance for most Acetaminophen based medication. Even for something as strong as Vicodin he needs at least twice the normal dosage. It’s bad for his liver, but good for his fever. He’ll be fine. You, on the other hand, have no such issues as far as I’m aware, so you’ll take two.”

“Do you want to be able to put on your damn shirt or not?” Natasha quips. Tony takes the pills and downs them without further ado. “Good boy. Now sit down and wait for Clint to get back with your jacket, then we can get you suited up.”

Tony chokes as she realizes what she’s implying, “I can get dressed myself!”

“Yes,” Natasha hums, patting him on the shoulder above his bruised ribs. She smirks when he winces. “And you’ve done such a good job so far.” Flicking his half buttoned top, she waltzes back to her room with a sound that, if Tony isn’t mistaken, is almost like a laugh.

Bruce snorts and shakes his head at his gameboy without looking up, “Oh, that’s not a good sign.”

Tony swallows, “She’s just . . . In a good mood?”

“Natasha’s good moods usually mean she’s either just murdered someone, or she’s about to,” Bruce mutters. “Or that she’s found a new toy to test on us. For your sake I hope it’s option number one.” He casts Tony a considering glance for a heartbeat, “Although, I think you’re at the top of the list, now that I think about it.”

“List?” Tony squeaks. He doesn’t think he wants to know what Bruce is referring to.

“The list of people we’re allowed to invite into our harem,” Natasha says upon reentry. She’s returned with a dozen or so ties folded over her right arm, and she displays them with a flourish for Tony to inspect, “Except you’ll be indisposed as of tonight, so your name has been crossed off. Now pick a tie.”

Brandishing the one that’s already lopsidedly looped around his neck, Tony scoots a little closer to Bruce across the couch. Bruce shoves him away without missing a beat in the steady tapping of his thumbs on the gameboy. “Oh no. I’m not your human shield.”

“I have a tie!” Tony yelps while Natasha paces closer. “A perfectly nice one!”

“It has polka-dots on it,” Natasha says smoothly, “And it needs to be burned. Pick a new tie.”
Bruce inclines his head towards her, “Better listen, or she’ll toss you into the fire along with it. And also that tie is ugly.”

“As if you have any fashion sense,” Tony hisses. Natasha steps closer and he hastily works to undo the thing from around his neck, “Okay! Okay! Jesus Christ!”

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

Pepper arrives within the half hour to find that Natasha has outfitted Tony with not one but six ties. She stands in the doorway for a moment, contemplating whether she should get out while she still can or help. Seeing as Tony’s currently giving her his best Bambi impression over Natasha’s shoulder, she decides on the second option. “Who wants to explain to me what’s going on here?” she sighs.

“Natasha’s trying to kill me with ties,” Tony blurts out.

“The tie he had on earlier was hideous.” Natasha turns towards Pepper to display her handiwork of half a dozen assorted ties. “But we can’t decide on which one looks best.”

The selection of ties receives only the briefest glance before Pepper says, “The blue one, obviously.”

“I like the black,” Natasha tries to argue.

“Blue,” Pepper says as she starts to remove all the rejected ties from Tony’s neck, “Something borrowed, something blue, you know?”

Tony blinks at them, “Oh hey, yeah. I forgot about that.”

“Of course you did. I assume you don’t have something old and new then either,” Pepper chides. She produces a lint roller seemingly from thin air and begins to brush it along Tony’s coat sleeves absentmindedly. “I guess you can count as something old though.”

“Wow, rude.” Tony smiles anyways. “Did Natasha call you?”

Pepper shakes her head and whips out a comb to attempt to calm Tony’s every-unruly hair. “Steve. He saw your tie struggles from across the street. He’ll be over soon and then we can get this show on the road.” Tony yelps as Pepper picks at a snag over his ear and she smacks him on the shoulder, “Don’t be a baby.”

“You’re being mean,” Tony mutters, obligingly closing his mouth when she glares at him.

“I’m being responsible,” Pepper corrects. She smoothes back his hair with a hand and moves to straighten his tie. Her hands falter a bit and she clears her throat. “Someone around here has to be. Then again, you’ve become responsible too . . . Happy owes me money over that you know. He bet you’d never . . .”

Tony leans down, stunned, and Pepper dips her chin so he can’t see her face. “Pep, are you crying?”

“No,” Pepper denies, a choked hiccup following the single word. “I’m just really proud of you. And . . . Jesus, don’t look at me like that!” She hits him on the arm, ignoring the burst of laughter he lets out, “I’m not allowed to be a little weepy over the fact that the biggest nincompoop in the world found someone who can stand putting up with him forever?”

“Stop, stop,” Tony wheezes, clutching his chest and trying not to wince, “It hurts to laugh.”
Pepper chucks the comb at him, “You’re a dick!”

He tries to muffle his laughter into a hand, practically choking. “I’m sorry. I should thank you, really.’”

“Yes, you should,” Pepper agrees. “No one else would have stuck around as long as I did.”

“You wound me.” Tony straightens up and quells the last of his giggles. “So, what, you want a formal written sort of thing? Or can I just say, ‘Thank you for dealing with my bullshit for so long’?”

Pepper eyes him and folds her arms together, “I suppose that’ll have to do. Your severe lack of elegance hasn’t changed at all, I see.” She lays a hand on his shoulder, “But that’s Steve’s problem now.”

Tony grins, “I guess it is.”

Still holding the discarded ties, Natasha cuts in, “You know that’s not a good thing when your ex is passing on your failings to your spouse-to-be rather than your attributes.” Pepper scowls at her while Tony’s face falls. “I mean,” Natasha hastily corrects, “she should really be, uh, highlighting things . . . Like the fact that you’re fantastically loaded?”

“And a genius,” Pepper adds, “and a romantic. You can make the best jam in the state, and Steve will never have to worry about any appliances in the apartment breaking because you can fix anything in the world. In fact, you’ll probably fix it and give it five new features at the same time. And despite your history with being a bit of a flake, everyone here knows that you’re going to take the ‘Till death do us part’ line seriously, because you love Steve so much it makes the rest of us nauseous.” She smiles, an expression which Tony returns after a moment. “Basically, he’s very lucky to have you.”

Tony’s smile shifts into a smug smirk, “Of course he is. Like you’d give me away to just anybody, right?”

“Exactly.”

“Can we cut the cotton-candy-mush party now?” Natasha deadpans, “I feel ill.” She sweeps in between them and pats Tony on the back, purposefully close to his bruised ribs, “You’re getting married, blah blah, we’re all so proud and stuff. When’s the limo getting here?”

Pepper checks her watch, “Twenty minutes. Don’t you have to get dressed too? And Bruce?” She looks to where Bruce is still huddled down into the sofa with his gameboy. Neither he or Natasha moves. “Anyone who’s not ready to go by the time the limo gets here has to greet the guests at the door and be in charge of the gifts.” Natasha groans and Bruce oozes off the couch towards the bedroom with a put-upon sigh. “Shower separately!” Pepper yells after them. “We don’t have enough time for shenanigans!”

OoOoOoOoOoO

Clint and Steve’s return is heralded with singing. Steve enters while Natasha is putting on her shoes, a warning of, “I think the Vicodin has messed up his brain,” before Clint strides into the room mid-tune.

“Vse prikhodyat i igrayut!” Clint exclaims. Natasha freezes.

“He’s not even singing in English anymore,” Steve says worriedly. “At first he was just doing bad nineties pop and songs I’m pretty sure are from The Wiggles, and then it turned into this. I don’t even
know if it’s actually a song anymore.”

Clint pushes past him, twisting his hips to a beat the rest of them aren’t privy to. “Vybrosvyam vse zaboty!”

Tony looks up from the seating chart he’s been going over with Pepper, “Is that Russian?”

“Don’t ask,” Bruce mutters. His gameboy is out again, held in one hand while he runs a comb through his hair.

“Pretend you never heard it,” Pepper advises. “Unless you want to die.” She gestures towards where Natasha is slowly turning towards Clint. Tony flinches at the murderous fire that’s in the redhead’s eyes. “Seriously, you don’t want to know.”

“Davaite khodim v GUM . . . Sevodnia!” is the last lyric Clint gets out before Natasha leaps over the back of the couch and tackles him into the carpet.

Steve edges around them, concerned but not enough to interfere, and makes his way over to Tony. “How are your ribs?”

“Good,” Tony assures. “I can only feel it if I stretch weird or laugh too hard.” Steve’s mouth flattens into a doubtful line. “I’m okay, really. I can make it through the ceremony.” He leans up to erase Steve’s frown with a quick kiss to the corner of his mouth. “Don’t make that face, you’ll get wrinkles.”

“Like you?” Steve teases.

Tony huffs, “Rude. What is this, pick on Tony day?”

“Yes,” Natasha intones from the floor, where she’s successfully pinned Clint beneath her. “And we’re going to be late to the main event. Isn’t the limo here yet?”

Steve jolts, “Oh! I saw it pull up on my way back here! I forgot.”

“Distracted by my melodious voice,” Clint says gleefully into the carpet.

“Or his smokin’ betrothed,” Tony hums. “Either way, let’s scoot. We have to pick up Rhodey on the way, remember?”

Pepper begins to herd them towards the door, pausing when they pass Natasha and Clint, the latter of whom is still wearing pajamas. “Why isn’t he dressed? Grab his suit and he can put it on on the way.”

“Or in one of the dressing rooms,” Bruce suggests. “I don’t think you want to be, er, exposed to Clint without clothes on while he’s this drugged up and feverish.”

“Getting him into the suit will be a rodeo all its own,” Natasha says flatly. “And not in a fun way.”

Tony whines, “Can you not? I don’t need those images in my head today, thank you very much. You’ve just effectively eradicated every fantasy I had going about ripping Steve’s uniform off him.” Steve flushes and Tony stares at him for a heartbeat. “Never mind. Fantasies restored.” He points at Natasha, “But no more weird innuendos from you! None!”

The traffic on the way to Rhodey’s is horrible, and the traffic on the way to the museum gives the
first bought of traffic a run for its money. And by the time they finally arrive Tony’s stressed out, Bruce is sneezing up a storm, Pepper is at the end of her rope, and Clint has somehow managed to get rid of his pajama shirt, and no one can find it. They’re quite a merry spectacle as they make their way into the building, especially after Clint latches on to Rhodey and starts loudly commenting on how hot he finds men in uniform to be.

Once inside they’re greeted by Thor and Jane, who seem to have taken over in Pepper’s absence and are sorting through the presents that have already been collected by a few early arriving guests. “My friends!” Thor hails them down, “Why do you all look so harried on this glorious occasion?”

“Harried?” Tony parrots. "What year are you from?"

Pepper kneels Tony in the back of the leg to stop any further condescending remarks. “We’ve had a tough morning, Thor. Would you mind continuing to greet the guests while we get things sorted?”

“And Clint clothed,” Natasha says without looking up from where she’s studiously holding Clint’s hands behind his back to keep him from losing his pants as well.

Thor grins, “It would be an honor. Should we continue stacking the dowry contributions as well?”

Tony shrugs, “Make a pyramid or something, I don’t care. Just make sure you guys come pick up your flowerwhatevers before the ceremony starts.”

“Corsages and boutonnieres,” Steve stage whispers when Jane looks confused. “They’ll be in the freezer on the second floor by the bridesmaids’ room.

They inspect the reception room first. Tony fusses over the red tablecloths before darting in to the next room to interrogate Kurt on the state of the cake. The thing is five layers, and just looking at the height it sits at while on the table makes Steve a little dizzy. It’s over a foot taller than he is. “It’s . . . Excessive,” he says, as stunned as he is concerned about how much it must have cost. Something at the top catches his eye and he squints. “Are those tiny replicas of us?”

“Crafted from marzipan!” Kurt proclaims proudly, chest puffed.

Next Tony drags them through the ceremony area to check the flowers decorating the seats. “I didn’t know wedding aisles had red carpets,” Pepper comments while Tony picks a few wilting petals out of one of the blue and white bouquets at the head of a row of chairs.

“Traditional weddings are boring,” Tony explains. “Where’s Rhodey? I need to talk to him.”

“He went upstairs,” Pepper says, the words barely out of her mouth before Tony’s heading towards the elevator. She glances at Steve, who casts her a hesitant smile in return. “Nervous much?”

Steve chuckles, “No, not really. And I think Tony’s more anxious than anything.”

“Good.”

Upstairs, Tony finds Rhodey wandering around the halls looking for the rooms the staff have marked for their use. “Hey!” Tony calls after him, “Can I grab you for a sec?” He doesn’t wait for an answer before tugging Rhodey into the nearest room. “I need a favor.”

“I’m not helping you flee the country,” Rhodey says instantly.

Tony snorts, “Jesus Christ, no. I was just gonna give you a heads up that we put you at the same table as Bucky and Sharon. And you should be aware that they’re having some sort of fight or
something right now.”

Rhodey raises an eyebrow, “So you want me to distract Bucky?”

“No, I want you to keep Sharon company,” Tony says. “She doesn’t know many of the guests outside of the main wedding party, and I don’t want her to feel out of place.” He winks, “Plus, I think she’s your type.”

After a quick roll of his eyes Rhodey says, “I can’t believe it’s come to you trying to set me up with people at your wedding. It’s like I’ve fallen into a surreal alternate universe.” Tony purses his lips and Rhodey claps him on the back, oblivious to Tony’s rib situation. “I mean that in the best way, you know. I thought this day would never come.”

“You’re digging yourself into a deeper and deeper hole there buddy,” Tony mutters. “Why does everyone keep saying that?”

Rhodey’s eyebrows furrow, “Because there was a long period where we were seriously worried about you? I know that you don’t remember that very well, as you were either blacked out or immensely inebriated during most of it, but for awhile we were scared you were going to send yourself to an early grave.” A slightly strained smile forces its way onto his face, “It’s not that we didn’t think you couldn’t do it, or didn’t think you’d find someone. It’s that we’re so glad you got this far, that we’re all here to see you get hitched and end up happy, that it makes that time seem like a bad dream.” Tony closes his eyes, a flash of guilt curling in his gut. It’s a fleeting emotion, as Rhodey knocks it out of him with a companionable bump of their shoulders before it can properly sink in. “Don’t make that face, we were never mad. Scared shitless for you, yes. Mad, no. And now, seriously dude, we’re ecstatic for you. And feeling that way with that whole past behind us, it makes it all worthwhile. And that includes all the crying Pepper’s going to do today. I brought like four boxes of tissues to discreetly pass to her during the ceremony.”

“You sound like a parent sending their child off to kindergarten,” Tony says.

“It’s a similar emotion.” Rhodey admits. “And a similar level of commitment.”

Any further conversation is cut short as Natasha busts through a door behind them with Clint at her side. “Suited up and ready to go,” she declares, marching towards them and passing a thankfully-clothed Clint to Rhodey.

“His hands are bound behind his back with a tie,” Rhodey says, mildly alarmed.

“Leave it,” Natasha orders. “Sit him on one of the sofas or something until it’s time to go back downstairs. And if he starts singing in Russian ignore him. It’s gibberish.”

Clint tilts his head back to give Rhodey a loopy grin, “Davaite khodim v GUM, vse! Go!”

Rhodey stares at him and back at Natasha, “I’m pretty sure he just said something about a mall, though my Russian is a little rusty.”

Natasha whirls on him, teeth gritted, “Ignore everything he says, got it? Treat him like an enemy spy who spouts nothing but idiotic twaddle.” She turns around again and begins to glide towards the door in her heels, as poised and calm as if she’d never spoken at all.

As soon as she’s gone, Rhodey lets loose a full-body shudder. “She scares me.”

“She scares everyone,” Tony says. “Anyways, Clint duty for you, and I still have to go sort out the flowerthingies in the freezer.”
“Don’t forget the wrist ones are for the girls, and the pins for the guys,” Rhodey reminds.

OoOoOoOoO

Going by the formal rules, Steve’s technically not allowed to see Tony until the ceremony. As with everything so far, the rules have been cast aside for the sake of everyone’s sanity. Everyone meaning mostly Tony, who finds that he’s immensely aroused by the sight of Steve done up in his uniform. So it is that, shortly after they meet at the freezer containing the flowers and attempt brief small talk about them, that Steve finds himself being tugged into a cramped closet.

“We’re getting married in a little over an hour, Tony,” Steve chides breathlessly, though he makes no move to stall Tony’s wandering hands.

“And?” Tony inquires roguishly. Even with the darkness, Steve’s sure that Tony’s waggling his eyebrows at him.

His breath hitches slightly as Tony grinds up against him, “Ah—and isn’t this supposed to be a newlywed activity?”

“Maybe in the nineteenth century,” Tony groans. “What’s your point?”

Steve reluctantly pushes him back and holds him at arm’s length, or at least as close to arm’s length he can manage inside the tiny closet. “The point is I don’t want to get married in . . .”

“In jizz pants,” Tony finishes for him. “Good point.” He pauses consideringly before gently prying Steve’s hands off of his arms and situating them around his waist instead. “That doesn’t mean we can’t make out though.”

“Tony . . .”

“It’s either that or mingling with the guests,” Tony warns. Steve shuts up. “That’s what I thought.”

His ribs ache with protest when Tony leans into Steve again, a dull thrum of pain at the pressure of the contact. He doesn’t pay them any heed. “You realize this is our last hour as single people?” Tony hums against Steve’s lips.

Steve laughs, “We haven’t been single for a year and a half, Tony.”

“You know what I mean.” He hooks his thumbs into the back of Steve’s belt, drawing him closer until their bodies align and he can properly press Steve back into the wall again. “One hour of freedom left and I’m spending it in a closet with you.”

“You’re very generous,” Steve commends. “Though your choice in rendezvous locations leaves something to be admired.”

“Don’t pretend you don’t love cramped spaces full of hangers and musty coats bonking against your head.” Steve shakes his head, a darkness-hindered smile on his face. Tony feels it though, and takes it as his own when he moves to capture Steve in another searing kiss. “But really,” Tony continues, “I’m still wondering how I ended up here. Usually this is the bit where the bride has one last hurrah with one of the groomsmen or something.”

Steve runs absent hands down Tony’s back, fingers stalling to carefully probe at the bruises he knows lie just beneath the suit. “I guess I’m just a lucky guy.”

“Or a stupid one,” Tony whispers. “I’m okay with that. Because obviously only a very stupid person
would forgive me for all my shit, and put up with my crazy, and even think about giving up the rest of his life to continue doing all of that. Which is cool, you know. It’s best if they stick all the stupid people with the other stupid people. That way the earth can be ruled by the ones who aren’t busy running around in circles cleaning up their better half’s messes.” He chews on his lip in thought, aware that Steve has fallen silent against him. “Like Pepper. Pepper can totally take charge of being queen of the world. I have better things to do. Like hide out in closets kissing hot muscular blondes and eventually turning into a domestic housewife. Not desperate, okay, take note of that shit. Domestic. You can write the headstone I’m going to insist we share in eighty years give or take.”

He draws off, listening to Steve not breathing. Well that’s not the best sign. Tony slumps in relief when Steve lets out a huge, fond-sounding sigh a heartbeat later. “I’m pretty sure you just told me you’d rather have me than the world. Using the weirdest metaphors and explanations, but I’m pretty sure that’s what you said,” Steve murmurs. “You should have saved that for the vows.”

Tony sticks out his tongue, “Like hell. My vows are poetic and awesome as fuck. That was just the last minute additions I didn’t feel like writing down. So cherish them, cause I’m not going to repeat myself.” He shuffles awkwardly when Steve laughs again, tugging his phone out of his pocket to check the time. “We better go the dressing rooms and make sure we don’t look too thoroughly ravished. Pepper will have a fit if I walk in there all violated and stuff.”

Steve rolls his eyes as Tony edges the door open to let in a bit of light. “It’s not that bad.”

Spinning on his heel, Tony displays the creased back of his suit coat and untucked shirt. “Say that to your own handiwork, mister,” he says. “And also your hair is a mess. My fault, I apologize.”

Steve ducks his head so Tony can attempt to flatten it back down into a reasonable state. “I told you the closet wasn’t a good idea.”

“Yet you let me harass you into it anyways,” Tony scolds. “You just can’t say no to me, can you. What’s gonna happen when I bring home a dog or something?”

“You don’t even like dogs.”

“A robot dog. Like one of those Poochie things from the nineties except life size,” Tony decides. “And I’d just give you the ol’ goo-goo eyes and you wouldn’t be able to stop me.” He grins when Steve doesn’t even attempt to deny it.

They’re still semi-ruffled when they finally try and sneak to the dressing room. It’s quite the task with dodging the wandering guests and odd wedding party members, as well as ducking around corners every time they catch a glimpse of Pepper. Neither wants to be the one to explain to her why their previously nicely ironed suits are now rumpled messes. Tony insists they can just take the coats off and run one of the girl’s hair straighteners over the worst parts. While Steve’s not so sure, it seems like a better option than getting chewed out by Pepper. They steal one from one of the other, thankfully unoccupied dressing rooms (it might be Jane’s, though Tony notes the backpacks on one of the chairs and has a moment of doubt), before edging along the hall to their own designated room.

It isn’t until they’re only a few feet away that they notice the door is ajar. Tony stops and eyes the sign near the handle that clearly reads “Do Not Disturb” on it in bright red. Pepper had put it there, he recognizes her handwriting. It was probably meant to help give him some breathing room to calm the nerves that hadn’t had a chance or reason to spring up, a thoughtful but useless courtesy. Now, it stands as a warning. No one would dare to go against Pepper’s orders, and yet the door is cracked open. Seeing as Tony and Steve are currently caught outside of the room, though, whoever has left the door open is uninvited.
Tony stares at it for a second, debating the pros and cons of waltzing in there without any idea of who their possible visitor is. It’s most likely Bucky, come to give him a last talking to before they start down the aisle. He doesn’t especially feel like getting berated at the moment, but if they don’t get out of the hall and fix their attire, Pepper will find them in a matter of minutes and give them an even worse reprimand. Holding back a groan of dismay, he pushes the door open all the way, ready to face Steve’s best man with all of his usual sarcasm.

Except Bucky isn’t there. He was, as Tony can see that his military jacket haphazardly flung along the back of one of the sofas, but he’s glaringly absent now. And Tony can see why.

It’s a shock, really, to come face to face with someone who has been absent from your life for so long without any warning. Tony blinks dumbly when he enters the room, not quite able to properly register the presence of the man who’s seated on the other couch with crossed legs and crossed arms. He notes the characteristic green scarf wrapped over neck and shoulders, clashing with the formal suit, and the matching tie that completes the picture. The smirk, he sees, does not reach the equally vivid viridian eyes. And the steady tap of fingers against elbow is the only sound to break the stunned silence. Tony swallows, at a loss for what to say, how to greet the wiry man or respond to his oddly casual, yet stifling air he’s brought back with him.

“You two look a tad ragged,” the man remarks as Steve quietly pushes Tony the rest of the way into the room, shutting the door behind them. “I thought it was tradition for such activities to be saved for the honeymoon.” He smirks at Tony’s shell-shocked expression. “Well, don’t be rude, Stark. Is this how you’ve greeted all your guests?”

A cold, sick dread drops from Tony’s throat to his stomach at this, realization flickering to life in his mind. If anything were to ruin this day, more so than nerves or bruised ribs or high Clint Bartons, it would be this. And damn him for not listing it. Forget old flings showing up with illegitimate children, he should have remembered that some of his more recent bedfellows might have even worse things to gift him with at his wedding.

There is no greater master of chaos than the one who sits on the sofa before them, and Tony does not know whether that’s a talent that has been strengthened or softened in the past year. The Loki who left could bring the heavens crashing down on them in an instant with the blunt, harsh truth. On the outside, the Loki who has returned seems of a like mind. His leer of a smile widens when Tony fails to respond. “I think we need to have a little talk,” he says calmly. “The three of us. Why don’t you sit, Rogers, Stark, so we may begin before the wedding bells toll.”

Chapter End Notes

Look who’s back, back again. Loki’s back. Tell a friend.
What's a wedding without a little chaos?

Seeing the flush of pure dread across Tony’s face is something that Loki finds absolutely delightful. He’s missed this. Not just Tony himself, but also the company of other people. He’d nearly forgotten why he occasionally craved such interactions until this moment. Now that he remembers, Tony’s reaction is doubly delightful, and he can’t help but smirk at the sight.

Loki is, above all, a person who thrives on turmoil. Whether the source be his own inner demons, or something external he has caused, he relishes it. It was part of the reason he’d reached out to Tony in the first place. He’d craved to create disorder, and in Tony had gleefully found a sort of kindred spirit. Though unlike Loki, Tony did not survive on chaos. He unintentionally lived in it. At first that had intrigued Loki, attracted him even.

Except that, while Loki found solace in instability, Tony was drowning in it.

It had taken him awhile to see that, to notice that the further down the rabbit hole he led Tony the worse everything became. There is a difference, it seems, between welcomed disarray and burdensome disorder. Tony’s life, up until the point Loki had left his company, had been very much the latter.

He studies Tony now, drinking in every detail with a careful, calculating gaze. The engagement ring is the first thing he notes, and he takes a moment to confirm that Steve has one too, a quite lovely one in fact. Something at the back of his mind prickles with long-stifled jealousy. He pushes it aside. That is not what he has come here for. Focusing on the pair still standing in the door, he takes a moment to take count of their rumpled clothes and tussled hair. Really now, they couldn’t at least wait until after the ceremony? It was no wonder they had come to hide out in the room then. If Pepper saw the state they were in, she’d skin them for their idiocy.

But the panic, the sheer amount of fear in Tony’s eyes, is still the most important element. It betrays exactly what Loki has already suspected, and he groans internally at the sight of it. He should have known better than to assume anything more from such a foolish man, really.

As if Tony would think it necessary to inform his husband-to-be of the elicite arrangement he’d once held with one of their best friend’s brothers.

“Sit,” Loki commands again, gesturing to the opposite sofa. “Make yourselves comfortable.” The anticipated retort from Tony about how Loki has no right to make demands in a room that doesn’t belong to him never comes, and instead hangs heavy and tense in the air. Loki dismisses it as Tony and Steve reluctantly take a seat across from him.

He waits, one eyebrow raised in an attempt to prompt Tony to speak first. Tony’s mouth remains steadfastly closed, however. Loki sighs, “It would be best if you spoke of the matter of your own
accord. I doubt Steve would take it as well if it came from me.”

Tony narrows his eyes, “I don’t understand why we need to have this discussion in the first place. It’s over and done with, enough said.”

Loki flicks a glance at Steve to glimpse the confusion that’s starting to cross his features. This won’t end well if Tony refuses to speak about the matter. “Relationships are built primarily on trust, Stark,” Loki reminds coolly. “And you can quit giving me that look, I’m not here to harm you in any way.”

Again, that piece of him buried in the back of his mind hisses in protest. He bites his lip in an attempt to ignore it. “I left for a reason, Stark,” he says. “And now I would like for you to prove to me that it wasn’t all for naught.” His gaze shifts to Steve and settles upon him with a glint of a challenge, “The same goes for you. Acceptance is just as important as trust.”

Steve blinks in surprise, and something akin to recognition. This is not the same Loki who left a year before. His harsh, dangerous flare is still lurking under the surface, somewhat colder and deadlier than Tony remembers, but it’s not a constant presence on the forefront of Loki’s demeanor.

Tony grits his teeth, “Why? Why the hell is this suddenly so important to you that you need to try and ruin it?”

“You misunderstand,” Loki says, choosing his words with caution. He’s treading very thin ice here, and he is just as reluctant to break it as Tony is, possibly even more so. “I would not be here for something so trivial as that.” Tony scowls and Loki smirks in return before saying to Steve, “I assume you understand vulnerability quite well, Rogers?” Steve nods. “Keep that in mind, then, what it is like to feel as if there are no barriers or walls to protect you from the world, and no souls to keep your company. And keep it in mind for the rest of your life, because that is what Tony is like without you.”

He waves a hand when Tony makes as if to protest, and the other instantly falls silent, like the motion has stolen the air he’d meant to speak with from his lungs. “Such an emotion,” Loki continues, “that feeling of being alone and lost while still surrounded by people, is something I do not wish upon anyone. I heard of your . . . Misconceived notions that nearly put Tony into this state again, and I’m aware that you have made it clear you have no intention of repeating the incident. If you will, I would like you to prove it to me. This is a test, Rogers, for you. And if you fail it make no mistake, you will regret the day you were born.”

Usually, such a threat would be made in a lighter tone, a product of some long winded joke. Except here there is nothing that implies that the warning is anything but serious. And he’s right. Tony registers that with mounting nausea. Loki means every word he’s said, and every single statement he’s made has been correct.

Tony swallows, knowing his cue when it’s been handed so clearly to him. “About two years ago,” he starts, “I convinced myself . . . I convinced myself that not only would you never feel the same way as I did, but that I also didn’t want you to because I wasn’t . . . Wasn’t worth jack shit.” He studiously avoids looking at Steve while he speaks, and his whole body is stiff with fear. “I was mad, mostly at myself, that I would be left to feel like that forever so I accepted an offer to . . . To engage in some unrecommended outlets of release. It was violent, and dirty, and I needed it. I needed it because I had convinced myself I didn’t deserve anything better. And it took me . . . It took me a long time after that for me to recover.”

Loki watches the dawn of understanding bloom on Steve’s face, and waits with baited breath. “In London,” Steve says, “And at the beach, and the hotel, and the fire escape . . . All those times you tried to tell me it wouldn’t work, that was because of him?”
“No!” Tony exclaims, grabbing Steve by the shoulders to keep him from lashing out at Loki. “No! It was because of me! I put those burdens on myself. Loki just . . .”

He hesitates, and Loki fills in, “I was an instigator. A dealer, if you will.” This is a metaphor he knows how to work with, as it’s been interwoven into his own life too deeply for him to ever fully unravel. “I did not create the problem, but I influenced it. Unwittingly or otherwise, it doesn’t matter. I was the one who offered false respite, and let the issue fester until it nearly consumed him.” He fiddles with an end of his scarf while he explains, conscious of Steve’s accusatory stare on him. “That is in the past. It’s the present I’m concerned about, Rogers, and whether or not you can do what I could not.”

“Which is?” Steve prompts.

“Never let him down,” Loki replies. “I have seen what becomes of those who are left behind, who fall by the wayside because the ones they love are too preoccupied with other matters. You have a job as I recall, Rogers, and regularly volunteer at the local firehouse. Eventually you may have other things as well, better opportunities or other obligations.” He stalls for a moment, absently studying his nails, “I actually returned some months ago, did you know? Right around time when you tried to permanently part ways with Tony.”

Steve frowns, “That wasn’t any of your business.”

Loki raises an eyebrow, “Wasn’t it? I know better than anyone what dark roads can open up in the wake of such things, Rogers.”

“That doesn’t mean it’s your job to butt in like this,” Steve snaps. “And how dare you think I’d turn my back on Tony after everything -”

“Steve,” Tony starts.

“- After how badly I . . . I screwed up last time! Also,” he stands, shaking off Tony’s attempts to stop him. “I don’t care what happened with you two before London, what’s done is done. What I do care about is that it took Tony a god damn year to recover from it.” He leans over the small coffee table between the sofas, a move that would cause most people to flinch back. Loki is not most people, and he meets Steve’s ferocity with a cool stare. “That wasn’t my fault. However,” Steve jabs a finger into Loki’s chest, “Anything that happens from here on out will be. And I’m fully prepared for that responsibility.”

Loki glances down at the finger digging into his ribs, utterly passive, “Are you really? I will not stand for you to hide behind your ghosts as a defense, Rogers. Not if Tony is to ever have any hope of conquering his.” Tony feels a chill wash over him, and an entirely different form of dread resurfacing in him at this twist of phrase. He suspects, no, he knows what Loki is referring to. Loki rises to his feet and brushes Steve’s hand off of him, “I’ll believe your promises for now,” he says lowly, “but should the time come for you to fulfill them, and you fail . . .” He draws off and gives Steve a dark look, “You may find that there are worse outcomes than separation on the mortal plane.”

Smoothing out the front of his suit and straightening his scarf around his neck, Loki finishes with a short, “I’ll take my leave now.”

It isn’t until he’s halfway to the door that fingers close around his wrist. “Wait.”

Loki shoots a dangerous, warning glare over his shoulder at Steve before turning to face Tony. Carefully, daring Steve to interfere as he does so, he loops an arm around Tony’s shoulders and leans
into him until his lips are a hair’s breath from the other man’s ear. “I traveled abroad,” he whispers, “I saw and heard many things, and met many people. One of which is no friend of yours.” Tony tenses, and Loki murmurs, “While I excel in the art of distraction, there is only so long a man like him can remain occupied before he sets his sights on his prey again. Should Steve’s loyalties to you waver, I fear what would become of you.”

He pulls away to glimpse the determined look in Tony’s eyes. “We’ll be okay,” Tony says resolutely.

“I dearly hope so,” Loki returns. “And I wish you all the best.”

“Save the well wishes for the reception,” Tony says. “Unless you’re planning on leaving again?”

Loki lets out a disdaining snort, “We’ll see how my encounter with my brother goes. Darcy says I have to stick around at least that long before I make any attempts to flee.”

“And you listened to her?” Tony gapes in disbelief.

Something soft makes its way into Loki’s features, “She has healed many of the wounds I once thought would never close,” he says. “I would be a fool not to.” Clearing his throat, he adds loud enough for Steve to hear, “By the way, I’d like it if you returned my hair straightener undamaged.”

They all look to the straightener where its been forgotten on the coffee table. “It needs to warm up before you apply it to your coats,” Loki advises, “and seeing as you only have about fifteen minutes before you’re needed downstairs, I’d get to it.”

He departs without another word, leaving Tony and Steve to sort the rest of it out themselves. For a moment, he lingers just outside the door, chest heaving as he struggles to reign in the conflicting feelings in his chest. Loki has ever been one to show his faults to the world, and he’ll be damned if something like this causes him to do so now. A shuddering, calming breath or two later and he begins to make his way down the hall. He’s caught by a waiting, consoling hand before he gets very far.

“You look like you’ve been through an emotional laundromat,” Darcy says, pulling him into another room and out of sight of any nosey passerby.

Loki smiles, though it’s clearly strained, “Your odd metaphors will never cease to bewilder me.”

Darcy ignores the remark and stands on her tiptoes to study his wavering eyes. “Are you going to be okay?”

This time, there is no alternative motive to his movements. The embrace he draws Darcy into isn’t a mask to cover whispers, or a show for prying eyes. He drops her head onto her shoulder, his whole frame trembling again until she wraps her arms around him in turn. “I . . .” but he can’t say anything more.

“I know,” Darcy soothes. And she does. He’s told her before, confessed it in the hope that once it’s been said, it will no longer be such a thorn in his heart. Loki’s return was not done solely for the sake of passing along words of warning, and the test had not just been for Steve alone.

It was his as well. A test of his resolve to once and for all let go.

“It was his as well. A test of his resolve to once and for all let go.

“I know.”

There is no sharper pain than the stab of unrequited love.
For awhile after Loki leaves, neither of them says anything. Tony busies himself with heating the straightener and fixing his hair with a wet comb, mulling over Loki’s warnings in silence. The information passed along is as aggravating as it is unnerving. “Go ahead and ask,” he prompts. “You want to know what Loki said to me, don’t you? And why he felt the need to give me threats like that?”

“I have my guesses,” Steve says from the sofa. He’s oddly laid back, given what just occurred. Tony’s not sure what to make of that. “But I’m not going to force you to tell me anything you don’t want to.”

“I’d like to check some things before I raise the alarms,” Tony says. “I understand if you want to... To back out.”

It takes only a moment for Steve to be across the room, turning Tony to face him and kissing him hard. “Excuse my French,” he growls, “but you’re a fucking idiot.” Tony blinks, too stunned to form a proper response. “Nothing, let me make this perfectly clear once and for all, nothing you’ve done in the past will change my mind, or make me love you any less. Understand?”

“And in the future?” Tony can’t help but ask, Loki’s warning ringing in his ears.

“I can’t say nothing will make me mad at you,” Steve says. “Because that’s unrealistic. We will have fights. And both of us will probably do stupid things. But none of that will change how I feel about you.”

A small, quirk of a smile twitches across Tony’s lips. “I’d say the same about you,” he muses, “except that I’m so out of here the second you stop being gorgeously attractive and start getting wrinkles and white old-man hairs.”

“Tony...”

“Oh, wait, you wanted me to have a sappy reply? Okay. How about I promise I’ll still love you when you’re gross and old and stuff. From a distance. Because you’ll be in a nursing home.”

“And where will you be?” Steve asks wryly.

“Buying my way to immortality, obviously. Don’t worry, I’ll make sure the cure becomes widely available before you bite the dust.”

“You’re so romantic.”

“Thank you.”

As Rhodey predicted, Pepper cries. She starts crying before they even get onto the aisle. “Jesus Christ, woman!” Tony hisses, his arm looped through hers in preparation for her to escort him. “We haven’t even started yet! Also, you have about thirty seconds to stop it and walk me down the aisle before people start thinking I’ve flown the coop.” He gestures towards the open door before them, beyond which confused guests are starting to turn their heads in their direction.

“Sorry, sorry,” Pepper sobs, patting at her eyes with a handkerchief.

“Just get me to the end of the aisle and Rhodey can provide you with as many tissues as you need,”
Tony consoles.

They’d played rock-paper-scissor to decide who had to walk down the aisle last, and Tony had lost. It isn’t until he steps onto the carpet, between the rows and rows of family and friends, and sees Steve waiting for him at the end that he realizes what a fortune that was.

The sight makes his heart stutter in his chest. Even in late November, the lighting is perfect. It hits all the right places in the hall and falls like a spotlight over the temporary alter. And of course, that’s where the real show is. While everyone else has their attention on him (and possibly on Pepper, who’s still sniffing), Tony only has eyes for Steve. They’d seen each other just minutes ago, and yet suddenly, everything is different. It’s like he’s noticing things for the first time, as if every expression and emotion that passes across Steve’s face is entirely new. He watches the flush in Steve’s cheeks spread, subtle in the sunset glow drifting in through the high-set windows, and the way his eyes become dazed when Tony approaches. It’s the smile that gets Tony the most though, the soft curve of it that washes away any lingering doubts that had rooted themselves in the back of Tony’s mind.

“Hey, stud,” he whispers when he moves to stand across from the blond, “mind if join you?”

Steve’s shoulders shake as he holds back a laugh.

There isn’t much to say about everything between the “We are gathered here today” and the vows. Mostly because Tony doesn’t remember any of it. It passes by while he’s busy trying to memorize every detail of Steve. He’s done this before, many times in fact. It’s a process of cataloging everything from the way Steve shifts impatiently from foot to foot while the officiator speaks to the knowing look he gives Tony when he sees he’s not paying attention. He’s sure the wedding photographer is capturing every moment of it, but a photograph could never notice, or remember, all the things that Tony does.

He snaps back to reality when Rhodey waves a folded copy of vows in his face. “Oh!” The exclamation slips out before he can stop it, causing an amused murmur from the guests and wedding party around them. Tony swipes the copy from Rhodey and clears his throat, “Right, laugh away. There aren’t really any jokes in my vows so get your giggles out now.”

As expected, everyone sober up pretty quickly. Even Steve looks surprised by this, and Tony shoots him a grin, “What? Didn’t think I could be serious over something like this? Anywho . . . Vows, yep, reading them right now. Better get your tissues out.” Steve sighs. “Okay, that was the only joke. I lied,” Tony reassures. “Carrying on.”

Though Tony’s not one for stage fright, the silence that settles is just a little bit intimidating. He glances between his vows and Steve in askance before Steve relents, “Fine. One more.”

Tony smiles, and directs his attention to the guests again, “Loosen up a bit, guys. I’m not Shakespeare.” They lets out a collective giggle, and Tony relaxes again. “Now shush, you don’t have to be dead silent but be quiet enough that I can read this without being interrupted.” He shoots a warning glare at Clint, who weirdly enough hasn’t uttered a word since the ceremony began. Clint just gives him a dazed thumbs up.

“I’ve always thought,” Tony begins, “that I didn’t need to be taught anything. I learned how to do things on my own for the most part. How to hotwire a car at age four, how to build a motherboard at six, and how to make a grilled cheese sandwich in college; no one held my hand and walked me through any of that. I was always a step ahead of everyone, and there wasn’t a professor in the world who could show me anything I didn’t already know. And on the odd chance there were things I didn’t know, stupid things like how to do taxes or what my social security number is, I had people for that. People meaning Pepper.”
He smirks when the guests chuckle. “It’s not a joke,” Pepper says to them, and they laugh harder.

“But then I met Steve,” Tony continues, “Which was, as most of my friends know, a bit of a disaster from the get go. And that was the first lesson. I learned that there are some people who are still willing to be my friend even though I’ve been an asshole to them. Also,” he adds when he sees the despairing face Steve makes at his language, “This isn’t a church, so there’s no rule against mild profanity. Anyways . . . For someone who was so insistent that I couldn’t be taught anything, or learn anything of value from other people, I’ve been educated quite a lot in these past few years.”

“I’ve learned that Steve gets really ticked off if I skip out on Christmas, but that he’ll forgive me if I make him a motorcycle and sincerely apologize. I’ve learned that he has two left feet, but they go pretty good with my two right ones, and together we can cha-cha quite smoothly when our meddling friends lock us in a ballroom together. I’ve learned that wedding bouquets are just a little bit prophetic, and that as long as we’re on London time anything can happen. I’ve learned that the future is nothing to be scared of if you’re taking it one step at a time, and doing it with someone you love at your side. I’ve learned that even if you’ve known someone for a long time, there’s always something new to find out about them. And even if those things aren’t always good, I’ve learned that if they really love you, you can always be forgiven. I’ve learned that ‘in sickness and in health’ is very literal, and that Steve makes a mean chicken noodle soup. I’ve learned that living with someone you love doesn’t really change anything, except that now there’s someone around to remind me it’s three in the morning after I’ve spent way too long working. I’ve learned that loving someone also has to mean putting up with their friends, and that, surprisingly, said friends usually don’t have anything but the best intentions. Or that they want to mooch off of you and live in your apartment until they can find a new one.”

This time he expects the laugh, and he takes a moment to wink at an offended looking Bucky over Steve’s shoulder. “I’ve learned that there are approximately thirty jewelry stores in the general vicinity from where we live, and that as soon as you find what you’re looking for, you’ll know. I’ve learned that sometimes things don’t go as planned, and sometimes loving someone means waiting for them, even when there’s nothing you can do to help. I’ve learned that all relationships come with baggage, but that no adventure can get very far without a few carryons. I’ve learned that no matter how bad things can seem, as long as you still love each other they can always be fixed. And finally, I’ve learned that writing vows is really hard.”

He blinks up at Steve with a sheepish smile, and falters when he’s met with nothing but a rather teary-eyed one in return. “And, uh . . . I’ve learned that there’s no one else I’d rather spend the rest of my life with than you,” he finishes in a rush, “Okay, go.”

Steve hastily wipes a hand over his eyes and accepts the folded paper Bucky passes to him. “I guess I should have gone first,” he says lightly. “It’s going to be a little hard to follow that.” Tony just stares, and Steve raises an eyebrow, “What? You’re the only one allowed to make jokes?”

“Nope. Go right ahead.”

Unfolding the papers, Steve begins to read over the murmured mix of mirth and sniffling (the latter mostly from Pepper, and possibly Thor). “A lot of people say that love is about taking chances, or taking risks. And for a long time, I thought they were right. Risks were what determined a lot of things in my life, and not all of them ended well. But I started to realize that anyone who says that hasn’t really been in love. Saying that love is all about taking risks is saying that you don’t trust your partner, that you’re not sure if you can see yourself staying with them forever. If you’re focusing on all the hypothetical risks, you start to miss out on the important things.”

“It’s not a stretch to say that at first, Tony and I thought we were taking a lot of risks. After awhile
though, it became clear that there was nothing really risky about it. Yes, there were a handful of
times when we panicked, or thought we were in over our heads. But we always worked everything
out and unraveled our problems together. And suddenly, it wasn’t about risks. It probably never was.
There’s a difference between being scared of the leap, and leaping with no knowledge of whether or
not you’ll get to the other side. Taking risks and taking chances implies that it’s all been left to fate,
and that what goes wrong is meant to happen. Faith aside, I’m not one for believing our lives are set
in stone. And if they were, taking risks would just be setting yourself up for a letdown. Maybe,
instead of saying love is about taking risks, we should start saying it’s about putting faith in each
other.”

“There’s no such thing as risks, so long as you’re taking them together. I could be cliché, and make
allusions to trains and how it doesn’t matter where we’re going, or perhaps I could say that even if
we trip, hey, sugar, at least we’ll be going down swinging.” Steve cocks a grin at Tony at this,
ignoring Jane’s snort from amidst the wedding party. “So whether we call it chances, or risks, or
spell it out as the truth it is and simply call it love, I’m glad I’m going to be doing all of it with you,
Tony.”

Steve’s barely finished reading, and hasn’t even had a chance to fold his vows again before Tony
grabs him by his tie and kisses him. Someone, who Steve suspects might be Clint, starts a round of
applause going amongst the guests, above which he can barely hear the officiator exclaim something
about how they haven’t exchanged the rings yet. It takes more willpower than he’d like to admit to
gently ease Tony back, and he flashes an apologetic smile at the officiator as soon as he has his lips
to himself again. “Rings?” he prompts breathlessly, and somewhere off to his right Bucky holds out
an open double ring box. Tony snatches one up and slips it onto Steve’s finger within seconds
while Steve is still fumbling to grab the other one from the box’s velvet lining. “Slow down,” he
whispers, “We have the rest of our lives, remember?”

“And I’d like to get on with it as soon as possible,” Tony affirms, holding out his right hand and
waiting. Steve finally gets the ring out of the box and slides it onto Tony’s ring finger. “For better or
for worse, in sickness and in health,” Tony rushes out, “So long as I shall live, blah blah blah, I do.”

He pauses, and Steve takes his cue despite the officiator’s sputters of protest and dismayed
mutterings about tradition and protocol. “I do.”

To many of their guests looking on, it probably seems like one of the least romantic moments in the
history of ever. To Tony and Steve, it’s everything but. As soon as the officiator gives them a
reluctant okay, Tony has flung himself into Steve’s arms again. “Too late to back out now,” Tony
crows, “you’re stuck with me for good!”

“Whatever will I do . . .” Steve says with mock despair.

“Kiss the groom at seal the deal?”

“If I must.”

This time when Pepper pulls out a tissue from the box Rhodey’s offering her, it’s to wad it up and
chuck it at the back of Tony’s head. It ends up hitting Steve’s shoulder as he dips Tony down for a
kiss to the whoops and hollers of Clint, who seems to have regained the use of his vocal chords.
“Can’t you even be serious during your own wedding?!” Pepper shouts at them.

“ Nope!” Tony grins, tilting his head back for only a moment before Steve pulls him in again.

OoOoOoOoOoOoO
“The trick was,” Natasha says smoothly as the first course is passed out at the reception, “to hold him down long enough to get that much peanut butter in his mouth.” She nods towards where Clint is happily chatting away again, still sporting glassy eyes and flushed cheeks. “He’ll quiet down again when the Vicodin wears off in a few hours.”

“Considering that nothing that’s being served tonight has peanuts or peanut butter in it, the real question is where you got it,” Pepper points out. “Don’t tell me Kurt had some?”

“Bruce brought it. Said it was what they used to shush up the dogs at the lab when he worked for my employers. Figured it would work on Clint for the ceremony, and lo and behold.”

Pepper shakes her head, “You think you’d be more concerned that one of yours reverts to the IQ of a canine when sick and high.”

“You’ve never seen him on morphine,” Natasha deadpans.

Six placeholder cards still line the center of the table, facing out towards the chairs to indicate who should occupy which seat. As they chat Natasha begins to knock them off one by one with olives launched from her soup spoon. Not the most practical or deadly of weapons, but it suits its purpose. With only one card left, she takes aim and jerks it up at the last moment as a hand reaches to pluck the card off the tablecloth. “Mind if I hang here for a bit?”

Blinking, Natasha glances up to glare at the speaker who snatched her target. “You’re a bit late, aren’t you, Darcy?”

Darcy smirks, “No. We just hung back during the ceremony. Didn’t want to cause a scene on someone else’s special day and stuff.” She sits, ignoring the startled looks cast her way by all by Natasha. “Loki needs some alone time with his bro, so . . .”

Natasha turns to eye the wide double doors at the entrance to the reception room, catching a fleeting glimpse of Thor and Loki’s backs before they disappear into the hall beyond. “Are you sure that’s a wise idea?”

“As good as any,” Darcy shrugs. “I figured it was better for them to talk as soon as possible rather than drag it all out.” She frowns, and flicks the card she’s still holding in Natasha’s direction. “Or are you referring to me sitting here. Because it was either with you guys or with,” a shudder ripples through her, “Coulson, Fury, and those weirdos.” Gesturing to her left to indicate said weirdos two tables over, she continues, “Because seriously, no one wants to get in the middle of whatever the hell is going on over there.”

Pepper cranes to glimpse the sight for herself. “Oh,” she says, bored once she sees what the topic of discussion is, “That. Yeah, I don’t blame you.”

“Mi priyekhali syoda v magazin, i mi prishli syoda, chtobi flirtovat,” Clint hums in agreement. Natasha whips around and glares at him, though it does little to abate the tune Clint’s begun to mumble under his breath.

Darcy ignores them and directs her attention to Pepper, “I see nothing has changed in that area while I’ve been gone.” She waves a hand towards the distant table again, and Pepper sighs.

“Not so much.” Pepper affirms, “But I guess Bucky and Sharon had a fight, which is why poor Rhodey has been stationed over there as a mediator. Clearly, Coulson and Fury won’t lift a finger if anything gets hostile.”

“And Rhodey will?” Darcy asks, disbelief clear in her tone. “It’s Bucky, no one wants to get into
that mess.”

Pepper laughs, “Rhodey can handle it. His tactics will just be a little more . . . Covert, if you will.”

Darcy raises an intrigued eyebrow, “Oh? Then maybe I should have sat there. It sounds interesting.”

“No, you made a wise decision,” Pepper assures with a pat to Darcy’s hand. “I can see Rhodey slipping Bucky extra drinks from here. It’s not going to be pretty.”

Indeed, Rhodey has been refilling Bucky’s glass on a regular basis. He’s currently finishing off tipping the last of a third bottle into Bucky’s half-full tumbler. Besides that, however, the majority of his attention is on Sharon. And unbeknownst to all but himself, Sharon’s glass has been mysteriously replenishing its contents as well. Tony’s odd suggestions of solutions aside, Rhodey is prepared to take his assignment as stupid-couple councilor very seriously.

From his experience, most of which consists of incidents in dealing with a very drunk, post-breakup Tony, alcohol is the best solution for getting stubborn people to talk. Especially stubborn idiots. And currently he’s fairly certain these two fall under that category. At least from what he can discern from the mutters.

“This sucks,” Bucky mumbles over the rim of his glass. “I asked for a different seat, you know.”

“Yes, I know,” Rhodey says with no motive other than to keep Bucky talking. “Tony told me.”

“Tony’s a dick. No, scratch that,” Bucky sighs, “Natasha’s a dick. I just wanted to sit somewhere without . . . Somewhere less awkward.” He takes another long sip of his drink, nose wrinkling when the ice at the bottom clinks against it.

Rhodey obligingly tops it off for him, “Oh, do tell,” he prompts.

“I’ll tell,” Sharon offers with a hiccup. Rhodey shifts gears and turns to tip the bottle into her drink as well. “Bucky’s a coward.”

“Bah,” Bucky spits, tongue poking out of his mouth in defiance, “You’re so full of shit. Chicken shit, to be exact.”

Sharon raises her glass towards him as if she intends to make a toast, “I’m not the one who refused to take a few risks.”

Bucky snorts, “Didn’t you pay attention during the ceremony? Steve made a whole hooplah about how love wasn’t about taking risks. Which is exactly why I backed out. You weren’t trusting enough.”

“You wouldn’t let me try to be!”

Rhodey tisks in false sympathy for the both of them, “What a shame. You’re absolutely right of course.”

“Duh,” Bucky and Sharon snap in unison, “I’m always right!” They glare at each other, oblivious to Rhodey’s small, satisfied smirk. “He was talking to me!”

“That I was,” Rhodey says.

“See?!” Sharon an Bucky are practically nose to nose now, and Rhodey leans back in his chair between them to observe the products of his effort from a distance. Really now, this is far too easy.
Tony had made this sound so difficult. Probably due to an underestimation of Rhodey’s knack for strategy, but still. Although he will admit that it took a few more drinks than he’d anticipated to loosen Bucky up. The guy has clearly developed a tolerance, most likely courtesy of Natasha. He raises an eyebrow as Sharon leans across the table and grabs Bucky by the collar of his suit coat. Well now, things were about to get interesting.

“All done up and no place to go,” Sharon smirks, the effect somewhat lessoned by the beginnings of a slur. “What a shame.”

“Scuse you,” Bucky says between gritted teeth, “But there are plenty of fine women here that I could take home tonight.”

Sharon laughs, head tipping back in drunken mirth, “Ugh! Will you stop with the badass act already? Pretending to be the sexy ladies’ man about town, it’s embarrassing!”

There’s a slight pause before Bucky stutters out, “You . . . You think I’m sexy?”

“Here we go,” Rhodey says dryly. “Stage one: drunken anger. Stage two: drunken awkward.”

Red faced, Sharon tries to remedy the situation. “No! I think you think you’re sexy!”

“I have so much second-hand embarrassment right now,” Rhodey says, entirely to himself as neither of the idiots he’s playing babysitter to are listening to him anymore.

From across the table comes an agreeing sigh, reminding Rhodey of the two other unfortunate witnesses to this. “Which is why we’re going to find new seats,” Coulson says, casting a rather despairing look at the rest of them. “And the director wanted to give his well wishes to the newlyweds as well,” He nods to Fury, who’s busy petting his cat in what Rhodey is sure is an imitation of every cliché evil villain ever.

“Tony will love that,” Rhodey says, encouraging even through the sarcasm. Tony will shit bricks, and then complain about the encounter and unexpected congratulations for the next decade while citing various reasons to suspect Fury was trying to assassinate him.

In the meantime, Rhodey shifts his attention back to the scene unfolding in the present, which is accompanied by what can only be Tony’s choice in reception-appropriate music. “Bennie and the Jets?” Really Tony? He takes a quick glance at the head table to see Steve rolling his eyes accordingly while Tony grins. “Jesus Christ,” Rhodey mutters.

“Wait,” Bucky says, Sharon’s twist of wording confusing his alcohol-impaired mind. “You think I think I’m sexy? That doesn’t even make sense!”

“Yes it does,” Sharon argues, “Because only self absorbed idiots would think this song goes like, ‘Hey, kids shake it loose a lemon!’” She sings the hashed lyrics right on time, and Bucky’s eyes narrow in annoyance. “‘Gotta make a feather!’” She continues, pleased with his reaction.

“I know those aren’t the lyrics!” Bucky growls, “I was just being sarcastic when I told you that!”

“Then sing the real lyrics,” Sharon prompts.

“You sing the real lyrics!” Bucky counters.

Rhodey rests his head in his hands, “Lord, I’ve ended up in charge of a pair of kindergarteners.

“You’re gonna hear a handsome music,” Sharon complies, the sound of her sincerely singing along
surprising Bucky back into silence for a heartbeat. “So the walrus sounds.”

That riles him up again, and he chokes out, “Walrus sounds? Are you kidding me? Even my rendition was closer than that!”

Backing his chair up, Rhodey leans over towards the nearest table to whisper, “None of this was my doing, by the way. Idiots: The Musical was no creation of mine.”

“Say, Penny’s no longer in a cement jet,” Sharon continues in the face of Bucky’s protests. “Ooh, but you’re so laced down. Buh-buh-buh-buh-Bennie and the Jets!”

“This is stupid and proves nothing,” Bucky hisses.

Sharon laughs, “It proves you don’t know a classic song.”

At the head table, Tony says, “I suspect our reception is about to descend into madness.”

“And not by Loki’s doing,” Steve says smugly. He extends an open hand, “Pay up.”

Tony scowls, “We’re married now, our finances are shared.”

“Not until the paperwork goes through at the end of the month,” Steve reminds.

Further debate over money wagered in bets that may or may not have been made ceases when Bucky leaps up onto his chair. “Ooh, the wind and the waterfall. Oh, baby, she’s a revocaine!” He belts out.

“That isn’t even a word!” Sharon shouts over him.

Tony hands Steve the money. “They’re gonna break the table,” he warns. “So be prepared to forward that to the museum staff when they try to kick us out in the next few minutes.”

Bucky moves from chair to table, as Tony had expected. “She’s got electric boobs!”

“Boobs!?” Sharon yells. “It’s not boobs!”

“And mohair shoes!”

“That’s a fashion statement no one should ever make!”

“You know I read it in a magaziiiiiine! Oh-oh!” Bucky crouches down on the table-top, and practically screams the lyrics in Sharon’s face, “Buh-buh-buh-buh-Bennie and the Jets!”

And then the table tips over, sending Bucky crashing into Sharon and food flying everywhere. Steve sighs and relinquishes his newly-won cash to the nearest staff member while Tony howls with laughter.

OoOoOoOoOoO

“Seems like quite the ruckus is going on in there,” Thor tries, lifting his chin in the direction of the reception hall doors.

They’ve been out here for nearly twenty minutes now and Loki has yet to say anything, let alone explain why he dragged Thor away from the party in the first place. And there’s only so much patience Thor can have before his nerves begin to wear thin. Loki is his brother, his brother who’s been away for over a year, and yet things have never felt more strained. He thought the time away
was supposed to help mend their fragile bonds, not do away with them altogether. “Loki,” he presses when Loki still fails to utter a word. “Whatever needs to be said, please-”

Loki thrusts a hand in front of Thor’s face, and Thor jerks back. “Do you see it?” Loki asks.

Thor blinks, and after a moment takes Loki’s hand between his to study the open palm that’s been presented to him. When he was small he’d nearly memorized the lines in it, mapped them out in an effort to forge some connection with the boy he’d led to believe was his sibling by blood. He’d once thought that perhaps if he could find some similarities between the lifelines of Loki’s hand and those on his own, then his crimes in leading a child astray might be forgiven. Looking at them now, he sees no difference than what he remembers, and he turns a puzzled frown towards his brother.

The stall before Loki speaks sets him on edge. “The blood,” Loki finally says. “If I can still feel it, surely others can see it as well.”

Thor stares at him, the hairs on the back of his neck rising and his breath catching as he whispers, “What?”

Loki regards him as if from a distance, fingers clenching in Thor’s grip. “I have returned to you a changed creature, Thor. One who has shed others’ blood and taken things for personal gain. Can you see a dead man’s life stained on my fingers? Because sometimes I swear my skin still feels sticky with it.”

Something in the back of Thor’s mind itches in warning, urging him to drop the hand in his grasp and take a step back. He ignores it, instead clenching his fingers tighter against Loki’s. “I see nothing that can not be washed away,” he murmurs.

The expression in Loki’s eyes shifts to disbelief, “You are a fool.”

“And you are my brother,” Thor counters. “There is little you could do to make me abandon you.”

That, it seems, is the blade to snap the last of Loki’s self control. He snaps forward like a whip, fingers snagging into the shoulders of Thor’s suit coat as he slams him into the wall. “Didn’t you hear me? I’ve killed people! I stole! I robbed a bank, Thor! I cut a man’s throat and watched his blood mix with alleyway grime, and I didn’t feel a shred of remorse!” Thor doesn’t reply. Frustrated, Loki pulls back just enough to slam him against the wall again. “Say something! Turn me in for my crimes! Tell me I am broken beyond repair! Call me for what I am, Thor! Roll the word ‘monster’ across your tongue until it tastes enough of truth for you to utter it! Tell me!”

“I will not.”

Loki stares at him, his whole frame shaking, “I did not take you for the fool you oft pretend to be.”

Thor raises his hands from his sides and carefully begins to pry Loki’s fingers from his suit. “I could say the same of you. Your disregard of my love for you as a brother is quite imprudent.” A shudder ripples through Loki when Thor finishes loosening his grip and lets his brother’s hands fall to fists against his chest. “You’re seeking a retribution I can not provide,” Thor says.

“If you knew-” Loki starts.

“Tales of your escapades would do little to change my already made up mind,” Thor says. “But if you are willing to share them, I will listen all the same.”
The end scene is a lead in to the side fic Stuck In Second Gear which chronicles Loki and Darcy's adventures while they were away and will be posted before Arc 3 begins (as this chapter wraps up Arc 2). It will be posted separately from this main body of the Friends!AU, as it's probably gonna be 30K+ by the time I finish and can, if you really don't want to read it, be skipped.

Anywho, that concludes Arc 2! Thank you guys for sticking around for the longest arc of the fic and I hope you'll join me for Arc 3, which will begin as soon as I finish and post Stuck In Second Gear.

Also, yes, the Bennie and the Jets scene was taken mostly from the film 27 Dresses.
The One After I Do

Chapter Summary

This is not how Tony's wedding night was supposed to go.

Chapter Notes

Apologies and suchish for the unexpected and extremely long hiatus. I'm an asshole.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Whoever left Rhodey in charge of Sharon and Bucky is an idiot. Not to mention that he was not just dealing with Sharon and Bucky, who are already a handful, but a very very drunk Sharon and Bucky, which is just a long list of disasters waiting to happen. And who was it that left him to babysit two liquored up moronic adults at a wedding reception? Oh, right, it was Tony.

That’s what it always boils down to, isn’t it. That Tony is an idiot.

Rhodey wants that printed on his grave, because god knows that Tony will eventually be the cause of his untimely death. “Here lies Rhodey, Tony is an idiot.” He likes the sound of that. It has a nice, crisp, “this is all your fault you stupid bastard” sort of ring to it.

However, despite all the sheer idiocy that ultimately lead Rhodey to this point, most of it courtesy of one Tony Stark, he has to admit that the latest development in the situation is his own fault.

Somehow, somewhere between waving Tony and Steve off in the limo and going back into the reception hall, he managed to lose track of both Bucky and Sharon. Simultaneously. One minute he’s watching the limo pull away and they’re standing right beside him, utterly engaged in their drunken “I can wave like a princess better than you can” contest, and the next he’s turned around and they’re gone. He looks away for two freaking seconds and they’ve vanished.

Tony’s going to kill him. Although Bucky and Sharon are primarily Steve’s friends, if anything happens to them it will be Tony that buries Rhodey six feet under. Because Steve would be upset and an upset Steve is guaranteed to set Tony into murder-mode.

So scratch that headstone inscription, because at this rate Rhodey’s is going to read “Here lies Rhodey, brutally maimed and mangled by his best friend Tony, who is an idiot.” It’s a bit long, but he’ll make it fit. Or, uh, whoever’s job it is to carve shit on graves will make it fit.

It takes him all of thirty seconds after realizing they’re gone to find Natasha. She’s still in her seat in the reception hall, facing the door with a glass of wine balanced in her hand and a look on her face as if she was waiting for him (or some other disaster in the making), and Rhodey swears she smirks a little when he skids to a halt in front of her.

“Bucky. Sharon. Gone.” He pants, because soldier or not he just ran across half a museum in under a minute.
“Drunk and lost as fuck in the middle of New York City. What a shame,” Natasha muses, and Rhodey swears to god she swirls the wine around in her glass like a freakin’ movie villain. In all seriousness, he’s starting to wonder why Tony’s friends with her, because this is a whole new level of ridiculous Rhodey does not have the time to deal with right now.

“This isn’t funny,” Rhodey says, narrowing his eyes. She continues to swirl her wine with a twist of her wrist without a pause. “They could get hurt or -”

“Bucky’s in my line of work. He’s fine.”

“And Sharon?”

“With Bucky I’m sure, so also fine.” Natasha takes a sip from her glass and pauses in what can only be described as a dramatic fashion, much to Rhodey’s growing annoyance. “Unless . . .”

Rhodey grips the edge of the table, patience officially at its limit. “Unless what?!?”

“Well,” Natasha says slowly, devilishly, and god this entire moment will haunt Rhodey’s nightmares for eternity. Where does Tony find these kooks? “Bucky has always wanted a tattoo.”

“Shit.”

The fact that Tony clearly forgot they had to make a pit stop at the hospital before catching their flight becomes painfully clear to Steve when they pass the turn to the airport and Tony lets out an over-the-top pitiful whine when he realizes where they’re headed. “Steve,” he carries on when Steve ignores the protesting sound. “Steve, really, it’s not that bad. I don’t need a doctor, I’m fine. Doctors suck and I don’t want to deal with things that suck on our wedding night . . . Unless that thing is you. Sucking my-”

“If you finish that sentence our honeymoon will be as uneventful as a Twilight movie,” Steve deadpans.

Tony raises an eyebrow, “The fact that you can successfully pull off that joke and yet didn’t know what fondue was until last year will never cease to astound me.”

Steve meets the motion with an arched eyebrow of his own. “That’s what happens when Bucky has a penchant for horrible cinema and I’m not willing to spend fifty bucks on food.”

Again, Tony lets loose a pathetic whine. “You’re a party pooper, Steve. The biggest party pooper. You are the master pooper of parties.”

A short, clipped laugh escapes Steve at this, “Can I get that printed on an official plaque?”

“One we can hang in the living room,” Tony decides after a moment. “And then we can show it to all of our friends and relations when they visit. ‘Oh yes, and here is our lovely little reminder that Steve took me to the fucking ER on the night of our wedding when I could have been inducting him into the Mile High Club but noooooo.’” He props his chin on his hands and pointedly looks out the tinted window, gaze stony as Steve chokes a bit.

“Tony!” Steve gasps once he regains the use of his lungs.

Tony grins into his palm before turning to Steve with a shit-eating expression. “Yes, dear?”
Whatever reply Steve was attempting to fumble for gets cut off before the first syllable even escapes his lips as the limo suddenly screeches to a halt, tires squealing. Steve jolts as it skids to a halt and places one hand against the window to his right as the other instinctively curls over Tony’s shoulders. Once they’ve hit a full stop, the driver rolls the partition down a crack. “Sorry sorry! There’s some sort of pileup ahead, I didn’t see it until I came around the corner. We’ll be continuing on our way shortly. Everyone alright?”

Steve swallows and nods, his fingers curling into the back of Tony’s as Tony mumbles a swift, “Yeah.”

The partition rolls up again and Steve slowly unclenches his fingers from Tony’s scalp. “God, that scared me,” he whispers while Tony attempts to fix his now mussed-up hair.

Tony makes an agreeing noise and gestures to the closest window, where beyond Steve can just catch a glimpse of what looks to be a crash involving half a dozen or so vehicles, most of which are taxis. “It’s New York, shit happens, I don’t know why us natives pretend to be surprised anymore.”

Steve turns his head to eye Tony, “You’re from California.”

“Shh, that’s a secret.”

“That everyone knows.”

“Those are the best kinds of secrets.” Tony leans over to get a good look out Steve’s window at the mess just outside it. “Christ, look at that shit. What did they all try and blaze through the four way at the same time? Idiots.”

“Says the man who has crashed a grand total of seven sports cars in his lifetime.”

Tony scowls, “To be fair, five of those were in my liquored-up, Cheeto-dusted youth.”

“You literally just described how you spent last Sunday on our sofa,” Steve says with a small smile. Tony rolls his eyes.

“But see, I wasn’t a youth last Sunday. Big difference.” He turns his attention back to the chaos outside, momentarily distracted from the conversation as he notices that one of the taxis has a blown-out tire, which is probably the source of the pile up. The majority of those involved in the accident are gathered beside it, and one man in the middle of the crowd has his hands thrown over his head, mouth open in mid-yell as Tony’s gaze passes over him. He pauses, stalls, and does a double take as a wave of deja-vu washes over him. “Holy shit! I know that guy!” Tony grabs Steve’s arm and points, already moving to unbuckle his seatbelt.

Steve glances to where Tony is gesturing, squinting at the crowd. “Which one? And how?”

Tony purses his lips, debating whether or not it’s necessary to explain the long and rather complicated tale to him. “Er . . . Later. Tell ya later.” He opens the door and waves at the man outside, who appears to be midway through attempting to pull out his own hair in the face of all the angry crash victims surrounding him. “Hey! Uh . . .” Tony stalls as his mind blanks out on the man’s name. “Pa . . . Something . . . Parker? Parker!” The man looks up and Tony grins, relieved he’d remembered (although he can’t recall the poor dude’s first name for the life of him, but that’s not important right now). “You seem to have quite a bit of crap going on here. Need a hand?”

The look of utter confusion on the man’s face, most likely due to not immediately recalling who Tony is, is instantly replaced by relief when Tony approaches him, pushing his way through the crowd with that offer on his lips. “Christ, yes,” Richard Parker breathes. “It’s Tony, right? Tony
Stark?” Tony nods and Richard shoots a glance over his shoulder, eyes widening as he spots Tony’s limo. “That yours?”

“Rental, but yeah, kinda,” Tony says.

Richard’s eyes widen slightly, “Look, I know it’s a lot to ask, but can I borrow it?”

Tony blinks, “Wha-”

“The limo. I need it. These assholes,” he gestures around at the gathered people, indifferent to their glares and muttered replies to his curse, “Are in the way and I really need to get out of here ASAP.”

“Got a date?”

“Got a wife in labor,” Richard corrects, and Tony’s breath hitches slightly in alarm. “She’s fine right now, not a scratch on her from the crash. She’s tough as nails. But between standing around here and waiting for the authorities and this mob of dickwads, I can’t leave.”

Tony bites his lip, “I don’t . . . I’m not good with . . .”

“I’m not asking you to deliver the kid,” Richard says with a roll of his eyes, “I’m asking you to drive her to the nearest emergency room.”

Every cell in Tony’s body screams in protest at the request, and in his mind the math is all adding up to a situation he really doesn’t want to be stuck in. Women in pain = no. Babies = no. Women in pain + babies = super mega no. However, any further internal panic is stalled by a hand on his shoulder and Steve’s voice near his ear.

“Which cab is she in? I’ll fetch her,” the words are directed at Richard, despite being spoken so close to Tony that he can feel the breath of them on his cheek. “Tony,” Steve continues once Tony has blinked himself back to the increasingly alarming present. “Give Mr. Parker your cell number and the hospital address, we’ll just take her to the same one we were already headed to.” And then he’s gone, shoving through the crowd towards the taxi with the blown-out tire Richard directed him to.

Obediently, Tony hands over the contact information, silent until he notices Richard is giving him an odd look. “I didn’t know the ring was for Steve Rogers, of all people.”

Tony frowns, “You know Steve?”

Rolling his shoulders, Richard looks away, “Ah, sort of. We once worked for the same guy.” He forces a smile when Tony narrows his eyes. “I’m also friends with Logan? So I’ve met him a few times through the Volunteers and stuff.”

The uncertain way he shifts directions, too quick to name another shared contact, leaves Tony with an uneasy feeling in his gut. “Right,” he deadpans. Richard raises an eyebrow, opening his mouth as if to retort or spout some other half-assed cover to distract Tony, only to be interrupted by Steve returning with a woman in his arms.

“Got her, let’s go.”

Richard laughs, a tight, strained noise at the sight of Steve carrying his entirely too calm, massively pregnant wife bridal style. “Mary,” he scolds, “You really couldn’t walk the fifteen feet to the limo?”

Mary Parker smirks and puts a hand to her forehead in a mock swoon, “No. Not when there was an opportunity to be carried by this fine piece of man.” Richard purses his lips and she waves at him
over a blushing Steve’s shoulder.

“Quite the catch there,” Tony muses as Steve helps her get in to the limo.

“Yeah,” Richard agrees. “She’s going to be the death of me.”

“Or me,” Tony says darkly. “I swear to god, Parker, you better fucking get to the hospital as soon as you can because I am not spending the rest of my wedding night having my hand crushed.”

Richard pats him consolingly on the arm, “Thank you for volunteering.”

“I wasn’t—”

“Good luck.”

“Hey! I—”

And then Richard’s ducking back into the crowd, pulling out business cards to jot down his information on while Tony gets dragged back towards the limo with Steve’s hand on his arm.

“You better be there before the stupid kid comes! You hear me?!” Tony screams after of him.

OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO

There are approximately seventeen tattoo parlors in a one mile radius of the museum, and Bucky and Sharon aren’t in any of them. Or are they on any of the sidewalks or streets Rhodey spends his time running around in between frantically busting into aforementioned tattoo parlors. This combined with the fact that they aren’t answering their cell phones is quickly sending him towards a full blown, losing-his-god-damn-mind breakdown.

Natasha, however, answers her cell on the first ring. “Try really cheesy touristy places,” she suggests around a yawn.

Rhodey tries to hold in a frustrated scream as he grits out, “Why the hell would they be at those sorts of places? They’re both New York natives!”

“Bucky’s a goob,” Natasha hums, and that’s when Rhodey knows she’s at least slightly drunk, because a sober Natasha Romanov would find something much more creative and patronizing to call Bucky than a ‘goob.’ And if Natasha is gone, or at least heading towards it, then she’s about as helpful as the stop sign Rhodey’s currently leaning against.

“Great,” he sighs. “Just great.”

There’s a stark difference between navigating a battlefield and navigating an overcrowded city, and Rhodey still can’t decide which is worse. At this moment in time though, with the thought of all the fuckery Bucky and Sharon are no doubt getting up to hanging over his head, Rhodey’s going to pick the city. Because at least in the battlefield he can strategize. In the here and now, desperately scanning the passerby for the missing pair of idiots, he doesn’t have anything even close to resembling a plan in his mind.

“This is ridiculous,” he hisses between his teeth as he takes the stairs down to the nearest subway station two at a time. “They’re grown adults, they don’t need a babysitter. They can get tattoos and buy meth and get beaten up by thugs for all I care, it’s not my problem.” He halts at the bottom of the staircase, “Except for the part where Steve will be upset. Which means Tony will be upset. Which leads to a long chain of upset that will somehow circle around to me and . . . Argh. Fine.” The pace
at which he makes his way back up the stairs is begrudging and slow, but he does it all the same, grumbling the entire way until he’s standing in the chilled November air once again. “When I find them, I’m going to kill them,” he promises himself with a brisk rub of his palms together. “I don’t care what Fury thinks of that, they’re toast.”

Killing aside, finding them is obviously easier said than done. It isn’t until Rhodey’s gone up and down another six blocks that he thinks to call Natasha again.

“GPS passwords, go,” he commands.

Rhodey swears he can hear her smirking on the other end of the line. “Finally thought of that, did you?”

“Natasha,” he says warningly.

“Buckyisbest1234 and Dooweedoo.”

“Dooweedoo?” Rhodey repeats.

“Don’t ask her to explain it, bad things will happen,” Natasha says, and hangs up.

Tony did not sign up for this shit. He married a dude for fuck’s sake, that should have automatically opted him out of any situation wherein his hand gets smashed by a woman in labor. It really should have.

Alas, the universe is clearly out to get him, which was why he was sitting in the back of his own limo wincing while the bones in his hand slowly get ground into dust. And because of an odd stroke of better judgment, he chooses not to complain about his discomfort aloud, a decision that probably saves his life because Mary Parker isn’t someone he thinks he wants to contend with in any manner. Especially considering how she breathes through the contractions without any vocalized pain, though if the strength of her grip is anything to go by that’s a hell of a lot of pain to keep quiet through.

“Not how you pictured your wedding night going, huh?” Mary gasps out after a few minutes.

“No, this is all going exactly to plan,” Tony reassures, giving her hand a squeeze in return. He meets Steve’s eyes over the top of her head where Steve’s pressing a damp cloth to her brow, and quirks a rather forced smile. “All wedding nights should conclude with baby deliveries.”

Mary laughs, the sound short and strained. “Ha. Well you’re doing me a service, Stark, standing in for Richard.” She raises the hand she has clasped white-knuckle tight around his. “Try not to act like it hurts too much, tough stuff.”

Tony grimaces, biting back the retort that it does hurt quite a bit, excuse you, but stops short when another contraction ripples through Mary. “Don’t worry, we’re almost there,” he says instead, desperate to get to the safe haven of the hospital where he won’t be responsible for what happens to Mary and her baby. “Right, Steve?”

“Two blocks,” Steve nods. “You’re doing great, Mary.”

“Hell yeah I am.”

Two blocks is apparently more than enough time for Tony to lose all feeling in his hand, and by the time they’re exiting the limo and getting Mary into a wheelchair he can’t tell if he just stopped feeling
the pain or if his nerves were just that damaged. Damn, that woman had a grip. He shakes his hand in the air as he follows them through the front doors in a vague attempt to restore feeling to it. “Just another thing to get checked out by the doctor,” Steve says, and Tony grimaces as he remembers why they were headed to the hospital in the first place, wishing Steve would stay focused on Mary and the baby and forget about Tony’s annoying rib problem entirely. But before he can attempt to distract Steve with the clearly more crucial situation at hand, Steve’s leaning over the side of Mary’s wheelchair and holding out a hand.

“Can I borrow your phone? I should call your husband and tell him we’ve arrived safely.” Mary hands it over without hesitation, and the nurse pushing her rattles off a room number before she wheels Mary down the hall and away from them, Steve waving them off as he flips through the contacts on it.

“You’re scarily calm,” Tony remarks while Steve locates Richard’s number and dials. “This have anything to do with the fact that you and the Parkers are apparently previously acquainted?”

Steve arches an eyebrow and he lifts the phone to his ear, but doesn’t take the bait. Whatever retort Tony has for that has to wait until he’s done.

When Richard answers the phone, Steve’s not entirely surprised that he sounds tired and out of breath. “Mary?” he says hastily, “I won’t be there for awhile, they wanted to take everyone down to the station to get official witness reports.”

“This is Steve,” Steve says before Richard can elaborate on just how complicated this whole mess is becoming any further. “We just got Mary situated in a room. She’s fine.”

The sigh of relief on the other side of the line echoes in Steve’s ear. “Can I ask you a favor, Rogers?”

“Of course.”

“Stay with her until I get there? I know you and Stark both have things to attend to, and I’m intruding on your wedding night plans with this request, but right now my hands are tied and I don’t want her to be alone.”

Steve casts a glance in Tony’s direction, unsurprised to find that the other man is still staring at him as if he expects his earlier question to be answered. “Tony will want an explanation,” he says, more of a warning than an askance for permission. If the information had been at all important before now, he would have readily given it ages ago. It’s not like his connections with Richard Parker are a secret, but he’s well aware that Parker’s line of work tends to stray into some dangerous areas.

“That’s fine, that’s fine,” Richard reassures. “And in return you can weasel the story of how he got your ring out of him.”

“Will do,” Steve smiles. “We’ll stay until you get here.”

When he hangs up Tony is practically fronting on him, too far into Steve’s space for such a public area. “That guy is suspicious as hell, you know,” he says lowly. “How do you know him anyways?”

Steve rolls his shoulders and hooks an arm in Tony’s to lead him towards the direction Mary was taken. “Ah, you know, military stuff. Parker was a scientist I met a few times. He worked more in Bucky’s division than mine. I actually heard he and Bruce were colleagues for a time.”

“So he’s another one of Natasha’s secret spy people.” Tony frowns when Steve nearly trips over himself at this remark. “What, you don’t know?”
“No, I, uh, I’m vaguely aware of some things, I just wasn’t aware you were.”

“I’m not a god damn idiot.”

“I know.”

“And the longer we know Natasha, the less she keeps her mouth shut,” Tony says. “And Bucky is like an open book. They were fake married for god’s sake, what else would that be for besides spy shit? You and I are living right on the outside of some kind of creepy secret government operation baloney and I spend quite a bit of time waiting for it all to blow up in our faces.”

Steve shakes his head, “Whatever it is, they’ve got it under control. I don’t think we have to worry.”

Tony sighs, “Well you might not, but I do. What kind of science did Parker work on, anyways? Anything cool? Nuclear fission? Super soldier experimentation? DNA splicing?”

“Something to do with spider venom,” Steve says, “Wasn’t really my area.”

“Spiders aren’t really anyone’s area,” Tony agrees. “At least not anyone sane.”

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

Richard gets desperate as the minutes past midnight begin to tick away into hours and he’s still being held at the police station. He’s explained the situation to them a thousand times over, and each time has only received a completely unsympathetic nod and a clipped, “You’ll be out of here soon enough” that clearly isn’t true. Since the first phone call he’s talked to Steve twice, each conversation shorter than the last. Mary’s fine. The baby’s coming. Please hurry.

It’s all things he already knows, and all things that make him desperate for an out the police just aren’t willing to grant him. And, well, they say desperate times call for desperate measures.

However, he’s not quite desperate enough to go straight to the top of the ladder yet, so his next best option is the next run down.

He calls Coulson.

The day Richard Parker had learned that his boss’s number one lackey ran a coffee shop in his free time (he’s sure it’s a cover of some sort, but he’d rather not look too deeply into it), had been the day he’d almost stopped breathing due to laughter. Coulson. Making coffee. For people. It’s just too funny. Besides that, he has both Clint and Steve working under him? Hilarious. There’s a reason Richard never hangs out anywhere near S.H.I.E.L.D Coffee, and it’s because Coulson banned him from doing so due to his “chortling disturbing the customers.”

It’s better that way, really, because while Richard may be able to keep a straight-laced cover around the rest of the world, being in the vicinity of the stupid pink aprons Coulson has cursed his employees to wear is just a bit too much for him. Because of this however, he hasn’t really seen Coulson since they last officially worked together. And for their first reencounter to be in the police station with Coulson being five parts ticked off and one part suspiciously tipsy isn’t the best sort of situation.

“You came to pick me up drunk,” Richard deadpans once Coulson has successfully convinced the cops that Richard has urgent government business to attend to. “I didn’t even know you could get drunk.”

“I’m not Thor,” Coulson says, and Richard doesn’t even want to know what the hell that means.
“And besides, I’m not drunk. If I was drunk I wouldn’t have been able to rescue you.”

“Then you’re about a sip away from drunk,” Richard amends. And then, against his better judgment, he asks, “Who’s Thor?”

Coulson makes a dismissive, annoyed sound as he pushes Richard into the back of his red convertible. “You don’t want to know. Be thankful your current mission is to be domestic, Parker.” And then, much to Richard’s complete and utter confusion, he slides into the seat beside him.

“Wha-”

“Can’t drive. Too drunk.”

Richard throws his hands in the air, “Two seconds ago you said you weren’t drunk!”

“I lied. First lesson of S.H.I.E.L.D. training, Parker. How to lie successfully.” Coulson pulls a pair of sunglasses out of nowhere and positions them on the bridge of his nose before adding, “Don’t worry, someone will chauffer us.”

“This is turning out to be a lot like Budapest,” Richard sighs, pressing his palms to his eyes as he resists the urge to scream.

“No, Budapest had Clint in the back seat,” a silky voice says near his ear, and Richard just about jumps out of his skin. Natasha Romanov is leaning over the side of the car, a pair of sunglasses identical to Coulson’s on her face. Richard briefly wonders if either of them know that it’s two in the freaking morning.

“Don’t remind me,” Coulson says, “There’s still blood on the upholstery.”

Natasha tisks in his direction, “Aw, poor baby has a little blood in his car. Join the club.” She hops over the door and into the driver’s seat without further ado, one hand extended behind her for the keys that Coulson deposits into her hand without hesitation. “Where are we going again?” she asks once she’s started the car. “Hospital or something? I wasn’t listening when you called.

Richard sucks in a breath, “Are you drunk too?”

“I’m Russian,” Natasha says smoothly just before she floors it.

The drive to the hospital is a thousand times worse than any roller coaster in the world, and the fact that Natasha spends the majority of it cackling like a maniac doesn’t help matters.

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

To the surprise of no one, Rhodey finds Bucky and Sharon at Bucky’s apartment, passed out on the floor and covered from head to toe in “I <3 New York” gear. He really hates it when Natasha is right. A quick inspection of their arms, legs, and faces reveals no visible tattoos however, so he’s thankful for that. “You two are more trouble than you’re worth, you know that?” he tells them.

“Prepare for trouble,” Bucky mumbles blearily into the carpet. “Make it double.”

Rhodey thinks that’s more than enough motivation to leave Bucky right where he is, but he’s at least enough of a gentleman to move Sharon to the couch. He takes the little glitter encrusted American flags out of both their hands and places them in an empty flower vase on the table. “Classy,” he tells Bucky’s unconscious form, pleased to be met with nothing but a snore in return.
He calls Natasha while inspecting a suspicious scratch on the hardwood floor in the kitchen. “Targets recovered,” he tells her.

“Don’t sound so serious about it,” Natasha yawns. “Like that pair of idiots would actually get up to anything bad.”

“Bucky quoted Pokemon to me in his sleep,” Rhodey informs her. “That’s pretty bad.”

“The fact that you recognized it as Pokemon is twice as bad,” Natasha drawls. “Are they tattoo free?”

“As far as I can tell. I’m not checking anything under the tacky tourist shirts though,” Rhodey snorts.

“I don’t blame you. Feel free to leave them be then, you don’t want to stick around for the chaos that is freshly woken hung-over Bucky.

“Probably not.”

OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOo

Once Richard gets there, Steve ushers Tony off to the nearest x-ray machine without further ado. It’s both anticlimactic and irritating, in Tony’s opinion. On one hand, he didn’t actually want to be anywhere near the actual birth, let alone the child that would come from it. On the other, he also doesn’t want to be laying on a cold metal table while his insides get zapped with radiation.

“It’ll be fine,” Steve tells him, giving him a quick kiss on the forehead before stepping back behind the safety curtain. And really, Tony’s base instincts scream at him to tell him off, to remind him that he’s a grown-ass man who doesn’t need to be babied. Except that he has to admit it calms his heart rate, just a little, to know Steve is only a few feet away, ready to be right at his side again as soon as he can.

Tony’s been in this situation tons of times, definitely more than the general public, but that never makes it any easier. Doctors and their machines still freak him the fuck out. Being used to something doesn’t make it any less terrifying. If you lock someone with claustrophobia in a closet, they won’t be magically cured. So even though Tony is no longer one to publicly wig out in the doctor’s office, it’s still comforting to have Steve fussing over him, reassuring him that there’s nothing wrong with a little fear.

“It’s just a small fracture,” the doctor says, directing this information at Steve since Tony is currently flipping through one of the little info pamphlets on some disease or another he found in the hall with a bit more concentration than necessary. “A few prescribed pain killers and he should be right as reign in a couple of weeks.” Tony snorts at the phrase, mumbling something like, “who even says that anymore where are you from,” under his breath before Steve squeezes his knee in warning and effectively shuts him up again. Appearing not to have heard the snide comment, the doctor scribbles down something on his notepad and rips off the top sheet to hand to Steve. “Take this to the front desk and they’ll direct you to our convenient on site pharmacy.”

To say that Tony’s heart is still hammering in his chest after they leave the room is the understatement of the year. It’s like the little drummer boy that usually taps out the time in his chest had decided to start an entire band in there and then dropped the bass. He can feel every beat in the tips of his fingers, which is never a good sign for his nerves, and he swears the entire rest of the hospital can hear it. It’s definitely ringing in his own ears, thumping and bumping between his quiet, hitched breaths.
The moment he thinks this, starts to glance around and wonder if anyone else can hear the rattling of his heart in his ribs is the moment when Steve rests his hand on the small of his back, knuckles following the line of his spine and rubbing small soothing circles. “Do you want to go straight to the airport after this?” he says, so nonchalantly that it startles Tony a bit. “Our flight leaves at ten, right? Counting time to get through baggage check and security, we’ll be a couple hours early, but there’s really no point in going back home for that long. We’ll get coffee or something at one of the cafes, they’ll be opening soon.” Tony heaves out a breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding. Somehow, there’s something infinitely more comforting about Steve’s brand of reassurance. He doesn’t take time to dance around the subject, to weigh his words and figure out what’s the best thing to say, he does it by not doing it at all. It’s only because the slow roll of knuckles against his back that Tony knows, because the topic of conversation doesn’t even hover around the anxiety slowly cooling in Tony’s chest. “The luggage is all in the limo already, right? Tickets too?”

“Yeah,” Tony breathes out. “It’s all in there, so we can head out any time.”

It’s past dawn now, and Tony can see the rosy light of morning beginning to slip between the surrounding buildings every time they pass a window. It’s odd, somehow, to see the sunrise after such a long, hectic night, and Tony realizes belatedly that it’s been over twelve hours since the ceremony. He takes a glance at his ring as they walk by another window, thumb running over the cool metal of the band absentmindedly. “I wonder how long it to wear a groove in my skin.” It’s something he means to mull over in silence, and he doesn’t realize he’s spoken aloud until Steve has grabbed his hand and lifted it to his mouth. Tony stares at him, mesmerized as Steve places a kiss on his knuckles.

“You’ll never know,” Steve says when he pulls away, “because you’ll never have a reason to take it off.”

Tony blinks for a moment, at a loss for words (or at least any sort of sentimental ones), before replying, “Unless Natasha and her boys invite me into their weirdness, since I am at the top of the list. Then I’m leaving you in the dust, tight ass or no.”

Steve laughs, “Ah, well I guess I’ll have to figure out a way to one up the prospect of a foursome.”

“Pies.” Tony gestures at the air dramatically. “Make me pies. All of the pies. Then maybe I can be persuaded to stick around.”

“Good thing I am a fabulous pie maker,” Steve grins.

They take the stairs down to the ground floor and area nearly at the door when Steve stops short, stalled by Tony’s hand on his arm. “Look,” he says with a nod of his head towards one of the side halls, “Parker.”

Steve turns to see Richard Parker approaching them, one hand raised overhead in an attempt to hail them over before they leave. Offering him a rather nervous smile, Steve says, “Everything okay?”

“Fine,” Richard assures, “Fantastic even. Glad I caught you guys, actually. If you have a couple minutes to spare before your flight, Mary wants to see you.”

Tony’s eyebrows shoot up towards his hairline, a befuddled, “What? Why?” escaping his lips a millisecond before Steve says, “Is the baby okay?”

Richard cracks a smile and crooks a hand for them to follow, “Come see.”

It’s not much of a walk to get to the room Mary’s been set up in, but it’s just long enough for Tony’s
stomach to flip in his gut as he realizes he missed something dangerously crucial. The trip from lobby to hall is just enough time for him to notice things. Things like the way he can feel Steve’s pulse pick up a little through his palm and fingers which are still wrapped around Tony’s own. Things like the slight skip of excitement in his step when Richard points out the room. Things like the way his eyes widen and light up when they pass over the threshold and Steve sees the small bundle Mary has wrapped in her arms. Things like the way his mouth opens a bit when he sucks in an awed breath when the baby swathed in blankets lets out a murmured noise as they enter.

Shit. Shit shit shit shit shit.

Mary smiles at them, a tired, but content expression. “Hey. Figured you’d want to see this little tiger before you left. Seeing as it’s his fault we hijacked a good portion of your wedding night.”

Steve starts forward and Tony almost doesn’t let go of him, his nails scraping over the back of Steve’s hand for a heartbeat before he releases his grip. His heart is in his throat as Steve leans over the bed, and he doesn’t move, rooted to the spot just inside the door while things unfold before him.

“Hey, baby,” Steve whispers to the bundle that Mary tilts towards him. “You have a name yet?” There’s a soft inflection in his voice that Tony’s never heard before, and it makes his breath catch in his throat. It’s probably the only tone, Tony knows, that will never be directed towards him.

“Not yet,” Mary says. She lifts the bundle a little, a short motion which is all the warning Steve gets before it’s deposited in his arms.

Tony takes a step back, mesmerized and terrified as he watches Steve adjust his grip, one hand coming to rest under the baby’s head and the other cradling it against his chest. And Tony can see it now, see the wide brown eyes and the pudgy cheeks and the tiny hand that reaches up towards Steve. “Boy or girl?” he asks breathlessly.

“Boy,” Richard says beside him.

“Hey, baby,” Steve murmurs again, that new tone still in the undercurrents of his voice. “You caused quite the ruckus.” The baby gurgles, and Steve chuckles in return. Tony swallows hard. “It’s alright, people who come into life with a bang tend to leave quite an impression on the world. Like Tony.” He raises his gaze to where Tony’s still frozen in the doorway. “You want to see?”

“Uh, no,” Tony say quickly, folding his arms over his chest to make it impossible for Steve to attempt to surprise-drop the kid on him the way Mary had just done. “I’m good, thanks.” He doesn’t miss the subtle twist of Steve’s mouth, the one that speaks volumes and tells Tony that there’s a discussion he’d rather not have on the very near horizon.

It takes a few more minutes, a few more sixty second intervals wherein Steve whispers things to the baby in that tone that makes Tony’s stomach flip, before Steve hands the baby back to Mary, thanks both Parkers and wishes them well, and leads Tony out the door.

It takes exactly fifteen seconds once they’re out it for him to say, “Tony,” in that way that gives Tony that sick feeling deep inside him.

“I just,” Tony starts, faltering when he sees the way Steve is looking at him, eyes surprisingly soft. “I . . . Steve, you know I can’t . . . I can’t do kids, Steve. It’s not just an issue of biology. I can’t. I would fuck a kid up so bad. I’ve read shit, Steve. Abuse is a cycle, and I don’t . . . I don’t want that. I don’t think I’ll ever want that. I know I’ve said this all before but—”

“I know.”
Tony frowns. “Really? Because I don’t think you do. You and I are married now. And I don’t want kids. Which means you won’t have kids.”

“I can do the math, Tony,” Steve says. “Actually, I’ve already done it before, and I’ve concluded that the end result of that equation isn’t quite as nice as the end result of the one I’ve already got.”

For a long moment Tony doesn’t reply, his mind turning this new information over in his head a few times. “This is the first time I’ve ever been confused by math,” he says finally.

Steve laughs. “You, you idiot. I’m talking about you. You’re the end result I care about. Any hypothetical children aren’t worth half as much to me as you are. I already made my choice, remember?” He lifts his left hand to show off the band on his ring finger. “Stop worrying about it.”

“You’re going to get really fricken bored with me really fast, you know,” Tony warns. “Just you and me growing old together and yelling at other people’s kids to stay off our lawn.”

“We don’t have a-”

“Playing bingo until our wrinkles have wrinkles. You won’t have anything to brag about to the old biddies at the nursing home showing off pictures of their grandkids.”

“I can brag about you.”

Tony snorts, “Whatever floats your boat, I guess.” It’s meant to be a dismissive, disbelieving statement, but even as he says Tony can feel Steve’s words lifting a little bit more weight off his shoulders. It’s not a guarantee, he knows, nothing really is. Shit could happen at any second and change Steve’s feelings on the matter, or hell, even Tony’s. But it’s comforting all the same to know, at least for now, that Steve understands and accepts that dark and twisted little part of him that had whispered every single one of his faults in his ear when Steve had asked if he wanted to see the Parker’s baby.

Sharon wakes up with her face pressed into the cushion of a sofa that is vaguely familiar, but definitely not her own. “Muhgzzflbra,” she mumbles, annoyed to taste the faint tang of alcohol and an impending hangover in her mouth. After a heartbeat or so of laying there, trying to sort out how to move her limbs in a semi-competent manner, rolling over, she notices that the couch belongs to Bucky, a conclusion made by the sight of Bucky’s apartment around her and Bucky himself zonked out on the floor a few feet away, cheek pressed to the carpet and a bit of drool on the side of his open mouth.

“What the hell did I do last night?” she says, lifting a hand to her head as the world tilts a little. If she expects an answer from the very unconscious Bucky, she doesn’t get one, and Bucky continues to drool into the carpet. “Lovely. You’re so helpful.”

According to the fact that they’re still both wearing their clothes (more clothes than they left the party with actually, as they’re currently sporting a menagerie of matching tourist-trap apparel,) nothing too serious seems to have occurred, and Sharon breathes out a sigh of relief. And a scan of the room doesn’t reveal anything too amiss. “At least we made it here in one piece,” she says. This earns a muffled groan from Bucky, but no actual movement to indicate he’s risen from the dead yet. Sharon rolls her eyes. “I’ll make coffee and let myself out then, thanks.”

She’s not too surprised when Bucky lifts his head the second the coffee pot is plugged in.
“Caffeine,” he gurgles as he rolls over. Sharon watches him while the coffee brews, one eyebrow raised as he pats himself from top to bottom across his front as if checking to see if he has all of his limbs. “What the fuck,” he says slowly, “am I wearing?”

“An I heart New York t-shirt, what looks like a similar jersey underneath that and a matching ball cap. And a few bracelets which probably sport the same phrase,” she lists. “All on top of the suit you wore to the wedding.”

Bucky closes his eyes and purses his lips, “Please tell me we didn’t do anything.”

“Besides raiding every tacky tourist shop in the city, not that I’m aware of.”

“Did you check for condoms in the trashcans?”

“No, but I woke up with clothes on, so I really don’t think we crossed that line.”

Bucky huffs out a relieved sound. “Good.” He rolls back over onto his stomach and pushes himself to his feet as the coffee machine burbles as the last drips fall into the pot. “Grab another mug, will ya?”

Sharon turns and reaches for the overhead cabinet, standing on her tiptoes to snag a second mug. She barely has a finger hooked into the handle when Bucky shouts, startling her into dropping it onto the floor with a crash. “Jesus!” she snaps, “What is wrong with you? Now there’s glass everywhere!”

“I . . . You” Bucky stutters, pointing at her, “Uh . . .”

“Spit it out!”

“Tra . . . Sharon, on your lower back, there’s a . . .” he swallows, “Have you, uh, always had a butterfly tramp-stamped there?”

It takes all of five seconds for Sharon to leap over the glass and race into the bathroom, and another two for her to scream. “Oh my god! What the hell! What the hell!”

“I assume that’s a no,” Bucky calls after her before he heads into the bathroom himself to find her with her shirt hiked up so she can view the offending inking in the mirror for herself. “Nice. That is definitely not temporary.”

Sharon whips around and makes as if to slap him, and Bucky stumbles back out of her reach and bumps against the counter. It’s not a very hard impact, but he hisses all the same as a zing of pain blooms from the point of contact. “Ugh, what the - that shouldn’t have hurt.”

“Maybe you got one too,” Sharon says darkly, smirking when Bucky’s eyes bug out a bit. Teasingly, she grabs the back of his suit-coat that’s poking out beneath his many I <3 New York attire.

And to both of their extreme horror, there it is. An identical butterfly tattoo stamped to Bucky’s lower back just above the hem of his pants. They both stare at it a moment in stunned silence, mouths hanging open before Bucky says, “Holy shit. Matching tramp stamps.”
Quick reminder that Stuck In Second Gear, which takes place in the Friends!AU universe, has to be completed before I can post another chapter (because spoilers), so check that out in the meantime (Part 2 of 5 will be up in the next few days). It's not necessary reading exactly, but it will definitely enhance your understanding of a lot of the Loki and Thor plots coming up in this arc.

And again, I'm super fucking sorry this took so long. Finals and work and relationships and tripping and falling into the Rooster Teeth fandom kinda stalled me for a bit. But I'm back now, so . . .
Hey guys, this is my official declaration that So No One Told You and Stuck In Second Gear are up for fic adoption. Both fics will come with extensive notes on how they were originally going to be finished. I would prefer the fic go to someone who is at least the same level of writing as I was when working on this thing. BOTH fics MUST be adopted together. If you are interested in taking it, please message me on Twitter @cat_macbeth

I haven't been into this fandom since IM3 (which I hated) and AOU (which I loved, but sensed an impending disaster from) and I have never regretted leaving, especially after reading spoilers for the newer films. My only regret is that you, the fans of this fic, suffered for that. And so, the fic is now officially up for adoption.

In other news though, if you still enjoy slice of life superheroes, I have a DC College AU going you can check out called Just Us!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!